RAISE THE FLAG
Middle School Matters More Than You Think
TOM SHEFCHUNAS

with
ALAN RAMSEY
ASHLEY BOHINC
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ORANGE BOOKS
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INTRODUCTION

It was 2:30 a.m.

I don’t know if I’d call it an epiphany, an awakening, or an organizational panic attack.

But I do know that as a high school principal, what I was feeling was crystal clear.

Suddenly I knew the way forward was through middle school.

Let me explain. At the time of this lightning bolt moment, I’d been in education for eight years. I’d been a middle school teacher and coach, an AP calculus teacher, a physics teacher, a technology director, and an assistant principal. I was currently a high school principal, promoted to the role at the tender age of 28 (a terrible idea for both myself and the school), and finishing my Masters of Educational Leadership.

I was experiencing the tension and stress of the job, as well as the exhaustion and desperation of finishing my final project for my master's degree. I’d mentally blown up the whole education system and attempted to rebuild it in my mind . . . and now, I was trying to get all of it down on paper. It was kind of like writing a book on how to build a nuclear submarine. Filling 50 pages was the least of my concerns.

I’ll spare you the details, but my eureka moment basically went something like this. Every time I addressed a significant issue for high school students (dropouts, bullying, entitlement, etc.), I always came to this conclusion: It’s too late. And, whenever I’d consider the best time to “nip it in the bud,” the answer was always the same.

My conclusion—that I spoke triumphantly out loud as the papers I’d thrown in the air rained down on my head—was this:

“If anyone is really serious about fixing this train wreck called education, they would start with middle school and work their way out.”

And with that came another realization. In most school districts, middle schools are often the least resourced of the age groups. It seemed off balance that such a pivotal time in life gets the least amount of resources and attention.
Since that day, middle school has been my passion and focus. And I think as leaders, educators, and parents, we need to start with middle school and work our way out. As a high school principal, so much of my interaction with students was reactive. That night, at 2:30 a.m., I realized that by investing in middle school, my interaction with students could be proactive.

So I signed up to serve as a small group leader in the middle school ministry at my church, North Point Community Church. And then God started to do some things I can’t explain without the overwhelming realization that God was at work in and through me. The short version is this: First, I was asked to speak. Then there was a job offer that wasn’t right. But then came another job offer that was perfect. In the following years, I held several positions until, when the dust settled, I found myself the Director of Transit (our middle school ministry).

I met some amazing leaders (I could list a bunch here) and was resourced beyond my dreams. My job description was basically to . . .

**Do whatever it takes**
**to do whatever it is**
**that middle schoolers need most**
**to develop and pursue a faith of their own**
**as adults.**

The past 13 years have been amazing and affirming. They’ve confirmed that my epiphany, my awakening, my panic attack during my principal years was on track.

And here’s what I’ve found . . . there’s good new and bad news.

On the good side, a strong student ministry is built on the foundation of a leader who understands the importance of middle school. Whether that program is separate from high school or not, may or may not matter. What does matter is a commitment to meeting middle school students where they’re at and giving them the foundational ideas they’ll need moving forward.

**Our experience proves it.**
**Research proves it.**
**The stories prove it.**

Let me just ask you: For those of you fortunate enough to have had a loving adult who was not your parent invest in you during the middle school years, what was it worth? For those of you, like me, who did not, what would it be worth to be able to go back and change that? What
stories can you tell? What stories do you wish you could tell? What stories would you not have to tell if there had simply been someone there for you during those years?

Here’s the bad news of what I’ve learned. Schools aren’t the only organizations that have failed our middle schoolers. Many churches, for decades, have ignored this age group. It’s been “forgotten” in our family ministry strategies. Middle schoolers are often misunderstood, underestimated, and underserved. They’re grouped in with younger children who are too immature or high school students who are too far along. Middle schoolers are put on a shelf during a phase of cognitive development that’s only rivaled by the cognitive development of the first few months after birth, until their “ready” to take on mature spiritual growth. What?!

We’re losing our kids. The emergency is real. The statistics are overwhelming, and somehow, accepted. Depending on whose research you read, 40, 50, as much as 70 percent of students are walking away from church after high school. That’s not acceptable.

That’s why we’ve written this book. We want to start a new conversation to address these statistics. We want to go back further than what happens in high school, and start with this statement:

**If we’re going to be serious about high school graduates developing a faith of their own, we’ve got to start when they’re in middle school.**

I’ve compiled some essays by my friends who have joined me in this mission. They’re the champions of the cause. They’re people who have “put their money where their mouth is” when it comes to middle schoolers. They’ve stayed with middle school for the long haul, both in the trenches and as voices that celebrate the importance of this age group.

Our goals for this book are these.

1. **If you’re with us, know you’re not alone.**
2. **If you’re not with us yet, jump on board.**
3. **We want to raise the flag—and the bar—of middle school ministry by equipping you with the words and facts you need to share the mission of middle school ministry.**

Raising a flag can mean two things: Desperation. And anticipation.
We raise a flag to say, “Help!” and we raise it before charging into battle. If you’re in the thick of middle school ministry, maybe you feel like you’ve been waiting for someone to come rescue you. You’ve been keeping after it for years, and you’re waiting for fresh blood to come join you in the battle . . . to offer assistance or relief. Or maybe you feel like a (wo)man on a mission. You understand what you’re up against to keep middle school on the forefront of every ministry leader’s mind, and you’re ready to charge forward.

It’s our hope that the words you find here will give you the perspective, language, and guts to raise the flag of middle school ministry. We can shape the faith of the next generation of adults by changing how they see God, the church, and the world around them today. It’s time to be proactive, not reactive. Let’s do this!

—SHEF
@CoachShef

Tom Shefchunas, or “Shef” as most people call him, has worked with students for over 20 years. He’s been a teacher, a coach, a high school principal, author of Lead Small and The Art of Group Talk, and a father. Currently, Shef is the North Point Ministries Multi-Campus Director of Middle School. His passion involves working with, recruiting, and developing the hundreds of volunteer small group leaders it takes to pull off Transit (North Point Ministries’ middle school environments). Shef and his wife Julie live in Cumming, Georgia, with their three kids. Shef also loves developing leaders outside of North Point and can be reached at www.Coachshef.com.
Do you know why we need to rethink our budgets, rethink our strategy, rethink our buildings, rethink our leadership, and rethink our approaches for the sake of this generation of students? Taylor Swift said it perfectly: Cause when you’re 15 and someone tells you they love you, you’re going to believe them.

