

# Issues Preteens Face



CHILDREN'S MINISTRY





## Issues Preteens Face

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## A Bit Like *Frogger*

When I was a preteen, *Frogger* was my favorite video game. I loved trying to hop that frog across a perilous river teeming with alligators or kerplop its way across a highway filled with looming trucks. At any moment, my frog could be snatched up by a gator or squashed by an 18-wheeler! Now that was *intense!*

Video games have changed a lot since the eighties—and so has the experience of elementary-school kids, especially those in fourth through sixth grade. In some ways, the preteen experience is universal and has been the same for generations: dealing with puberty, developing a sense of identity, beginning to feel “grown-up.” But for today’s kids, life as a preteen is an awful lot like *Frogger*. Along with the “normal” trials of pre-adolescence, preteens today are being exposed to problems like bullying, drugs, sexual activity, eating disorders, and intense academic pressure. They can often feel like they’re in danger of being gobbled up!

That’s where you come in. As someone who ministers to preteens, you can play an essential role in helping preteens develop a solid sense of self and a strong, resilient faith that will weather the coming storms of the teenage years. This download is meant to give you a starting point for doing just that.

To begin, you’ll find several articles that address specific issues preteens are dealing with. After each article there are several “Consider” questions for you to use in your own personal reflection or to talk about with others in your church who work with preteens.

Then you’ll find a section called “Ministry Insights.” This is the spot where you’ll get some specific ideas and practical strategies for strengthening your ministry to preteens.

It can be a scary world out there for your preteens—having you alongside of them, helping them navigate the threatening gators, will make a huge impact in their lives. Thanks for what you do!

*Kelli B. Trujillo*

*Contributing Editor*

**Leader’s Guide:**  
**How to use this download with your  
children’s ministry team.**

*This download can be used in a group setting. Simply make a copy for every leader and volunteer you’d like to share this with, read the articles ahead of time, then get together to talk about what you’ve read. Be sure to take time to pause and discuss the “Consider” questions that follow each article. Afterward, talk about the various “Ministry Insights” and brainstorm additional ideas of your own.*

## Preparing for Puberty

*Helping preteens navigate the turbulent waters of approaching adolescence.*

By Debra Bruce

Next to being born, puberty may well be the most drastic change we experience in life. And for many children, the months and years leading up to puberty can be difficult as well.

Even before a child experiences physical changes, her body is preparing for this next step. As the hormones begin to do their job, the child's fluctuating moods will reflect that inner turmoil. As one parent said about her preteen daughter, "Ashley went to bed one night as an optimistic, confident 10-year-old with a world of friends, but woke up the next day as a disjointed, moody person who hated the world and everyone in it."

The late elementary years are bound to be a little tough for any kid. Not quite grown up, but no longer a child, preteens are struggling to figure out where they fit. A preteen girl may go to school wearing a bra and a splash of her favorite after-bath spray, then come home, throw on a pair of torn jeans, and climb into a tree fort with the neighborhood kids. The home run hitter who slides into base and smiles at a cute girl may still ask his mom to cuddle with before he falls asleep at night—and it's all normal!

Outwardly, a late elementary child is a passionate bundle of energy and enthusiasm; inwardly, she might live with a growing sense of insecurity. This insecurity can affect everything from her feelings about school or her family to her relationship with God.

How can you help your preteens during these difficult days?

- **Practice an open door policy.** Let the kids in your ministry know that they're always welcome to invite and bring friends to your activities.
- **Remember how she feels.** If you've got the guts, show your kids pictures of yourself as a preteen! Talk about how you felt when you went through similar struggles and remind them that everyone grows and changes at different times.
- **Help him relax.** Encourage preteens to be themselves and to stay true to the things they enjoy doing rather than trying to impress others or grow up too fast.
- **Enjoy her childhood.** Keep your preteens' activities age-appropriate so they can continue to fully enjoy childhood.

### Say affirming words.

Whenever you can, build up kids' self-esteem by saying words of affirmation like "You're a great kid" or "You've got a great sense of humor." Let the kids know that

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God made each of us different—varying shapes, sizes and figures. Use Scripture passages such as Genesis 1:27 and Ephesians 3:17-19 to give preteens the ongoing assurance that they are just right in God’s sight.

*Debra Bruce is a writer and mother of three. This is an adaptation of an article that first appeared in Christian Parenting Today in 2000.*

### Consider

1. *What child-like behaviors have you observed in your preteens? What grown-up behaviors have you seen?*
2. *How have you seen kids’ physical changes impact their social relationships?*
3. *In what ways can you instill self-confidence in your preteens as they go through the ups and downs of pre-puberty and puberty?*

## Coping with Cliques

*Preteens struggle to form healthy friendships.*

By Faith Tibbetts McDonald

"At my school, there are three kinds of people: popular kids, regular kids and the losers," my son said recently.

"And where do you fit?" I asked him.

"I think I'm a 'high regular,' " he said.

According to my son, a "high regular" is interested in sports, wears athletic clothing and eats lunch with other high regulars. A high regular knows he must never sit at a lunch table with popular people and never, ever with the losers.

And, a high regular boy does not have a girlfriend.

