

White Wing MESSENGER

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LIVING MISSIONAL



Facing the Sixth Grade Dilemma

Successfully Transitioning Students From Children's to Youth Ministry

Transitions are never easy, no matter at what stage we find ourselves when we go through them. When parents, caregivers, and church leaders think about stress in the lives of our students, transitioning from children's to youth ministry is not something that usually comes to mind. Any change in the routine of a child can be very stressful. Some embrace transition as an opportunity to experience something new, to form new relationships, and learn new things; others, however, get anxious, experience overwhelming fear, and may develop behavioral problems.

As men and women who are committed to the spiritual development of the students we serve, the transition of a student from children's to youth ministry *must* be successful. Statistics tell us that the salvation experience and spiritual formation of believers must be accomplished before a child reaches the age of 16, or chances of their conversion are unlikely.

During the transitioning period, many churches find that children or teens become lost in the shuffle or decrease participation in church-related functions. What is the result? In 2009, America's Research Group released a study that revealed that more than 60 percent of children will leave the church by the time they graduate high school.*

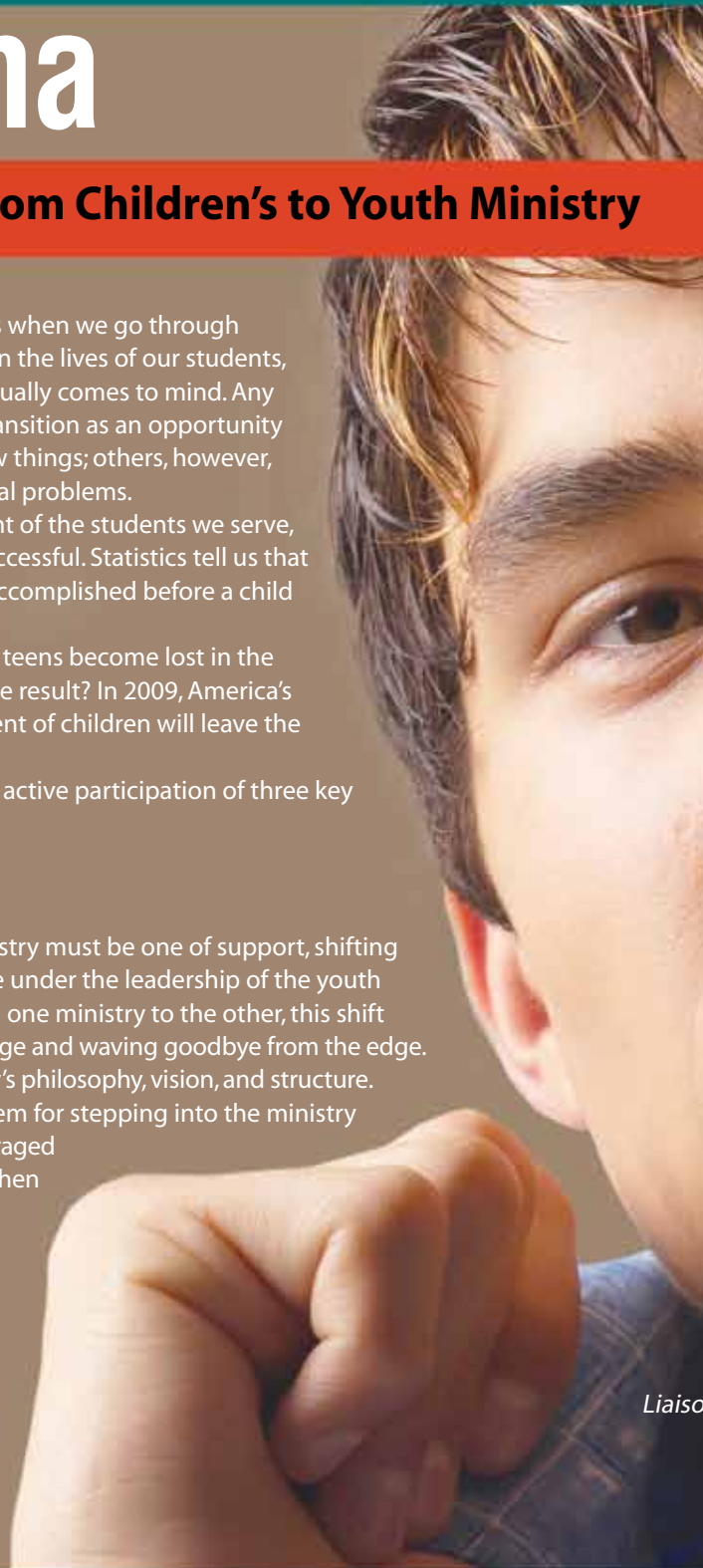
A successful transition from children's to youth ministry involves the active participation of three key influencers: the children's minister, youth minister, and parents.