Andy Stanley
I recently sat down in my office with my friend Jake, a volunteer leader and former middle school student in our ministry, and discussed the impact he’s had on the lives of hundreds of students over the past four years. As we talked about our lives, our purpose, and our future, there was a common thread through the entire conversation. It was the fact that his middle school years were so instrumental in laying a foundation of faith that they have kept him on the path of following Jesus through some of the most turbulent years of high school and college. This young man is getting ready to embark on the journey of being an officer in the U.S. Marine Corp and I can’t be more proud of the man he is and is becoming as a follower of Christ.

When I talk with people about the importance of middle school ministry I can’t help but demonstrate a very biased passion for this incredible gift of middle school age students God has given to us. People ask me all the time, “Why do you do what you do?” I always begin by saying it’s a calling and passion God has put deep inside of me to come alongside early adolescents and help them connect to Jesus and to the family of God.

Working with middle schoolers can be an emotional roller coaster ride. They’re a rapidly changing group of people who have such potential and purpose in this life. Just when you think you know what they’re thinking, they blindside you. If we’re being honest, we really never know what they’re thinking or—even crazier—what they’ll say out loud about what they’re thinking. They can sometimes be brutally honest about what they think about you and others!

I love spending time with them and living in their world. To sit down with a student and talk about everything or anything is so much fun. I really enjoy listening to what they have to say and what they actually believe about life, school, friends, parents, teachers, politics, sports, movies, YouTube clips, music, and God. And it’s even more fun to play with them.

My friend and long-time mentor Kurt Johnston demonstrates a pure love and passion for middle school students that’s influenced me to champion the cause to never give up on them. He’s reminded me through the years that “middle schoolers are like wet cement—very quickly, in just a few
short years, they will be set in their ways.” This has shaped my view of middle school ministry as the last preventative ministry in the church.

Another thing I love about the middle school phase is how students are beginning to think abstractly and wrestle with faith issues. They’re learning for the first time to own their faith and follow Jesus. It’s a privilege to journey with them and their parents, and in partnership with the Holy Spirit, to help shape and influence them in their faith development.

At this age middle schoolers are still moldable and shapeable, and they’re looking for adults to speak truth into their lives. And, no, they don’t verbalize this, but it’s a desire they have. They can be genuinely excited about pursuing their relationship with Jesus or at least the possibility of a relationship with Jesus.

Middle schoolers are an incredible gift to the church and to this world. They have so much potential and ability that, if tapped, can and will change the world and advance the kingdom of God. In my opinion, middle schoolers are one of the most valuable gifts and natural resources we have.

—ALAN

Alan Ramsey is the Student Ministries Lead Pastor overseeing the middle school and high school ministries at Fellowship Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. He’s been working with students—specifically middle school students—for 24 years and is honored to play a small part in God’s plan for their futures. Before joining Fellowship Church, Alan was the Assistant Middle School Pastor at Skyline Wesleyan Church in San Diego, California. He and his wife Diane have been married since 1997 and have five children: Madison, Abigail, Kayla Ray, Rusten, and Favour, who was adopted from Uganda. Let’s just say they have their own youth group at home!
WHY MIDDLE SCHOOL MATTERS
ASHLEY BOHINC
Director of Middle School Strategy
Orange: XP3 Middle School

I was called to middle school before I was ever called to ministry.

Ever since I was a little girl I wanted to be a teacher. I loved the idea of helping students and making a difference in their lives. So I chose to teach Health Education, because I wanted to talk about a student’s daily life and help them see that what they do right now matters for their future.

I was certified to teach K-12, but through my field experience I quickly realized that if I wanted to maximize my influence, I should focus on teaching middle school students. They’re moldable, impressionable, and desperate for a role model. Developmentally they are experiencing an enormous amount of change, and need to be affirmed in who they are and what they are experiencing. I had the energy to do that.

This gave me an opportunity to talk to middle schoolers about decisions they would have to make before they were actually faced with them. I not only wanted to help prevent something, I wanted to go one step further.

I wanted to proactively influence the decision they would make in place of the decision I was trying to prevent them from making.

According to statistics, on average students will experience many firsts in middle school:

- First smart phone (avg. age 10)
- First exposure to pornography (avg. age 11)
- First experience with alcohol (avg. age 12)
- First sexual experience (avg. age 13)
- First social media account (avg. age 11)

Barna Research claims that the overwhelming majority of Christ-followers date their “conversion” prior to 14 years old; indeed, after 14 years old the likelihood of conversion drops drastically.
In one of my undergraduate courses in college, we studied a poem written by Joseph Malins in 1985 called “The Ambulance Down in the Valley.” The poem tells a story of a number of people who had slipped and fallen off a high cliff overlooking a town. The town's people were divided over whether the best way to deal with the problem was to build a fence at the top of the cliff, or park an ambulance down in the valley ready to treat the injuries of the fallen. The problem with the ambulance solution was more attention went to repairing results rather than stopping the cause. And if more energy and resources went into building the fence at the top, they could actually dispense of the ambulance in the valley.

The poem is really describing the difference between proactive and reactive mindsets. To me, it represented the difference between the role of a health teacher and the role of a counselor: The role of the health teacher is to help prevent negative results, whereas a counselor helps repair and heal what’s already been done.

So if the statistics are true, and middle school really is the last preventative phase, that means middle and high school ministries really are different animals.

When it comes to the church, we have an incredible opportunity to . . .

- send our brightest, most experienced ministry leaders into the front lines of middle school ministry.
- champion middle school in order to help surround that ministry leader with solid volunteers who will invest in the lives of a few thirteen-year-olds.
- help build the fence at the top of the cliff, so that we don’t have to spend double the energy and resources on the ambulance at the bottom.

I don’t know of a ministry with a larger return on investment than middle school ministry. That’s why I’ve given my life to it.

—ASHLEY  
@AshleyBohinc

Ashley Bohinc serves as the Director of Middle School Strategy at Orange and co-authored The Art of Group Talk. She’s worked with students in public education, athletic, and ministry settings since 2005. Though she is equipped to work with all students, she has been drawn to middle schoolers. Ashley is most passionate about resourcing the local church, communicating onstage, developing leaders, working with students, and engaging in world missions. Additionally, she’s the USA Director of Carry 117, a ministry in Ethiopia which focuses on orphan prevention and family preservation by empowering women.
'Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed, Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant; But over its terrible edge there had slipped A duke and full many a peasant. So the people said something would have to be done, But their projects did not at all tally; Some said, “Put a fence ‘round the edge of the cliff,” Some, “An ambulance down in the valley.”

But the cry for the ambulance carried the day, For it spread through the neighboring city; A fence may be useful or not, it is true, But each heart became full of pity For those who slipped over the dangerous cliff; And the dwellers in highway and alley Gave pounds and gave pence, not to put up a fence, But an ambulance down in the valley.

“But the cliff is all right, if you’re careful,” they said, “And, if folks even slip and are dropping, It isn’t the slipping that hurts them so much As the shock down below when they’re stopping.”