As kids reach the late elementary years, cliques inevitably begin to form. According to school counselor Gloria Libkin, a clique's code of behavior is remarkably well-defined, although usually never spoken. It's almost as if some invisible authority has set down rigid guidelines that limit membership by designating parameters for belonging, she says. To an adult, the standards may seem impossible to decipher, but children easily recognize who belongs and who doesn't. And because the clique defines who they are—and who they aren't—most kids wouldn't dare violate group standards.

It's difficult for those who work with preteens to stand by and watch as their kids seem to set aside their own individuality in order to adapt to the personality, likes and dislikes of their "group." But cliques can actually be a good thing in the lives of preteens, according to author Zick Rubin in his book *Children's Friendships* (Harvard University Press.) At this stage, kids are just beginning to move away from their family's influence and toward greater independence. Groups of friends help bridge the span between childhood and adulthood, providing a sense of security, belonging and support.

For some children, however, the struggle to be included can be painful. Developmentally, some kids aren't ready to break away from Mom and Dad and won't be ready until later in adolescence. Yet as they see their friendships shifting and rearranging, they feel pressured to conform to a group. As someone who ministers to preteens, your understanding of the tension they're feeling is crucial to helping them cope with the ever-changing social structure of their world.

*Faith Tibbetts McDonald is a mother and freelance writer. This article was first published in Christian Parenting Today in 2000.*

## Consider

- *What role have you seen cliques play among the preteens you minister to? Has it been positive or negative? Why?*
- *Are there any kids you work with who are excluded or emotionally hurt by other students' cliques? Who? What effects have you observed?*
- *How have you seen cliques either help or hurt a student's developing sense of identity? How can you help the preteens you work with form a strong sense of confidence and self-worth?*

## The Pressure to Cheat

*When preteens and teens see others cheating, especially without being caught, it's easy for them to question the importance of integrity.*

By Faith Tibbetts McDonald

When I set out to write an article on cheating, I wondered where I'd find kids who cheat. Hoping for a hint, I visited a teen Sunday-school class in a nearby church.

"Do you know anyone who cheats?" I asked the kids.

"Are you gonna use our names?" a boy in the back asked uncomfortably.

Once I assured them that I would preserve their anonymity, the truth began to spill out. And I must admit, I was shocked by what I heard.

"Everyone cheats," one boy said. "Sometimes cheating is just easier than stressing yourself out. Anyway, only the really smart people survive by doing everything on their own."

Another student added, "We have a sweet system in one of my classes. When the teacher asks us to change papers to check each other's quizzes, we change each other's answers. You're not cheating for yourself. You're 'loving your neighbor.'"

Sadly, these kids aren't unique. In a recent survey conducted by Who's Who Among American High School Students, 80 percent of high-achieving students admitted to cheating at least once. And other studies show that 40 percent or more of students in grade school through graduate school cheat regularly.

Why is cheating so prevalent, even among students who should know better?

"Cheating's not such a big deal," one young girl told me. "The teachers have too much else to worry about."

She has a point. In today's society, where educators are forced to worry about guns and drugs and violence on a daily basis, it's not surprising that cheating might be relegated to the category of "minor offense."

Still, school leaders are concerned about the problem. Although cheating is nothing new, educators say the new facet is that students cheat without shame. "While I don't see cheating as a problem for the majority of our students, cheaters are getting sneakier," says Debra Latta, assistant principal at Park Forest Middle School in State College, Pennsylvania. "The problem is that kids don't see anything wrong with cheating."

It's tough to help our kids practice academic honesty when they've got all kinds of rationalizations for cheating. But by recognizing why children cheat, we can begin to break apart their skewed logic and build a sense of integrity in its place.

**Excuse #1: "If you want to pass, you have to cheat."**

The pressures on today's students are enormous. When faced with their parents' demands for success, increasingly difficult subject matter and intense competition, students often feel they have no choice but to cheat.

Dr. Sally Morrison, assistant professor at Wheaton College in Illinois, says sometimes the problem is not so much the student's, but his parent's or teacher's. "When students cheat, we need to ask why they feel so insecure about the subject matter," she says.

Studies show that cheating occurs more often in a classroom where the teacher is disorganized and inattentive to student behavior. Other factors might make cheating a more tempting option: vague penalties for cheating, the teacher offering unclear reasons for learning or a final grade based on only one or two papers or tests. When teachers provide study sheets, offer study sessions and use various forms of assessment (tests, presentations, projects or papers, etc.) cheating decreases.

**Excuse # 2: "I'm not smart enough. I have to cheat."**

The idea that it's impossible to succeed without cheating can often come from the most innocent of sources. Take video games for example. Kids often search the Internet for codes or "cheats" to help them win computer and video games. Many games are set up so that a crafty player can surf the Internet and discover a secret code or shortcut that will allow him to advance or even win the game without completing each level.

Children often use the "I'm not smart enough" excuse in one of two ways. They either truly believe they can't do the work, or they use it as a cop-out when they just don't feel like studying anymore.

**Excuse # 3: "Copying homework isn't cheating. It's working together."**

Some kids are genuinely uncertain about the specifics of cheating and are especially confused when it comes to identifying plagiarism. Some aspects of school culture actually contribute to this confusion. Many teachers encourage teamwork and require kids to work in groups. In turn, kids may find it convenient to stretch the concept and assume copying someone else's homework and handing it in as their own is OK.

Some school districts have "homework help hotlines." Unfortunately, some students aren't able to tell the difference between the help they receive here and getting the answers from a smart friend.

Kids can also cheat online. Consider the many Internet sites that advertise homework "help." I searched the Web and found thousands of sites. Although many include a disclaimer in small print declaring that papers are provided for "reference only" and students shouldn't turn them in as their own, several sites offer the possibility of downloading free or reasonably priced papers and book reports. One site, "The Evil House of Cheat," promotes itself as the "best way to get an A and it's free." This site posts 15 tips and tricks for cheating on an exam.

**Excuse #4: "Everybody else does it."**

When kids see others cheating, especially without being caught, it's easy for them to question the importance of integrity. Provide your kids with the motivation to be honest by showing them what the Bible says.

In Leviticus 6:3-4, cheating is compared to stealing and God says the person who cheats must make restitution. Contrary to current thought, Scripture says there are no "little" acts of dishonesty. A person who is dishonest in small things will most likely be dishonest in the more important matters. A person who does even the smallest things with integrity will do the same in more important matters (Matt. 25:23).

You can encourage parents to emphasize to their kids that they value honesty and integrity over high grades. A child will feel better knowing he earned his grade, rather than cheated to get it. One student I talked to admitted, "Cheating makes me feel cheap because I wonder what grade I would have gotten if I'd done it on my own."

Teaching kids to take the moral high road is never easy. When it comes to building godly character in the kids we work with, our own active involvement and consistent example are crucial. As you live a life that reflects honesty and integrity, the preteens you minister to will learn what it means to stand up for what's right and take pride in a job well done.

*Faith Tibbetts McDonald is a freelance writer and former teacher. She lives with her husband and three children in Pennsylvania. This was adapted from an article called "Is Your Child Cheating?" that was first published in the May/June 2000 issue of Christian Parenting Today.*

**Consider**

- *What impact do you think academic pressure has on the kids you work with?*
- *How much cheating do you think the preteens you work with are exposed to? How much cheating do you think they actually do themselves?*
- *Have you ever discussed cheating with your preteens? Why or why not?*

## Bullies Are Hurting Too

*Ministering to kids who bully others.*

By Alicia Corts

Bullying doesn't just happen on the school playground—it can happen right in the middle of a church Sunday School class. And it isn't just the visitor from a non-Christian home who does the bullying; sometimes it's a child from a committed Christian family. His parents may even be your close friends!

Consider the statistics: The Committee for Children found that 78% of 3rd through 8th graders polled had been bullied in the previous month. Somebody's doing the bullying.

Clearly, bullying and teasing can have a tremendous impact on the victim. But children who intentionally hurt other children—whether with their fists, their words, or their actions—also need help from the adults who love them. We grown-ups need to be willing to recognize that even the kids we work with and love can sometimes hurt other children—physically or emotionally.

If you discover that one of your preteens has been antagonizing other children, try to root out the cause of your child's behavior even as you work to change it. Here's how:

### Help Parents Accept Responsibility

Almost universally, school administrators say parental involvement is critical in changing a child's behavior. But first, parents have to be willing to admit there's a problem.

"Parents often refuse to accept that their child could be a bully," says Dr. Jerry Daniel, administrator of Trinity Christian School in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Naturally, parents want to think the best of our children, but they have to be willing to listen to other adults in their children's lives. They need to recognize that nearly every child is capable of cruelty.

Bullying is more than just an occasional harsh word or hit; most kids will have conflict of some kind during their school years. But the bullying that should lead to concern is a pattern of behavior that results in frequent peer problems at school. If a teacher, administrator, or church worker tells a parent know that his or her child has recurring conflicts, it's time for that parent to step in.

### Help Kids See Their Bullying Behavior

Dr. Daniel says, "Research shows that most bullies are blind to their actions. They don't see themselves as bullies and are able to rationalize their actions as justified." Steve McChesney, who runs the Bully-Free Kids website ([www.bullyfreekids.com](http://www.bullyfreekids.com)), notes that bullies often blame their victims.

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In order to help a bullying child take responsibility for his actions, McChesney suggests encouraging that child to use "I" language. He says, "When ever I ask a child why they bullied someone, the answer is usually 'Because he or she ...' I stop them there and say that their answer has to start with the word I. They will begin again with 'They were ...' I stop them again and say 'Start with 'I,' until they finally start with 'I was ...' That is a major breakthrough in getting to the resolution." Many bullies are acting out their own fears of rejection, a low sense of self-esteem, or a need to exert control over others.

### Work With Parents to Make a Plan

As you start figuring out the root of a child's bullying behavior, work with the child's parents to take steps toward dealing with the behavior itself. For more than 25 years, Stan Davis has been traveling to schools, using storytelling and magic tricks to illustrate the effects of bullying. He also runs a website, [www.stopbullyingnow.com](http://www.stopbullyingnow.com), offering tips for parents and students. Davis stresses that continued parent/child communication is a key factor in helping to curb a bully's behavior. This provides a level of accountability for a child and helps her recognize that she is ultimately responsible for her behavior. Davis says, "Focus on the bullying behavior as a choice your child made. Next time someone bugs them or everyone else is picking on someone, what are they going to do differently?"

Loving adults can help a child establish a plan of action for dealing with stressful situations. Together with his or her parents, you can talk through the issues that seem to spark bullying behavior in the child. Discuss appropriate ways to handle her frustrations or anger. If she is acting up because she feels left out, set up one-on-one play dates with classmates she'd like to get to know better. If she's teasing or hitting to gain control, help her discover her strengths as a student or a friend. These can then become areas where she gains the respect and attention she craves.

Parents and church workers can also curb bullying behavior by giving children a glimpse at how their actions affect others. Talk about how it feels to be hurt or picked on. Help the child imagine what the other child is experiencing as a result of her actions.

### Look for Negative Influences

Keep in mind that sometimes the biggest problems are closer to home. Julie was surprised to find out how much Kylie was picking up from Julie's fiancé Eric. A fun-loving guy, Eric wasn't afraid to mock people at the grocery store, at the park, or even at church. Kylie eventually told her mother that she really liked the way everyone laughed at Eric's jokes, so she had started to make fun of people on the playground. Says Julie, "Learning what was behind her behavior allowed us not only to help her change her ways, but to help Eric understand what being a father would mean."

Stan Davis notes that there are pressures to tease and ridicule others everywhere. If a child is prone to bullying behavior, encourage her parents to keep her away from these influences, to pay attention to what she watches on TV or in movies or video games, and to take note of how her friends act and what passes for "cool" among her peer group.

## Seek God's Help

Children don't always understand the need for standards of behavior—they are impulsive creatures who are still learning to express their emotions in appropriate ways. But as Christians, we can help the children we work with to recognize that, as God's people, we are to show God's love and respect for others. Talk to a bullying child about the way Jesus treated people, especially those who were different. Have her think about why Jesus chose to be compassionate, even to people who were mean to him. Together, think about ways that child can treat others with kindness. Pray together for patience, compassion, and understanding.

Showing grace to a child who has bullied is also important. Steve McChesney advises adults to avoid calling that child a bully; instead, he encourages adults to use the term "bullying behavior." "The more you put the label out there," he says, "the more likely your child will feel that's what he is and can't change." Let a bullying child know you believe he can make different decisions about how he acts. Tell him you're proud of him when you witness a positive interaction with a friend. Continue to pray together, asking for God to help that child make good choices.

If a child is hurting others, remember that they will struggle with sin just like everyone else. Help that child hold on to God's promise of redemption in Isaiah 1:18: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

*Alicia Cortis is pursuing a Master of Arts in Teaching. She lives in Minnesota. This is adapted from an article called "Could This Be Your Child?" that was first published in Christian Parenting Today in 2004.*

## Consider

1. *What bullying behaviors, big or small, have you observed in the preteens you work with? Or what kinds of behaviors do you imagine might be taking place behind the scenes?*
2. *What have you observed as the root causes of bullying behavior among the preteens you minister to?*
3. *What strategies for dealing with bullying mentioned in this article stand out to you most? Which might you need to employ with a particular student you work with?*

## Deadening the Heart

*Killer video games are no "safety valve" for preteens and teens—quite the opposite.*

A CHRISTIANITY TODAY editorial

Steve Johnson, author of *Everything Bad is Good for You*, says violent video games are good for children. He thinks that video games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* may "function as a kind of safety valve—they let kids who would otherwise be doing violent things for the thrill of it, get out those kind of feelings sitting at home at a screen." Says Johnson: "This may have a deterrent effect on violence."

But the American Psychological Association thinks otherwise. Time spent playing violent video games "increases aggressive thoughts, aggressive behavior, and angry feelings among youth." Less than a week before the *Ottawa Citizen* reported Johnson's remarks, the professional society for psychologists acted on 20 years of research into the effects of violent video games. After a "special committee" reviewed more than 70 studies, the organization adopted a resolution calling for the "reduction of violence in interactive media used by children and adolescents."

APA scholars cited a study of eighth- and ninth-grade teachers. The teachers said that the students who spent time playing violent video games were more hostile than other children and more likely to argue with authority figures and fellow students. And according to another study of 600 eighth- and ninth-graders, students not normally prone to aggression are nearly 10 times as likely to get into a fight after playing a violent video game.

Good teachers know three things that contribute to effective learning: active participation, rehearsing behavioral sequences rather than discrete acts, and repetition, repetition, repetition. Video games employ all three. In addition, the vast majority of the gaming scenarios (like the random killing of prostitutes) fail to show the real-life consequences of violence. Perpetrators go unpunished. In short, violent games can deaden us to the horror of violence and stimulate our native sinfulness. It shouldn't surprise us that all media shape us, which is one reason Paul exhorts us to think on things that are true, honorable, pure, lovely, commendable, and excellent (Phil. 4).

Some say these are just games, and that we shouldn't take them so seriously. But in the wake of the 1998 schoolyard massacre in Jonesboro, Arkansas, military expert David Grossman showed CT readers how these games use the same operant conditioning techniques used by armies to overcome recruits' natural aversion to killing.

To be sure, there is a difference in setting—between the home (where real violence is eschewed otherwise) and the military (where the environment reinforces the violence in the video games). Still, it is not hard to see that repeated exposure to random violence can have a detrimental effect.

Others point to the violence found in traditional storytelling, wondering what the difference is. Indeed, fairy tales are often gruesome, with wolves gobbling grandmas and witches baking little children. But such fairy tales are pieces of cathartic moral fiction that help children process their fears. Biblical violence is every bit as gruesome, and it likewise helps us construct a moral universe. Goliath's severed head is not the end of a gory story. It is the beginning of a long saga in which the champion of God's people must struggle with hubris and learn humility.

