

As you lead sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders, you'll soon get to know what they're like. But even veteran leaders find it hard to analyze and categorize this age group. One reason is that kids in middle school are in transition from childhood to adulthood. Somewhere, probably at widely different points on the developmental continuum, you'll find each of your students taking halting lunges forward and painful slips backward.

The preteens in your group can vary all the way from those who profess to “hate” the opposite sex to those who spend increasing amounts of time thinking about them. The differences in physical maturation alone can be stunning. And physical changes are matched by intellectual, social, and spiritual changes that are every bit as dramatic.

Here are a few reminders for you to consider as you prepare to teach your middle schoolers.

Intellectual Characteristics



Young teens

- are gradually acquiring the ability to think abstractly and are no longer limited to “concrete” experiences from which to draw conclusions. Older middle schoolers have a developing ability to conceptualize, understand metaphor, think logically, speculate about ideas and propositions, and entertain lots of questions while toying with a variety of answers. While abstract thinking is starting to happen, keep in mind that many middle schoolers are just beginning this process. Some may still need very concrete examples to help them cross the bridge to more abstract thinking.
- like to flex their new-found mental muscles by pointing out inconsistencies in what they've seen, heard, and learned about many topics, including their faith.
- are becoming increasingly capable of working out their own system of beliefs and values.
- continue to need a lot of variety and “hands-on” learning experiences to maintain interest and attention. They can stay on one task longer than younger children but still respond best to frequent changes in pace and activities.

Tips for Leaders

- Be aware that these early teens may be at widely differing places in their ability to handle abstract thinking. This means that you should include some questions and activities that they can successfully handle. At the same time, you can move your teaching beyond just facts and information.
- Ask questions that help these kids give their opinions and give them opportunities to draw conclusions from Scripture, to raise questions of their own, and to apply the insights gained from Bible study to the way they live from day to day.
- Establish a personal relationship with your kids. Stimulate, challenge, and lovingly guide them as they rethink old assumptions and entertain new ideas.
- Create a warm, friendly environment for learning where kids are free to ask questions and be themselves.
- Vary your teaching approach and methods from week to week as much as possible. Use activities that cover the range of all eight intelligences (see introduction to your leader's guide and individual sessions).

- Avoid lecturing whenever possible. Try some of the more unusual and creative activities suggested in your leader's guide.

Social Characteristics

Young teens

- struggle with the task of establishing their own identities. Many tend to move away from families and teachers toward their own peer group, who help them shape their beliefs, test their values, and provide support.
- may show their identity struggle in ways that startle and irritate adults (garish trends, abrasive music, or exclusive groupings).
- often feel an almost desperate need for acceptance, especially by their peers. Friends become very important, and though some middle schoolers won't admit it, research shows that families continue to play a vital role in influencing the values and beliefs of this age group.
- ride an emotional roller coaster with unpredictable ups and downs. They can be spirited, reckless, and energetic, especially in small groups, but they may also experience feelings of isolation and loneliness (despite hectic schedules and much busyness.) Their need for affirmation, acceptance, and support is hard to overestimate.
- may occasionally behave in disruptive ways to gain peer approval. They may giggle and whisper or they may be loud and argumentative. You'll have to judge just how much noise is detrimental to learning, how much bothers the group, and how much bothers you. Most young teens really want a well-run classroom.
- are often hugely concerned with their appearance to the point of becoming self-conscious. There seems to be no limit to the things these teens can stress about concerning their body image and self-concept. They don't want to be embarrassed but embarrass easily.
- may often appear totally self-absorbed (because they often are), but they are now able to take the perspective of other people. This new ability ironically gets a good workout as the kids use it to look at themselves as they think others do. While eventually this will blossom into an adult-like sensitivity to others, for a while it adds to their egocentrism.
- may spend long hours playing video games, going online, instant messaging, watching TV, or talking or texting on their cell phones.

Tips for Leaders

- Build relationships. Let your kids know you like them, enjoy their company, and want to be with them. Listen to them and let them know you take them seriously. If possible, try to attend at least some of their games, concerts, plays, and other special events. They might not show that your attendance matters, but it does.
- Look for opportunities to affirm individuals privately (public praise can embarrass them.) Avoid sarcasm and criticism. Help them feel loved, accepted, and valued.
- Make the classroom a place where everyone is safe to express thoughts or opinions. Be fair but flexible, consistent but caring. Deal with individuals who misbehave individually and apart from the group. Doing it in front of their peers puts them in a situation where they will be even more disrespectful to you in order to impress their friends. Taking peers out of the situation makes it easier for everyone.
- The best way to have a well-run classroom is to vary the pace and activities. Kids who are engaged in the learning are less likely to misbehave. Building personal relationships with them also helps them to want the class to go well.

- Provide lots of opportunity for group interaction and working together on assignments or projects, but make sure no one is left out or feels rejected. Asking them to form their own groups gives too much opportunity for some kids to feel left out or hurt.
- Provide clear instruction for projects and activities while encouraging kids to be creative. They should have a good idea of what's expected of them. Creativity is often enhanced when kids are given some parameters within which to work.

Spiritual Characteristics

Young teens

- are moving from doing good simply to avoid punishment or to return a favor to a more “conventional” level of faith and morality, where the key is conforming to what the group or culture defines as “normal” and acceptable. These young teens are developing their own beliefs and values in the context of peers, school, media, and church. Belonging to groups like the church and participating in its rituals and ministry become increasingly important.
- are able to commit themselves to Christ and to understand what it means to live a life of Christian gratitude and service. Public profession of faith is a very real possibility as some have arrived at the place of making commitments in their own right, apart from peers and parents.
- are able to deal with moral questions in terms of motives as well as consequences. They can think about questions of ethics and morality in the context of love, loyalty, promises, and so on.
- are idealists, quick to point out faults and failures at home and in the world, quick to spot injustice, and eager to become involved in worthy causes.
- need to know they're important to God and to the church right now, not just when they get older.
- often admire and seek to imitate adult faith models as a way of establishing their own identity.
- may be struggling with doubts and questions about their faith, feelings that often intensify with older adolescents. Their faith still likely reflects the faith of their parents, but they have begun to make it more personal and individual. Some may reject the faith of their parents and teachers out of rebellion or a desire to demonstrate that they think for themselves, but this is more likely with older adolescents.
- will have particular resonance with thinking about a God who knows them as individuals and cares about them. As they are working on developing their identity, knowing that God knows them and loves them personally is very important.

Tips for Leaders

- Involve kids in active ministry through service projects you do as a group. Encourage kids to participate in your church's worship and outreach ministries. Encourage your pastor or worship coordinator to find ways to consistently include young teens and children in worship leadership.
- Gently encourage those who express an interest in publicly professing their faith. Offer to talk with kids individually about their faith and answer any questions they have about the process of confessing their faith before your congregation.
- Help kids think through moral issues, give reasons for their choices, and get beyond just going along with the group. Use lots of examples from their lives. Case studies can be an effective approach for teaching ethics to older kids.

- Build on their idealism by encouraging them to respectfully protest injustice and inequalities they see at school or in their community. Encourage them to resist the clique mentality and think inclusively when it comes to selecting friends and joining groups.
- Think of yourself as a faith model for the kids. Know what you believe and live it and speak about it openly. At the same time, talk with them about difficulties and struggles that you experience (within reason, of course.)
- Assure kids who are struggling with their faith or with their failures that God does not expect or even reward perfection. God's grace is a gift through Christ.
- Encourage kids to have regular devotions at home and explore various forms of participatory prayers in your weekly sessions.