So day after day, as these mishaps occurred, Quick forth would those rescuers sally To pick up the victims who fell off the cliff, With their ambulance down in the valley.

Then an old sage remarked: “It’s a marvel to me That people give far more attention To repairing results than to stopping the cause, When they’d much better aim at prevention.

Let us stop at its source all this mischief,” cried he, “Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally; If the cliff we will fence, we might almost dispense With the ambulance down in the valley.”

“Oh he’s a fanatic,” the others rejoined, “Dispense with the ambulance? Never! He’d dispense with all charities, too, if he could; No! No! We’ll support them forever. Aren’t we picking up folks just as fast as they fall? And shall this man dictate to us? Shall he? Why should people of sense stop to put up a fence, While the ambulance works in the valley?”

But the sensible few, who are practical too, Will not bear with such nonsense much longer; They believe that prevention is better than cure, And their party will soon be the stronger. Encourage them then, with your purse, voice, and pen, And while other philanthropists dally, They will scorn all pretense, and put up a stout fence On the cliff that hangs over the valley.

Better guide well the young than reclaim them when old, For the voice of true wisdom is calling. “To rescue the fallen is good, but ‘tis best To prevent other people from falling.” Better close up the source of temptation and crime Than deliver from dungeon or galley; Better put a strong fence ‘round the top of the cliff Than an ambulance down in the valley.
RAISE THE FLAG

THE PRACTICE OF PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE
BRITT KITCHEN
Associate Director of Middle School Ministries
North Point Ministries of Alpharetta, Georgia

My first car was a 1967 Ford. It broke down all the time and once caught fire while I was driving it. But that didn’t change how much I loved it. Ask anyone who’s been around old automobiles and they’ll tell you: There’s a big difference in repair work and preventative maintenance.

Repair work means something has gone wrong. Maybe a part has stopped working or a key component has worn out. Or maybe the car was in an accident and there are now dents to buff out and rebuilding to be done.

Preventative maintenance is the opposite. It’s the little things you do along the way to make sure bigger problems don’t occur. It’s the careful steps you take to insure you’re safe and don’t wind up in a regretful situation. Preventative maintenance isn’t as interesting as repair work. It doesn’t garner people’s imaginations. On reality TV, there aren’t shows about routine maintenance. But it’s just as important as repair work. And that’s why I love working in middle school ministry.

In the ministry world the people who get to do the hardcore repair work capture our attention. The idea of helping a high school student rebuild a relationship, their reputation, or respect for their parents is exciting. But the slow, meticulous, and painstaking preventative maintenance done in a student’s life as a middle schooler is often overlooked.

As middle school leaders, we need to proudly wear the badge that working with this age is the last preventive ministry. Many times, we’re getting students before they’ve faced the crippling realities of their own shame and regret. We get to mold and shape their view of their God, their world, and themselves without having to reprogram or remove the false ideas cast on them by the world.

Most likely we don’t have to peel back layers of false bravado and scarred identity before we get to know the real heart of the student. Middle schoolers are just learning to play those games, so they’ll still open up to a leader who’s willing to be genuine with them. All it takes is us being willing to do the work to set those students and leaders up for the hard preventative maintenance.

Being in preventative ministry means that your teaching series about parents isn’t necessarily driven by the fuel of the latest fight with a parent,
but by the new urge many middle schoolers have to withdraw, shutdown, and cut their parents out of their everyday lives.

It means your talk about dating and sex doesn’t start with the energy and emotions of an audience who’s feeling those tensions. Instead, that conversation can begin with students who have an intense curiosity about the opposite sex, and wonder themselves if they’re loveable.

With middle schoolers, your talks about faith don’t come with an interest in the hot topic debate points about science or doubt, but with an introduction to the faithfulness of a God who will never leave them, and the promises of a Father who will walk with them through everything they face.

This work is not always the most exciting, but it has a greater potential to meet middle school students where they are and prepare them for where they are going.

By focusing on preventative ministry now, they’ll be better prepared . . .

* to face the storms and temptations of adolescence because they’ll have already identified their boundaries.
* when questions of self-worth strike because they’ll have already determined where their value really comes from.
* for a pileup of doubts because they’ll have already learned that authentic faith can withstand difficulties.

Let’s face it: Eventually all of the students in our ministries will leave our doors. They’re going to drive out of their parents’ driveways and head into life. The long-term goal of any church leader is to help produce healthy adults with a mature faith. Our job in the last preventative ministry is to make sure they have all the tools and skills they’ll need to do the daily maintenance on themselves, their relationships, and their faith, so they’re prepared for whatever comes their way as they travel through life.

—BRITT
@TheBrittKitchen

*Britt Kitchen has worked on the North Point Ministries middle school staff for 15 years; first as the Middle School Director at Buckhead Church, then as Multi-Campus Creative Director, and currently as the Associate Director of Middle School Ministries. He loves managing the tension between the creative process and logistics of programming, and gets excited about helping students pursue a faith of their own in the middle school years. As husband to Natalie and dad of Nolan, Ellie, and Ben, he’s proud of his ability to carry on conversations about football, monster trucks, and musicals.*
I didn’t think I’d be a die-hard advocate for middle school ministry forever. I thought, “I’ll do this for a little while and then maybe try something else.”

Except no one ever tells you that middle schoolers have the ability to hold your heart hostage and never let it go. Decades into ministry, I’m still their biggest fan.

Why?

Because I want to be the church I always needed.

In fifth grade, I took books from the library without checking them out because I needed answers to some questions I didn’t know who to ask or how to ask. And on top of that, I felt ashamed for being curious. So I “borrowed” books that I thought would help me. I concealed them in paper book covers and looked for answers to questions I was too afraid to ask.

I wish I had someone I could trust with my doubts, curiosity, and questions.

In the sixth grade, I liked playing Monopoly more than anything. I wasn’t sure about boys, but I was sure about listening to music with explicit lyrics. I found nothing funnier than listening to horrible music with my best friend.

I wish I had someone to help me take different types of risks and like me when I wasn’t the best version of myself.

In the seventh grade, boys began to notice me. And I wasn’t sure what was appropriate or if it was okay to say “no” or if people would still like me if I didn’t want to date them.

I wish I had extra help navigating choices that felt bigger than me. I wish I had a few people outside of my parents who could notice my heart and speak truth over me.
And in the eighth grade, I dated a few boys all at once. As you can imagine, that didn’t go so well. Then I dated just one boy . . . and that went a little too well. And then I was really confused.

**I wish there were more people who knew me well enough to ask tough questions and love me through making difficult social decisions.**

Then, the summer before ninth grade, a camp counselor named Cherry was my cabin leader. I honestly am not sure how I ended up at a church youth camp but, through a series of fortunate events, I landed in a place where a young adult could see me, my questions, my pain, and my heart. She told me who Jesus is and, while sitting together at a picnic table in the middle of a student camp in Kansas, she prayed with me.

She liked me.  
She believed in me.  
She wasn’t afraid of questions.  
She helped me to be brave.  
She was there when I called from camp to break up with the boyfriend who I felt a lot of love toward but who I knew wasn’t healthy for me.

A few years later, when I started working in student ministry, I began to see that what Cherry offered me is what every human needs. I wondered if I could spend time making sure that more humans have what they need from other humans . . . sooner rather than later.

And, in doing that, I found the love of my life: Middle School Ministry.

Middle schoolers are finding themselves in a raw, ever changing, not-so-sure of themselves phase, giving us adults a chance to walk with them through questions and change and some of the most embarrassing and exhilarating moments of their lives.

The stories are endless.  
The fruit is eternal.  
The earthly payoff is nil.

But you won’t find a better place to connect than with someone learning to connect for the first time.

Say “yes” to middle school ministry, and say “yes” to being the Church for humans when they need it most.

—BROOKLYN

@BrooklynLindsey
Brooklyn Lindsey has been a youth pastor for 16 years. Fun (Sarcastic) Fact: She started ministry when she was a young child, which makes her the youngest youth ministry veteran on the planet. But really, she has a heart for middle school, a love for empowering students to serve, and a joy for writing and communicating to students and leaders. She helped create a place for youth to practice compassion together with their churches and families @thejustmove. She’s married, has two daughters, nine and six years old. Their giant puppy, Marley George Washington, was named by the kids and is taken care of by the parents.
LET ME ASK YOU THIS. HOW MANY SONGS ARE WRITTEN FOR 40-YEAR-OLDS? ZERO . . . WHY WOULD WE CONTINUE TO CREATE CHURCHES FOR 40- AND 50-YEAR-OLDS, AND LET CULTURE STEAL THE STUDENTS? THAT’S JUST STUPID.

Andy Stanley
I’m not exactly sure that anyone in my family would call me a carpenter, but I do own a table saw. In addition, I once made a stand for said table saw. Before my wife and I had kids, I had a dream that woodworking would be one of my hobbies. Now, 30 years later, it sits by an old treadmill that was purchased with similar ambition. While my woodworking experience is limited, I have learned a few lessons along the way that connect with Student Ministry.

My favorite part of building something involves using the most effective tools: the table saw, a hammer, and an industrial power drill. I love watching individual pieces of wood take shape into something useful. When this happens, I feel like I’m really making a difference.

At this point you might be thinking, “That’s brilliant, Doug, but what else does a carpenter do besides use old pieces to create something new?” Well, there’s actually more than you might think.

You see, before you can cut, hammer, and drill, you have to select the boards. In my early projects, I would swing into the lumber store and simply grab the first boards I laid my eyes on. After all, in my enthusiasm, I wanted to get home to cut, hammer, and drill! And as I started to do exactly that, I noticed something I didn’t expect. The boards were a mess. Many of them were warped, twisted, or cracked. Which, in the end, resulted in a creation that was warped, twisted, and cracked. Not only that, but it took me longer to finish as I had to adjust and try to “fix” all the warped, twisted, and cracked boards.

After a few projects I learned to change my approach. Instead of hurrying through the lumber store and grabbing the first thing I found, I would dig into the stacks of lumber to find the very best boards. It definitely took longer and wasn’t as fun as my previous grab-and-go approach. I really had to dig. I would be there for a good bit of time looking over every board. In these moments, it didn’t feel like a lot of change was happening. But I have to admit the time investment was worth it when I began cutting, hammering, and drilling. The result of a little extra time, evaluation, and focus created something more efficient and beautiful.
So, here comes your analogy . . . hang on to your tool belt.

In my 30+ years in youth ministry, I’ve focused mostly on high school students. There are a lot of reasons, but let’s just say it’s one of my favorite phases. Upon reflection, the problem with predominantly focusing on high school is that approach results in having to work with a lot of warped, twisted, and cracked students.

Now, I’m not saying you should just select the best kids—that would be the opposite of your job description! God has called you to love all teenagers. However, I am saying this:

To hurry through or ignore the formative years of middle school will result in a negative effect on your high school ministry. In fact, I would say the primary foundation for a solid high school ministry is a healthy middle school ministry. Middle school ministry is one of the most strategic ministries in the church.

Here are some examples:

**You grow the CULTURE of your high school ministry through your middle school ministry.**

Often, when you tell a middle schooler the way things should be, a magical thing happens: They actually believe you! They’re moldable and care about what you say—and that’s a huge advantage in culture-building. In essence, when you tell a middle schooler that they don’t have to be warped, twisted, or cracked, they try not to be.

Here’s a reality for your high school ministry: Your ministry culture is often the thing that students are most attracted to, or repelled by. They can feel the culture when they walk into the room. A wise youth pastor will pay close attention to that culture in order to build their ministry, and middle school is the prime development opportunity. You can help define and change culture for middle schoolers much easier than with high schoolers.

**You grow the CORE of your high school ministry through your middle school ministry.**

Imagine your current sixth graders. They can’t sit still. Their voices are cracking. They ask the weirdest questions. It’s hard to think of them as any older than they are right now. But the fact is, they’ll be ninth graders in no time. Just think about how fast time moves in this job. When you give intentional focus on middle school now, you’re actually shaping the
core of your high school ministry before they’re even in your high school ministry. That’s an investment worth making.

You grow the SIZE of your high school ministry through your middle school ministry.

So, along comes a group of ninth graders that you’ve now been investing in for years. They have a healthy culture and an amazing core group of kids. Now what? Well, it’s simple. As your core grows in leadership and as your culture grows in quality, you should start to see significant changes. If you maintain a quality program you’ll start to notice new faces coming in, as well as familiar faces showing up more often. And the result will be higher attendance—more teenagers who get to hear and experience the life transformation of Jesus.

At the end of the day, the thing students want most out of any youth ministry environment is simple . . . to be surrounded by other students. Fancy buildings equipped with climbing walls, basketball courts, and coffee shops are awesome, but if more students show up next door in the condemned warehouse, it’s just a matter of time until the gravitational pull of the herd takes over. Critical mass is definitely a factor in student ministry.

So, if you want to grow your high school ministry’s culture, core, and size—and ultimate health—you need to think strategically about middle school. If you’re in charge of both groups, it’s time to start caring more about what’s happening in middle school. If you work in a church where there’s a separate middle school director, it’s time to strive for a strong relationship where you two can work together for the overall health of the entire student ministry.