We support the APA resolution that asks educators to help students apply the same critical viewing skills to violent video games that can be applied to movies and television. This might be a way for youth leaders to engage their charges. Such media literacy programs not only reduce the negative effects of watching violent programming, they reduce the amount of time children watch television. The participatory nature of video games makes this critical-viewing strategy an especially difficult challenge, but outside of a complete ban on games that employ random violence (not politically possible), this is a good first step.

*This editorial was first published in the October 2005 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.*

## Consider

1. *Putting the issue of violence aside for a moment, do you think video game playing in general is a problem for some of your preteen students? Do any of them play video games too much? What positive or negative effects have you seen in the lives of kids who are really into video games?*
2. *Why do you think violent video games appeal to preteens (or teens)? What do they "get" out of playing them?*
3. *How have you seen violent video games affect kids' character formation?*

## Preteen Pressures

*High-risk behaviors once limited to adolescence are finding their way into the preteen world.*

By Kelli B. Trujillo

The preteen years used to be merely a time of older childhood with a sense of “innocence” and naïveté that wouldn’t be intruded upon until the middle school years. But the reality is that in our world today, preteens are exposed to some dangerous behaviors on a regular basis. Consider these facts:

- Preteens watch more television than younger kids or than older teens, logging in over four hours of TV per day. (Kaiser Family Foundation)
- By the time a preteen has completed elementary school, he or she has seen an average of 8,000 murders on television. ([www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html](http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html))
- Attitudes and behaviors that lead toward eating disorders are increasingly being seen in preteen girls. One study out of the Duke Eating Disorders Program found that four out of ten girls ages nine and ten said they were on a diet in an effort to lose weight. (<http://news.healingwell.com>)
- In a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation and other groups, nearly half of all preteens surveyed felt that violence and racial discrimination were big problems among kids their age.
- One study found that nearly half of all fifth graders reported being bullied at some point during the school year. ([www.kidsdata.org](http://www.kidsdata.org))
- Inhaling fumes from household items like nail polish, paint solvents, glue, and lighter fluid appears to be the current popular way to get high among preteens. Studies show that this use of inhalants often leads to use of marijuana and other drugs during the teen years. According to the National Inhalant Prevent Coalition, between three to four percent of 12 year-olds use inhalants on a regular basis. ([www.injuryboard.com](http://www.injuryboard.com))
- 16 percent of preteens report regularly seeing other kids their age “making out.” (Kaiser Family Foundation)
- Research completed by the University of Texas concluded that 12 percent of kids under age 12 have had sexual intercourse and nearly eight percent have participated in oral sex. ([www.citizenlink.org](http://www.citizenlink.org))
- *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, found that 42 percent of kids and teens (ages 10 to 17) had viewed online pornography; of

those kids, two-thirds saw it accidentally (through advertisements, web surfing, and so on). (<http://pediatrics.aapublications.org>)

A majority of preteen kids *don't* participate in these behaviors, but it's important for us to recognize that they're likely still exposed to them through conversations with other kids their age. The more we in the church are aware of these issues, the better equipped we'll be to minister to the preteens in our lives.

*Kelli B. Trujillo is the author of Faith-Filled Moments (Wesleyan).*

### Consider

1. *Which of these facts alarms or surprises you the most? Why?*
2. *What effects can a "loss of innocence"—even if it is merely through hearing things talked about by other kids—have on a child? How have you observed this in your ministry to preteens?*
3. *How have you seen kids' faith in Jesus help them overcome some of these pressures?*

## Ministry Insights

**Want a place to start? Here are several specific ideas and principles you could implement to strengthen your ministry to preteens.**

### First Steps Toward Faith Ownership

*An Interview with Preteen Ministry Veteran Patrick Snow.*

Interview by Kelli B. Trujillo

*Patrick Snow knows a thing or two about ministry to preteens. He's the director of SuperStart!, a weekend faith-building event for preteens that tours the country. He's also the author of Leading Preteens (Standard Publishing), a book of strategies and insights for church preteen leaders. We recently checked in with Patrick to get his take on the most important aspects of ministry to preteens.*

**Developmentally, preteens find themselves caught in between childhood and adolescence. It's the same in church: in many ways they've outgrown traditional children's ministry but they're not quite ready for youth group. In your experience, in what ways are preteens still "kids"? And on the flip side, what are some of the "grown-up" or "teenage" issues you see preteens dealing with?**

Preteens are still kids because they still love to play, pretend, and act silly. They still love to be with their parents, they still love to hear stories, they will still do just about anything you ask of them, and they still love to serve. But on the other hand, they're beginning to deal with the "teenage" problems of peer pressure, self-image, and fitting in. They're also beginning to be exposed to substance abuse, bullying, and even sex. None of these are brand new to preteens, but at this stage they're beginning to understand what these issues mean for them personally and are beginning to decide where they stand on these issues.

