

How You Can Help Jr. Hi Kids

THE GREAT (AND SORTA-GREAT) STRUGGLES FACING YOUNG TEENAGERS, AND WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP THEM CLEAR THE HURDLES Junior highers are early in their trajectory. Most haven't *yet* made the significant choices that will profoundly mark their future lives.

1. Lack of Friends- This is easily the #1 problem our junior highers *face*. Some of them have so many friends I wonder how they have time to instant message them all. But many students sit alone at lunch, where they have plenty of time to wonder whether they'll have anyone to sit with *if* they go to the basketball game. Most junior highers simply need people who will go out of their way to be their friend. You and your adult leaders can do that. You'll need to do things your kids like to do. Show up at their sports events. Discover their hobbies and interests, then ask them to teach you about them. And don't be shy about inviting them into your world- if you golf, call up a junior higher to hit a bucket of balls. If you bike, get a small group together for a two-hour ride. