

# IMMERSE

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## Helping Grown Ups Hang in There

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Recruiting for middle school ministry is sort of like getting someone to volunteer to gargle thumb tacks or give a skunk a nice, long hug. For the average churchgoer, surrendering time and energy to enhance a ministry filled with pubescent, smelly, squirrely homosapiens ranks right up there with signing up to clean toilets. Hey, I love middle schoolers. And while I acknowledge some of the difficulties of working with them, I try not to focus on those less attractive features. All I'm saying is that most people find those obstacles hard to ignore. If, in your setting, people are knocking others over to get on board with your middle school team, I think it's safe to say you are in the minority.

If it is hard to *get* willing people, it is equally hard to *keep* them. Many of us "capital M" ministers are good salespeople. That's why when we quit ministry we go sell stuff—insurance, used cars, etc. So it should be no surprise that we can get unsuspecting members of our churches to give middle school work a try. We set timeframes and coerce with a bounty of bulletin announcements and congregation-wide appeals. If we're in larger settings, we network, pick off the best of the children's ministry volunteers when their kids are promoted into sixth or seventh grade or raid the local college campus house in search of energetic students who may not completely think through our sales pitches before agreeing to commit.

But this system of semester-by-semester trial runs doesn't produce a whole lot of success in building relationships, discipling or gaining

momentum. We end up functioning like grocery store stock hands—pulling what’s left to the front of the shelf to make appearances good, while quietly stressing over the fact that our team isn’t very deep. When a shipment of new workers comes in, we celebrate their arrival with enthusiasm but silently recognize they might not last all that long. Once they realize that middle school students are temperamental, flighty, forgetful and emotional, what will they do? Once they see that things don’t run smoothly in a ministry where you spend a lot of time doing messy things, will they lament leaving the well-oiled ministries from which they came? Will they be able to see the good through the loud? Can they trust the end product when the process of formation is so hard to interpret?

Anyone who has worked in middle school ministry for very long knows the list of unique qualities working with early adolescents brings. There’s the girl drama, the hormone-induced coupling carousel, the *that’s-not-fair* attitude, the *everything-revolves-around-me* egocentricity. Some of these can be explained away by neuroscience; others we chalk up to immaturity. They are kids, after all. But how do you get new volunteers to push through these early indicators of difficulty to discover the true substance of the mission—pointing kids patiently toward Jesus? If he can love these kids, zits and all, how can we inspire other adults to do the same?

I believe our error starts and ends with our short-sightedness. Often, we trick ourselves (or are pressured) into believing that having a large, thriving ministry is what matters. Packing out the place means we’re doing our job. I can appreciate anyone’s desire to have a full house. But I am keenly aware of my own ability to drum up excitement, pull out all the stops, make a crowd go nuts and do absolutely nothing formative. The purpose of a middle school ministry is not to get sixth through eighth graders to show up; it’s to start (or continue) a process of discipleship that will result in a spiritually mature adult. Some kids will be more mature than others; some, in fact, are more mature than their parents. But one minute a kid will rip off a memory verse, and the next he’ll rip off a fart. This does not mean the kids are particularly unspiritual. It means they are thirteen.

For an adult (who, hopefully, does not behave the same way), that can be disconcerting. They think their small groups are ineffective and insignificant if they can’t stay on task. Meanwhile, the students *in* those groups love them, wouldn’t miss a single week if they could help it and have recently made a great personal discovery about their own need for Christ. Sure, they had three Twinkies stuffed into their cheeks when they made it, but they made it nonetheless. It’s all about perspective. If *right here, right now* is the point, leaders get discouraged and—sometimes—quit. But the seeds we plant are often watered with patience and laughter. A wise leader of leaders gets volunteers to slow down and think long term.

A great equalizer in all this is the opportunity we have to celebrate changed lives. It is well documented that most decisions for Christ are made

before children leave home. A vast majority of those are made around the age of twelve. Whether it's a baptism or confirmation, there are plenty of chances to slap high fives, spread credit around and glorify God together. Seeing a kid turn to Jesus covers a multitude of potty jokes. Being the primary influence in that kid's life can fuel a volunteer for years on end. When something good happens in your ministry, you as the primary overseer should be shouting it from the rooftops, praising those involved and making sure it breeds infectious enthusiasm among the rest of your team.

There are some people who just aren't cut out for middle school ministry. Maybe they love everything to have its place. Maybe they can't stand loud noises. Perhaps they just can't loosen up and have fun. They want to go deep every time and can't understand how playing dodge ball helps you to do that. In my experience, though, there's no prototype. On our volunteer staff are college students, young adults, parents of students and those whose kids are grown and gone. I am grateful that some of our workers have stayed with us beyond their own kids' involvement. I am grateful that some of our workers are old enough to be the parents of some of our other workers!

The obstacles in middle school ministry are obvious, but they aren't overly difficult. If we can get people to think about how that student will look in ten years instead of ten minutes, we've jumped the biggest hurdle. If we can unite under our common mission, celebrate success stories like crazy when they occur and pound out ministry through the tough times, people are going to be interested in getting and staying on board.