**What are some of the best ways a leader of preteens (like a Sunday school teacher) can relate to them and help them grow in their faith?**

During this stage, preteen students are each developing at different rates. How much and what they can grasp will vary significantly from student to student. Some will be ready to go deep and some won't reach that point until they hit Jr. High. Some will still

behave like children and some will seem more mature. So the best way a leader of preteens can relate to his or her kids is by getting to know each individual preteen as best as you can. The two key ways to do this is by spending as much time as is appropriate with them and involving their parents as much as you can. The more you get to know each student, the better you'll understand how to relate to them and help them grow in their faith. This can be difficult for a leader who has a large group to lead, but it can be accomplished by recruiting and training other adult leaders for small groups and mentoring.

**What are some of the pitfalls leaders should avoid in their efforts to try to connect with preteens?**

We need to remember that preteens are different from the students in kindergarten to third grade and we need to stay away from the same kind of teaching and programming that we would use for those younger ages. Preteens strongly believe that they're different and older than those younger than them. And they're right! When leaders use the same teaching and programming approaches that the kids had when they were younger, it tells them that we as their leaders don't really know who they are. That translates into them feeling like we don't believe they're important.

But in changing how we teach preteens, we also need to be careful not to put them too far into the category of youth ministry. They are not ready for some of the teaching and programming of junior high youth ministry; exposing them too early not only scares them, but it also tells them we don't know who they are.

**As you point out, preteens are quite different than kindergarteners through third-graders, but most churches do include preteens as part of their children's program rather than having a separate ministry just to preteens. So what are some specific things leaders of preteens should do differently than leaders of younger children?**

Leaders of preteens should keep in mind that the preteen years are the time when a person begins taking their first steps into self-reliance. Up until third grade, a person is very dependent on others, but during the preteen years that begins to change. This means they're taking their first steps into understanding what the gospel means to them, what church means to them, what friendships and leaders mean to them, and the list could go on and on. They want and need to begin understanding Biblical truths and concepts on their own. So we who work with preteens need to make sure our teaching and programming is helping them do that. The kids need more lessons that help them come to conclusions on their own. They now need us to do more listening and guiding along with our efforts to teach.

**In your book *Leading Preteens*, you emphasize the importance of using small groups with preteens. What's so powerful about using small groups with kids this age?**

Small groups are powerful because they allow for the “listening and guiding” I just mentioned. They give us and our other adult leaders a chance to understand who our preteens are, how they learn, and in what ways God has already been at work in their lives. It's only when we know those things that we can then truly guide our preteen students into understanding Biblical truths on their own.

**Speak for a moment to a volunteer preteen Sunday school teacher or mid-week leader who's reading this: What's the most important thing you'd want to tell him or her about ministering to preteens?**

I want to encourage you to hang in there. At times, preteen ministry is extremely rewarding. To be able to see a ten-, eleven-, or twelve year-old move into a deeper understanding of the gospel (and they will) is amazing. And then to watch it play out in their life through their decisions and actions (which will also happen) is even greater!

But those times are also interspersed with other times of dealing with blank stares, hyperactivity, and even unashamed critique. In fact, I actually think the latter happens more than the former. It's during those times that most of us feel useless and want run away screaming, never to return.

We need to remember who is really at work in the lives of these students: It's not us—it's Jesus. It's his power that changes and grows our preteens. Working with preteens is never useless as long as we're making sure it's about moving them closer to Jesus.

*Patrick Snow is the author of *Leading Preteens* (Standard Publishing) and the director SuperStart!, Christ In Youth's program for preteens. You can find more information on SuperStart! at <http://www.ciy.com/superstart/>.*

## Ministry Insights

### Get Into Their World

*What preteens are like and how to get to know them.*

By Patrick Snow

The preteen world is always changing. Even if preteens describe it to me today, it'll be irrelevant by next year, maybe next month. News from yesterday is, well, yesterday. No matter how far away his friend lives, he's only a text second away. She knows the trends in fashion, talk, news, and stuff to own. I can't fool them or talk down to them. The preteen world is as complex and changing as mine. That's one thing I have in common with them for sure.

#### Did I say listen?

It takes more than Sunday mornings to get into their world. I watch some of their TV shows and listen to their songs. I listen to them when they talk to me and watch what they get excited about. I ask them about what sports they're in, what movies they're watching, and what video games they're playing. And I listen as we talk about issues in their families and with their friends. Did I say listen to them?

Getting into their world doesn't mean you have to act like them or pretend to like everything they do. But it does mean if you know a lot about them, you can help them navigate their choices and opportunities. It means you can use examples from their world to make your lessons relevant. The more you get into their world, the more you'll understand their thinking, and the more you'll be able to predict what'll work with them and what won't.

Observe or read about other ministries too, but don't copy them. For lots of reasons, don't try to be like other preteen ministries, no matter how cool or relevant they seem to be. God didn't give me anyone else's ministry. He gave me mine. The same is true for you. That means I'm supposed to minister to my unique group of preteens and you're to minister to your group of preteens.

What's relevant or interesting to another group of preteens might not be relevant or interesting to mine. The preteens I'm supposed to be reaching may not be interested in someone else's video game-driven ministry. The students I'm supposed to reach may be drawn more to sports, music, or service projects. When I get into their world I'll know more what my students need. Now that doesn't mean I should ignore other successful ministries or shouldn't learn from them. Not at all. Look around—lots! I've gotten great ideas and insights from other ministries. But don't try to be just like them. Have the ministry with your students that God wants you to have.