For those of us who are called to high school ministry, getting involved in the middle school ministry may not seem like the most exciting assignment . . . but I can assure you, it will lead to a stronger high school ministry before you know it.

—DOUG
@DougFields

Doug Fields is a veteran of over 30 years of church-based youth ministry. He’s the co-founder of DownloadYouthMinistry.com, an author of 50+ books, a speaker, consultant, and Family/Parenting/Marriage-ministry leader for both HomeWord and Orange.
After 24 years in youth ministry, the last 21 of them focused primarily on middle school, it seems odd to me that I would need to persuade someone to see the value of middle school ministry. To me, it’s blatantly clear. I acknowledge that I am weird—exceptional if you want to use a Christian euphemism—and have a different perspective than normal adults. I believe middle schoolers are capable of so much more than most adults give them credit for!

On the surface, I love middle schoolers’ enthusiasm for life. They have a temporary immunity to the “too cool” epidemic most high school students are plagued with. When you pull out the blender, churn up a McDonald’s happy meal (ketchup and all!), and ask for volunteers to drink the blended wonder, hands shoot up instantly. When you introduce the singing of Christmas classics on the bus in July, they shout out their requests before the current song is done. That kind of enthusiasm should be harnessed and highlighted in the wider church!

When I intentionally push past the nervous chatter, the over-compensating, the public passing of gas, and the girl drama, I find young teens who have a heart for service. Even though their natural state is one of self-centeredness, they long to do things to better someone else’s life. They want a place to use the gifts they’re discovering in themselves. True, if left in their natural selfish state, they’ll spend their time on Snap- chat, playing video games, and walking aimlessly around the mall. But if given the opportunity to serve, they’ll serve wholeheartedly, and the trajectory of their lives will be altered because of it.

As I look a little deeper, I discover middle school students are in a phase developmentally where their minds are opening to concepts they couldn’t comprehend even a year earlier. They’re moving from concrete thinking to abstract thinking. This change in thinking has a direct impact on their spiritual development.

At a younger age, as they moved through the children’s ministry programs, they heard and understood the truth of Scripture at a surface level. Moses was a great guy. David lived a life pleasing to God except that one incident with the lady in the bathtub. Esther had a sweet life!
Jesus died for their sins on the cross and wants to be in a relationship with them.

In middle school, though, they begin to make the personal connection to that truth. As a 13-year-old begins to understand the personal nature of their sin, they’ll emotionally say, “What Jesus did on the cross—all the pain he went through—that was because of me and my sin. That was because I messed up and I need to be forgiven for that!”

Over and over, I hear students proclaim in their faith stories, “I committed my life to Jesus when I was five, but it wasn’t until seventh grade summer camp that I really understood what it meant.” As the Junior High Pastor and Camp Director, I would love to take all the credit for that realization, but I can’t. I simply get to foster environments where those developmental changes can be actualized.

What if these years were ignored? What if their enthusiasm was stifled? What if they were told that they couldn’t go on a mission trip until they got to high school? What if spiritual environments were not created for this crucial developmental shift to play out? That, my friends, would be a tragedy.

—HEATHER
@FliesHeather

Heather Flies is in her 21st year as the Junior High Pastor at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. She loves middle school students and people in general! Outside the walls of Wooddale, Heather spends a great deal of time and energy as a communicator. Heather authored I Want to Talk to My Teen About Girl Stuff, a book for parents, and a book for teenagers titled That’s What She Said/That’s What He Said. Heather loves football, dominating on the tennis court, NASCAR racing, and listening to Christmas music 11 months out of the year. She lives in Minnesota with her husband, Chad, and their 133 pound St. Bernard, Jingle Belle!
“And what do you do for a living?” I love this question. I actually get giddy when I’m at a party or social gathering and conversation turns in this direction. First, because I love what I do, but also because of the reaction I get. When I share that I’m a pastor to middle school students, 9 times out of 10 I get a certain facial expression followed by something along the lines of, “Well, bless your heart”—which I’ve learned from my southern friends means, “Well, aren’t you just totally insane.” Or I get an eye roll with the response, “God bless you . . . because middle schoolers are crazy!”

Over the years, I’ve formed a well-crafted response to these naysayers. When people comment that middle schoolers are crazy, I like to say, “You’re right. Middle schoolers are crazy. Do you know why? Did you know that they’re experiencing five different phases of development all at the same time? In fact, middle school is the second most rapid phase of development in a human’s life. It includes changes of the body, the brain, relationships, emotions, and faith. And don’t get me started on what students are up against in today’s culture. You’d be crazy too if every fiber of your being and life was changing. In fact, you were crazy once . . . you’ve just blocked it out!”

I promise I say this in the most loving, gentle way possible. But make no mistake: I’m on the defense. I’m really passionate about what I do and I really just want to help people understand the magic of middle schoolers. I want them to understand that “crazy” is not the way to describe them. I prefer the words exciting, incredible, curious, and enthusiastic. They’re in this amazing “middle space” which includes self-discovery, deeper thinking, and turning the corner toward adulthood. And in that space they’re moldable, they desire authentic relationships, and they have an expanding capacity to take on bigger things. Then, partner all of the above with Jesus, and well, that’s when you understand why middle school ministry is the most exciting ministry in the church.

I’ve often thought if life in the church were a movie, middle school ministry would be the first real plot twist. Many believe they know what to expect from middle schoolers . . . and those expectations are typically low. Most write off the middle school phase as something to survive between the “beloved can do no wrong” kids ministry and the “where
the real youth ministry happens” high school ministry. (I’m not bitter—I swear.) Most never see the plot twist coming that middle school is the most crucial crossroad where students have the opportunity to solidify their own personal faith in Jesus, belong to a faith community, enter into the discipleship process, and begin to live a missional life.

I have been pastoring middle school students for over 20 years in my church. I’ve given my life to it. Not because of the paycheck or the recognition or because it’s easy. But because I believe with my whole heart that middle school ministry is where the seeds of a life-long relationship with Jesus are planted, where the first true crisis of faith occurs, and where teenagers make the leap from childlike faith to a true faith of their own.

I love standing in that “middle space” with teenagers, encouraging and inspiring them to look to and like Jesus. In fact, I can’t imagine there’s anywhere in the church I’d rather be.

—KATIE
@KatieEdwards34

Katie Edwards has been doing full time youth ministry for the past 21 years. She’s currently the Junior High Pastor at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. She has a passion for teenagers and a passion for equipping and encouraging youth workers. She loves her Kindle, chocolate, naps, Starbucks, and movies. Katie lives in Southern California with her husband Ron and their 3 kids: Abby, Ella, and Cooper.
WHAT IS THIS GENERATION WORTH? EVERYTHING. BECAUSE THIS GENERATION OF STUDENTS IS THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHURCH LEADERS . . . AND IF WE DON’T LEAD THEM TO FALL IN LOVE WITH THE CHURCH AND WITH THE LORD JESUS CHRIST THEN WE HAND THE CHURCH OFF TO A GROUP THAT’S NOT EQUIPPED TO MAKE IT BETTER.