The Children's Minister's Role

The children's minister's role in transitioning a student to youth ministry must be one of support, shifting from being a leader of the student to encouraging the student to come under the leadership of the youth ministry team. When considering the transition period as a bridge from one ministry to the other, this shift can be viewed as the children's minister bringing the student to the bridge and waving goodbye from the edge.

Children's ministers should educate themselves on the youth ministry's philosophy, vision, and structure. Helping transitioning students understand the ministry can prepare them for stepping into the ministry as knowledgeable participants. When eligible, students should be encouraged to participate in youth ministry activities and should be commended when they do so.

Oftentimes, transitioning students will express a desire to remain in the children's ministry as a volunteer or assistant. Such service should be applauded and welcomed; however, the children's minister should communicate with the youth minister to establish criteria for teens desiring to serve. Service in children's ministry should not conflict with the student's participation in youth ministry activities, small groups, or worship opportunities.



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Finally, children's ministers should celebrate the student's transition into youth ministry. Host a "Moving On" or "Bon Voyage" party for transitioning students. If a party is not appropriate or possible, set aside time during a children's church or adult worship service to acknowledge the transition and express appreciation for the child's participation in the children's ministry.

The children's minister's role in the transition process is crucial. He has established a position of authority and trust with the student and, therefore, can influence the student's attitude and feelings about the transition in either positive or negative ways.

The Youth Minister's Role

The youth minister's role in the transition of student to youth ministry is equally important. Initially, his role is a relational role. His goals are to engage the student with fellowship and ministry opportunities that will connect the student with other members of the ministry so that peer relationships can be established. This connection will often come through involvement in ministry-sponsored activities outside of worship service settings.

The youth minister should dialogue with the children's minister to learn more about each transitioning student. In this conversation, the youth minister should learn about the student's personal life. What is his family situation like? What are his likes or dislikes? What activities does he engage in? This information can help the youth minister relate with the student on relevant issues and direct ministry resources and staff to meet the student's needs.

Also, the youth ministry should prepare the youth group for the incoming student(s). Address the needs of the transitioning students. Ask questions such as, "What

relationship needs do you think the students will have when they join us?" "Where will relationships best happen?" "How can you help them feel a part of the group?"

Finally, once the students have transitioned into the group, the youth ministry team should observe how well they are connecting to the group and overall ministry. Encourage incoming students to be in the center of the activities, and do not permit anyone to be an outsider.

Evaluate the teaching/preaching methods of your youth ministry. Are truths being taught in simple ways that the younger students can understand them? Are you using relevant, easy-to-understand Bible translations and curricula? Do the students connect in worship or respond to altar ministry times? If not, this can reveal the presence of personal or spiritual needs, but it may also indicate a lack of understanding or fear to participate.

The Parent's Role

Parents must also assist their students in the transition from children's to youth ministry. Parents must encourage, and sometimes push, their student's involvement in youth ministry. Parents should pray for this student's transition as well as maintain an open dialogue with him or her concerning the transition. Parents should quickly report any concerns with a member of the children's or youth ministry staff.

As their students cross the bridge from one ministry to the other, parents very much become the support column for the bridge.

*Ken Ham, Britt Beemer, and Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Publishing Group, 2009).

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