#### Use their world stuff.

Use their preteen-world stuff to teach! Use examples from their world in every lesson. That's what Jesus did. Jesus used figs and coins and sheep—stuff his listeners could relate to, stuff from their world. Think of preteen-world examples ahead of time to use, stuff that your students can relate to. Use examples from video games, music, entertainment, family, school, sports, and friends. Ask your students to give you examples during the lesson too. When you use stuff from their world, your preteens will feel as though you understand them.

Use their preteen-world stuff to reach! When you use their world examples, you're showing preteens you really care about them. You'll touch their hearts and minds. In turn, they'll bring their friends to learn too. You'll reach heart after heart and mind after mind.

Use their preteen-world stuff to preach! NOT!! Don't preach to preteens. They get sermons from parents and schoolteachers, police officers and firefighters, even friends and neighbors. Great teaching involves the students in discussions. Teaching segments should be short and interactive. Preaching is telling them stuff for more than, say, five minutes. Save the preteen-world stuff for teaching and reaching and skip the preaching.

### Preteens can tell.

I don't need to look or act like a preteen to get into their world. Trust me on this—don't try. I'm not a preteen so I don't act like one. If I do, I'll just be hokey and unbelievable. Preteens can tell a wannabe a mile away. I do try to have lots of energy as I show them that I'm interested in what they like. When they talk with me, I let them know that what they're talking about is important. I try to talk about the things they're interested in and use their terminology. I refer to current movies and music. I use stories that tell about things I've learned and try to put my stories in the context of things preteens can relate to. So I don't talk about paying taxes, getting married, or disciplining children. I'm not always good at playing their video games or sports, but that's OK with them. They can tell when I'm genuinely interested in them and when I'm not.

You'll know you've invaded their world by the look in their eyes. Are they looking at you? Are their eyes sparkling? Are they sitting on the edge of their seats clinging to every word? Are the students jumping up and down saying, "Pick me, pick me!" Are the students diligently trying to find something in their Bibles? Not in my experience. Honestly, sometimes you just don't know if you're getting through to preteens or not. Sometimes they're engaged and right with you. Other times they may be all over the place.

Don't freak out if they go wild on you. It happens, and they may still be listening. When you're ministering every week, they will get crazy on you at times, but they'll still hear what God wants them to hear. Sometimes you'll think a lesson was a disaster, but when the students come back next week, they say or do something that lets you know they thought about what you said. Just because they don't act engaged, doesn't mean they don't get it.

*Patrick Snow is the author of *Leading Preteens* (Standard Publishing) and the director of *SuperStart!*, *Christ In Youth's* program for preteens. You can find more information on *SuperStart!* at <http://www.ciy.com/superstart/>.*

## Ministry Insights

### 5 Things Your Preteens Want You to Know

*Strategies for your preteen Sunday school class.*

By Kelli B. Trujillo

How can you enliven your preteens Sunday school class? How can you better connect with them ... and connect them with Jesus? If you could peek inside your students' minds, here are five things you might discover about them—and some Sunday school strategies to help you put these insights into practice.

#### We've got lots of energy!

Energetic preteens sometimes get an unfair bad rap for being too hyper or unable to pay attention (especially boys!). But perhaps the problem doesn't lie with the kids—it may lie with the teaching style. God just didn't design preteens to enjoy sitting still for long stretches of time! So do your best to teach in a way that involves action, interaction, and energy rather than too much passive sitting and listening. Not sure where to start? Try some activities like these:

- Send kids on a group treasure hunt in your room, following clues that will lead them throughout your room (or through the church building) and that connect with the week's Bible story.
- Start with an icebreaker in which kids express their opinions by going to various spots in your meeting room. (For example, you could ask "Do you think it's *always* wrong to lie? If you do, go to that wall. If you don't, go to that wall.")
- Give kids hands-on, creative projects to work on like building a clay model of a biblical scene, scribbling prayers graffiti-style on a wall covered with newsprint, or making a Bible-themed snack together to eat during class.

#### It sticks better if we can talk.

Sure, it's annoying when preteens chat while you're trying to teach—it's not good manners and it is a problem that needs to be addressed. But on the flip-side, strive to always make sure you provide ample opportunities for kids to verbally express themselves. Simply listening to a teacher talk isn't the best way for kids to personally connect with God's Word. When kids get a chance to verbally process what the Bible says and what they think about it is when the principles of God's Word really begin to

“stick” in their minds and hearts. Try to intersperse strategies like these into each Sunday morning together:

- Plan times when kids can pair up to share their answers to specific, personal questions like “What do you most admire about David in this story? Why?” or “What’s one thing you want to do this week to show God’s love to your family?” (Shy kids will be more likely to talk when it’s one-on-one with a friend.)
- Include small group discussion time (with four to six kids in each group) and give each group a few printed out questions to guide their reflection on a Bible story. Keep it simple, like “What verse or phrase do you like best from this Bible passage? Why?” or “What are some important ways a kid your age can serve others?” (If you’ve got adult helpers, assign one to each small group to help keep things on track. But, whenever possible, let kids *lead* their small group’s discussion.)
- Try to work in opportunities for talking as a large group by asking broad, open-ended questions like “Why do you think God did that miracle?” or “Would you want to be in Esther’s place? Why or why not?” Try to avoid questions with one right answer; kids who get the answer wrong may feel discouraged from sharing their ideas in the future.