Andy Stanley
Every Wednesday night, I get together with a small group of 13 seventh
grade boys. Most nights go exactly the way you’d imagine they would;
we talk about sports, girls, school, and any number of random topics
that have absolutely nothing to do with the actual topic at hand. Spon-
taneous wrestling matches break out, and spontaneous body odors slip
out. Tangents and rabbit trails are the rule more than the exception.

Middle school ministry is often described as “controlled chaos”; but my
small group usually feels more like “absolute anarchy.” I spend 90-min-
utes with these guys once a week, and when I get home I typically have
to spend another 90-minutes convincing myself that it actually matters;
that somehow God’s spirit is at work in the midst of the mess.

Middle school ministry is, by its very nature, messy. The developmental
process of early adolescence is messy, families are messy, friendships are
messy . . . the world students are trying to navigate is a messy, messy
place. And if you’re like me, you want to make the mess go away.

One of the reasons I feel so defeated after a typical weekly small group
is because I’ve set myself up for failure—I’ve determined that my role
is to provide 90-minutes of awesomeness every week that offsets the
mess these young men are navigating on a day-by-day, minute-by-min-
ute basis. And when that doesn’t happen, I feel like a middle school
ministry failure.

In many churches, middle school youth workers are expected to play
the role of “mess magicians” who will somehow make all the messiness
of early adolescence magically disappear. Parents expect it, leadership
expects it, the senior adults who have been sitting in the same pew for
the past 45 years expect it, and the church janitor expects it . . . in fact,
he reminds you of those expectations on a regular basis!

But the messiness of middle school ministry doesn’t magically disappear,
no matter how good you are at what you do—and I would suggest it isn’t
supposed to! And this is why I’d like to propose a new job description for
middle school youth workers everywhere: Mess Ministers. Please remove
from yourself the pressure to make the messiness of middle school min-
istry disappear and replace it with the freedom to simply walk along-
side and minister to young teenagers in the midst of the mess. Embrace and walk alongside the confusion, doubts, fears, rebellion, insecurity, change, mistakes, and chaos virtually every young teenager in your community is facing. Remind them, and everyone else in your church, that the messiness of middle school is a normal and important part of their faith journey; one that, when navigated with the support of a few Jesus-loving adults, will ultimately serve to make their faith stronger.

The messiness of middle school ministry is here to stay. You’re a mess minister, not a mess magician, so go dig around in your office and find your shepherd staff. But remember that in order to pick it up, you’ll need to let go of the magic wand.

—KURT
@KurtJohnston

Kurt Johnston leads the student ministry teams at Saddleback Church which consists of 18 campuses worldwide. Kurt’s middle school ministry journey began as a senior in college when he launched a 10-week summer day camp for sixth-eighth graders at his home church. Middle school ministry has been his passion ever since, and along the way he’s created over 100 resources to encourage others with the same calling.
I’ve just come home from my regular mid-week junior high meeting. Although I’m a little tired from being out late, I’m full of emotion; my heart is full of joy, I feel optimistic, and I’m still full of energy. Most days I’m trying to go to bed by this time, but not on these nights. Why is it that for the past 20 years on Thursdays I consistently feel this way? I’ll tell you why. It’s because I believe with my entire being that junior high ministry is the most important ministry in the entire church.

In construction, the most important part of a building is the foundation. A good foundation is the base that supports the rest of the building. In a similar way, the junior high years are some of the most foundational years of a person’s life, setting the trajectory for their future. That’s why ministry to junior high students is so important. Junior high ministry is right in that special place where families and youth workers can drastically impact and change a student’s life.

Everything in middle school students’ worlds are changing.

- Mentally, students are changing from concrete to abstract thinking.
- Physically, students are growing by the day and developing muscles, fat, and hair in places they never thought possible.
- Socially, their network of friends is expanding geographically and is starting to include members of the opposite sex.
- Spiritually, their relationship with God is starting to be personalized and they’re beginning to understand God in new ways like never before.

When you add the other factors of brain development, identity, moral development, and relationship formation, I truly believe the junior high years are the most influential years in a person’s life.

There’s no other group in the church more set and ready for impact than junior high students. The only problem is that in most cases they’re the underdogs of the church, often forgotten, patronized, misunderstood, and drastically under resourced. As junior high leaders, we need to help
our churches understand the importance of the middle school years and help our students understand that they matter to God and that He created them to be just the way they are at this time in their lives.

Middle school students are significant parts of our churches and need to be seen for who they are: gifts from God, the future leaders of our church, fields ripe for harvest, clay needing to be molded. It’s proactive ministry, setting in place a foundation that they can begin to set the rest of their lives on.

I hope in these few words you hear and feel my passion for junior high students, because after two decades, I still love spending time with them and pointing them to Jesus. The ministry is so worthwhile, and so rewarding because it’s so important. Like I said in the beginning, I believe it’s the most important ministry in the church.

Even when I am old and gray,
do not forsake me, my God,
till I declare your power to the next generation,
your mighty acts to all who are to come.
Psalm 71:18 (NIV)

—MARK

Mark Janzen is the Team Leader for Student Ministries at Willingdon Church in Canada, where he has worked with junior high students for the last 20 years. This wily veteran believes that junior high students are the coolest people on the face of the earth and his passion is to impact students at their level and build them into active followers of Jesus.
MY WORKING METAPHOR FOR YOUNG TEENS AND DOUBT
MARK OESTREICHER
Co-Founder of the Youth Cartel
San Diego, California

For years, as I’ve talked about the spiritual development of young teens and their brain development, I’ve said something along these lines:

Abstract thinking is a beautiful gift from God that comes with the onset of puberty. Abstract thinking is, in a nutshell, thinking about thinking. There are tons of implications, but the primary biggies are speculation (asking “what if” and “why” questions), and third person perspective (seeing myself from someone else’s point of view, or seeing someone else from someone else’s point of view, or even considering an idea from someone else’s point of view). These two results of abstract thinking are revolutionary to the spiritual development of teenagers (as well as for their emotional development, relational growth, and identity formation). Preteens are some of the most concluded people on the planet. They have a completely worked out (albeit naive) worldview and systematic theology—concrete, but functional. Then puberty comes along like a tsunami and obliterates all that conclusiveness, creating a space for questions and doubts, and a move toward either rejecting childhood faith or growing into a more robust, complex, adult faith.

I think I’d picked up that “tsunami” metaphorical language years and years ago from one of my own junior high ministry mentors. It’s dramatic, and sounds nice.