### **Boys will be boys, girls will be girls.**

Boys and girls are different from each other and the difference can become especially pronounced in the preteen years. Some eleven and twelve year-old girls are already thinking like teenagers while many boys of the same age are happy to just be kids. As much as you can, utilize opportunities to use these gender differences to your advantage. Try some strategies like these:

- For icebreaker activities, form all-girl teams and all-guy teams for some friendly, light-hearted competition. Kids will really get into it! (By the way, do your best to select activities that will keep the scores relatively even.)
- During discussion times, intentionally allow for all-girl small groups or all-boy small groups. Kids will more likely to talk if they’re with others who think more like them.
- Enlist both male and female adult helpers to be a part of your classroom. It’s important for the kids in your class to see adults who they can relate to model Christian faith for them. This is especially important when it comes to gender; preteen guys will respond well to an adult male leader who is excited about his faith and preteen girls will gravitate toward the example of an adult Christian woman.

## We still think our parents are cool!

Preteens are still very open to influence from Mom and Dad; this openness will fade in the teen years when kids begin individuating from their parents. So take advantage of this stage to really solidify the parent-child faith-building relationship.

- Have a “Bring-a-Parent” Sunday in which each child brings one of his or her parents to class. Include fun activities and games that pit kids against their parents in competition as well as some time for meaningful sharing within small groups that include both parents and kids. If you can, provide opportunities for adults to share about their own personal faith during small group discussion time with their kids.
- Set up an email list including all the parents. As often as you can, update the parents on what you’re studying in class and give them one specific suggestion for a way to talk with their child about it. (For example, “This week we studied Psalm 148 which talks about all of creation (including the stars) praising God. Invite your child to stay up late one night this week to do some stargazing with you. As you do, talk about the psalm and praise God together.”)
- Plan a special event for parents and kids outside of Sunday school like a cookout or a trip to a bowling alley. Help parents connect with each other and make it as fun as possible for both parents and kids. Every memory kids build with their parents at this age will solidify their relationship for the rocky adolescent years ahead.

## We need healthy friendships.

The strong peer influence that significantly affects teenagers is just beginning to take root with preteens. Friendships are very important to preteens—when they’re healthy, they can serve as great spiritual growth catalysts! But when they’re unhealthy, serious harm can occur. One goal you can have for your time with your preteens is to help them develop healthy, God-honoring friendships.

- Be on the lookout for cliques, especially among preteen girls. It’s great for them to have close friends at church, but not if that means others are intentionally excluded and hurt. Indirectly address clique problems by separating cliques when you form small groups or pairs for discussion times and regularly talk about the importance of developing new friendships with others in the class. Also, always be on the lookout for kids who may be loners in your class and take opportunities (like pair discussions) to intentionally connect them with some of your friendlier students.
- Kids’ faith will be strengthened in the long run when they’ve got strong Christian friendships. So aim to provide at least one out-of-church bonding experience for your kids each year. For example, get some moms involved in

planning a slumber party for the girls in your class and recruit some dads to coordinate a boys' campout. As kids share common experiences with each other, they'll feel closer and will be more likely to connect on a deeper level.

- Encourage your adult leaders (and yourself) to develop healthy adult-child friendships with your students. Model what a healthy friendship looks like by asking meaningful questions, listening well, and encouraging the kids. The more they observe of this type of friendship, the more they'll mimic it in their peer relationships.

*Kelli B. Trujillo is an author and mom of three. Her latest book, Faith-Filled Moments: Helping Kids See God in Everyday Life (Wesleyan), releases October 2009. You can find out more at [www.kellitrujillo.com](http://www.kellitrujillo.com).*

## Recommended Resources

*Want to explore this topic further? Check out these resources:*

**Building Church Leaders:** Leadership training resources from Christianity Today

 [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com)

**The Fight of Your Life:** Why Your Teen is at Risk and What You Can Do About It by Jeffrey Dean (Multnomah, 2009; 224 pages). In *The Fight of Your Life*, Dean offers a frank, solutions-oriented plan for parents who want to protect their teens from dangerous choices and guide them toward God's best—and are ready to fight to make it happen. First Dean gives parents a shocking but invaluable inside view of what teens are up against. Then he helps parents discover their irreplaceable role in their kids' success. Along the way he tackles hot button issues--sex, partying, porn, cheating and eating disorders--and coaches parents on how to protect and grow a healthy relationship with their teens.

**Leading Preteens** by Patrick Snow (Standard Publishing, 2007; 128 pages). Discover how to help preteens get a super start to their relationships with Jesus. Whether you have been doing preteen ministry for years or are just beginning to think about it, this book is for you!

**Preteen Launchables Kit:** All the Stuff You Need to Reach Preteens (Group Publishing, 2007). Upper-Elementary kids. One moment they're happy in children's ministry, the next they're bored to tears. And if you put them into youth ministry...they're lost. Where do they fit? This kit includes books of advice from preteen pastors, discussion starter games pieces, and hundreds of other programming ideas.

**Tween Spirituality:** Offering Opportunities in Preteen Spiritual Growth by Marcia Stoner (Abingdon Press; 128 pages). A book for teachers and leaders of tweens with articles on spirituality and specific activities to nourish spiritual habits in preteens through Sunday school, worship, and other church settings. Included is a photocopyable section for leaders to use with parents to help parents understand what is appropriate in the spiritual realm for their preteens.