But it’s not accurate.

I’ve replaced that metaphor recently in how I think about this shift.

The reason it’s not accurate is that young teens don’t suddenly acquire fully-functioning abstract thinking. They get the capacity; but it’s like an underdeveloped, super-wimpy muscle that has to be exercised for a number of years in order to gain strength. So, yes, young teens (post-puberty) have the capacity for abstract thinking; and it does have huge implications for all those developmental realities (including spiritual). But it doesn’t happen overnight. It’s not a light switch. And the “elimination” of concrete childhood beliefs does not take place like the arrival of a tsunami.
Picture a giant cliff at the edge of a sea. But this cliff is made of something soft and easy to erode—like dirt, or sandstone, or chalk (think Cliffs of Dover). When the capacity for abstract thinking kicks in, nothing changes immediately. Those concluded faith bits still stand like a proud sea cliff as long as the sea below is calm.

But then something happens that creates a gap or tension between experience and belief. Like a 12-year-old who has always had a beautiful and confident belief that God answers prayers, and that if they really pray and it’s not selfish, they can throw a mountain into the sea. Then that kid’s favorite grandpa gets inoperable cancer. The kid is confident (full of faith) that prayer will heal his grandpa; but grandpa dies. Now, suddenly, there are stormy seas below the cliff. Waves crash against that edifice, and erosion happens. The concrete beliefs of the preteen years can’t stand against the barrage of powerful storm waves.

By the way, at this point, a young teen almost always needs an adult who can come alongside and help them move all the erosion, storm waves, and doubt stuff out of the murky world of subconscious if they hope to do anything other than reject that previous faith bit (if they hope to consider alternatives and new, more abstract, ways of thinking and believing).

If this re-evaluation of childhood (concluded) faith doesn’t occur by the mid-teen years, it’s highly likely that as an older teenager, they’ll fall away from an active faith. After all that erosion, there’s just not enough belief left to be sustainable. The other unhelpful option is that an older teenager doesn’t reject faith, but simply moves into adulthood with a childish, simplistic faith that doesn’t inform daily living, and certainly doesn’t look like anything we would call vibrant and life-giving.

Of course, for most young teens, this erosion of previous belief conclusions takes place at a semi-conscious level, where they struggle to put words to it. It just doesn’t seem to “work” anymore. That’s where we come in, youth workers. We become tour guides to the process of re-evaluated faith formation. We walk alongside, bringing questions out into the open, moving doubts from the sub-conscious and semi-conscious into the fully conscious, where they can be considered in the light of the Bible and first-hand experience.

So there you have it: Doubt comes to young teen faith not like a tsunami of change, but like a storm wave crashing into a sea cliff made of easily-erodible stuff.

Let’s get in there, storm chasers.

—MARKO
@MarkosBeard
Mark Oestreicher (Marko) is a veteran youth worker and founding partner in The Youth Cartel, providing resources, training, and coaching for church youth workers. He’s the author of dozens of books, including Youth Ministry 3.0, Hopecasting, and Leading Without Power: 9 Paths to Non-Coercive Ministry Leadership. Marko is a sought after speaker, writer, and consultant, and a middle school ministry volunteer at his church. Marko lives in San Diego with his wife Jeannie and two college-age kids, Riley and Max. Marko’s blog: www.whyismarko.com
WHY IN THE WORLD WOULD YOU HAVE A PROGRAM IN YOUR CHURCH THAT LEADS 6-YEAR-OLDS TO PRAY A PRAYER TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN AND THEN DRIVES ALL THE 16-YEAR-OLDS AWAY WHEN THEY TURN 16? WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?

Andy Stanley
SUCCESSORS TO LEADERSHIP
NIKOMAS PEREZ
Next Gen Pastor
Harvester Christian Church of St. Louis, Missouri

Middle Schoolers. Their socks don’t match, their fingers are stained by Cheetos dust, and they possess the energy of an over-caffeinated baby alpaca. It’s no wonder many churches keep them penned up in a separate room far away from the adult community!

But what if we didn’t? What if we strategically released middle schoolers into the church?

After working with this age group for the last decade, I’ve become an advocate of integrating this generation into the church body in meaningful ways. In fact, I believe that the church’s future is brightest when we treat middle schoolers like successors to leadership, rather than behaviors to be managed.

Middle schoolers are quirky, but they’re capably quirky! I’ve seen this age group rise to every challenge posed to them. They believe there’s nothing they can’t do—and I’m starting to agree! Because of that, I think churches should give them a shot at big things. More and more churches are excelling in their ability to reach and raise middle schoolers with great small group environments. I love that! So, now, I think it’s time we start excelling at releasing them in two specific ways.

1. REACH AND RAISE: Middle School Environments
Let me make this clear: I love middle school specific environments. They’re the best way to reach new kids and raise them in the faith. Like others, our team does that through large group and small group environments. I’ve seen the effectiveness of a middle school program that’s high energy and fun, with Jesus-centered teaching that leads to great small group discussions.

Having a specific environment to reach and raise middle schoolers is imperative. But if you’re hoping for long-term community involvement, it can’t be the only church environment they experience.

2. RELEASE AND RETAIN: All Church Environments
The Church can’t function to its fullest capacity without a thriving generation of teenagers bouncing around its halls. The church needs them, and they need the church. So while I’m 100 percent on board with having
middle school specific environments, I also believe we should have at least one environment where students are put smack-dab in the middle of the Church’s broader community.

In our region, Wednesday nights work best for middle school ministry. So that’s given us the ability to be creative with Sunday mornings. We’ve tried it all: Sunday school, teen worship services, breakfast and bagels, and more. A few years ago we tried a different strategy: Nothing.

And it’s working.

Instead of providing weekend programming, we integrated all of our students into the church-body in all of its facets: worship, serving, community, and leadership. And it has been wonderful! The kids are benefiting from it, and the church is benefiting too!

Previously, a new family would visit, go to the main services, look around and never see a young face. Sure, we had tons of young people, but we kept them penned up in a room far from the adults! Now, from the moment you step onto campus you are inundated with multiple generations in the halls and in the seats. It has created a new kind of energy on campus.

The middle schoolers are benefiting from it too! Sure, the service may not be as high energy as theirs, but our lead pastor does a great job every weekend of making a tie-in to younger generations. But the best benefit the students experience is through leadership opportunities that weren’t available before. By integrating them into the church, students are given the opportunity to serve in some pretty big roles. We have middle schoolers serving everywhere now: as children’s ministry small group leaders and greeters, and in tech, prayer team, worship band, etc.

We’re giving an entire generation the opportunity to lead in the church now. I love that!

The church is no longer just managing the age group, they’re raising up leaders by releasing them into the church body. Our hope is that this will create an environment where students thrive in the church setting beyond their middle school and high school years. Now, when they graduate from youth group, their whole church experience doesn’t completely change. While their mid-weeks may change, they can continue to attend, serve, and lead on the weekends.

With just a small shift, our church’s future has become brighter, simply by treating middle schoolers like successors to leadership, rather than behaviors to be managed.

—NIKOMAS
@Nikomas
Nikomas Perez serves as the Next Gen Pastor at Harvester Christian Church in St. Louis, Missouri. His role allows him to develop leaders and strategies that impact God’s kingdom for generations to come. Previously, Nikomas spent 9 years as Harvester’s Middle School Pastor. To this day, he loves talking about, speaking with, and writing for various middle school ministries across the country.
I still reflect on this comment an eighth grader threw at me before church on a Sunday morning a few months ago. We were just talking about life, and he said that sentence that I haven’t been able to shake from my mind. Without realizing it, he was reminding me once again that quite often for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, it seems like no one’s really interested in their story.

Think back to your story—specifically of middle school. Who were the players in your story? Did anyone really see you or seek to know you? Is there a person who talked things out with you, so you didn’t have to do it all alone? What about the middle schoolers you know today? Who really sees them? Who really wants to know their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of regular, everyday (sometime seemingly mundane) stuff, as well as the pain and confusion many of them carry?

Why have I stayed with middle school ministry for the long haul?

Because I want to be the person I needed when I was in middle school.

And I want to inspire, encourage, and equip other people to do that for every middle school student.

Some people think that to do middle school ministry, you need a lot of answers. After all, we live in confusing times, and middle schoolers need wisdom, right?

But actually, I believe that, more than “answers,” middle school ministry is really about asking the right questions.

Questions to dig into students’ lives . . . questions about what they say or how they experienced something, or even just about what their facial expression is saying when their mouth is saying very little.
Recently, I had only one eighth grader show up to small group time. I love this kid, but he’s quiet. Really quiet. I wasn’t sure what to do with just the two of us, so I decided we’d have a “walking small group” that day. As we walked around the church, I asked him every question I could think of including, “What do you think we could do to make our small group better?”

His answer wasn’t encouraging: “Well . . . we could try to get people to come more often . . . ” I thought to myself, “He thinks this conversation is so lame. He thinks I’m so lame!”

But that night, I got the following email from his mom, word-for-word:

“I want to thank you for spending one on one time with Charlie* this morning. It is a true honor for him to know you. You play such a unique role in his life, and I’m sure so many others too. By choosing to stay with Charlie, you have reminded me of how important our small decisions can be. You have shown how God values every single person. You have demonstrated how valuable our time is when invested in each other. Charlie told me he had the best small group time ever! Thank you, thank you!”

I know another middle schooler who goes to a church in another state. Austin* has two siblings and his parents are together . . . but all is not well at home. His family sent him away to a summer camp to “help” him, but my hunch is that what he needs even more is to be listened to more at home. Austin goes to church every week. But when I asked him if there were any adults besides his parents who he could talk to or who asked him questions and listened to him, he looked at me and said, “Nah.”

You know what I really wish for Austin? That someone would ask him questions. He lives out of state, so I can’t do that very often. But I can do it for the middle schoolers in my church. And you can do it for middle schoolers at your church—whether you’re a full-time, part-time, or volunteer youth worker. Or even if you’re just an adult who loves Jesus and cares about the students at your church. Every middle schooler has a story they’re dying to tell . . . if someone will just ask them the right questions.

Be the person you needed when you were in middle school. I will, too!

* Names have been changed.

—SCOTT
@Scott_Rubin
Scott Rubin is the Director of Student Ministries at Willow Creek Church and the Director of Elevate, Willow Creek’s junior high ministry. He’s been on staff at Willow for over 25 years, working with students, volunteers, and parents. Scott is also a speaker and author of several books, including Middle School Ministry, The Essential Guide to My New Life with Jesus, and The Red Stuff. Scott is married with three sons and wishes Lake Michigan was an ocean so he could surf there. Seriously, that’d be cool.
CLOSING

As I read these essays, I’m inspired. I hope the same is true for many of you.

Middle school . . .
It’s an age group that doesn’t seem to fit.
They’re not kids anymore, but they’re definitely not adults.
And just when you think you’ve figured them out, they change.

So, how do we make middle school matter more?

We can inspire change from two angles:

1. Focus on what needs to change.
2. Focus on what could be.

Imagine with me for a moment . . .

If we sent our best, brightest, most experienced ministry leaders into the fight for the hearts of middle school students.

If middle school ministry volunteers felt like the special ops force in the church.

If we created places where middle school students felt known and accepted for who they are and where they are.

If we created a safe place for middle schoolers to belong at a time when they feel like everything else inside and outside their bodies are changing.

How many marriages could be saved because someone intersected with some guy in middle school and altered his belief in himself at that critical age?

How many eating disorders could be prevented because a sixth grade girl felt like she found a place where she was enough?

If churches all over raised the flag for middle school ministry, and an entire generation of students embraced the fact that God loves them exactly as they are right now in this phase.
If middle school students changed the world because you believed in them.

Here’s what I want you to do.

Picture your last “head-in-hands” meeting with an adult who has self-destructed in some way. Do you feel that? It’s that “hopeless-can’t-help-you-now-what-am-I-gonna-say” feeling. I’m pretty sure it’s one of the top 10 worst feelings in the world as a pastor.

Now, imagine you had an option to get in a time machine, and you could go back to that person in middle school to help them understand one big idea about themselves.

Maybe you would help them believe a truth they never were exposed to at that age.

Maybe you would help them understand a lie that they started believing in middle school is just that . . . a lie.

Maybe you would help them uncover a secret that they started to keep in middle school, so they can experience grace and acceptance at an early age.

Would it make a difference?

You know it would!

The next time you feel that “hopeless-can’t-help-you-now-what-am-I-gonna-say” feeling with someone you love, imagine a world where that conversation never had to happen. That’s possible with a time machine.

I would love to give you all a time machine. I’m working on it, but it looks like they’re not real.

But here’s what I know.

For some of you, there’s a group of middle schoolers who need you right now and it’s very possible that they won’t need a time machine in the next 20–30 years because of you. Because you raised the flag and painted a picture of what could be.

For some of you, there’s a group of volunteers who tirelessly give their time and energy to the students in your ministry, and they need to be reminded why what they do matters so much.
For some of you, the leader of your middle school ministry needs to hear from you, so they know they’re not in this fight alone.

That’s real. That’s as real as it gets. That’s why we do what we do.

So, focus on that world. Look at the students, volunteers, and ministry leaders God has entrusted to you.

Raise the flag and advance.

—SHEF
@CoachShef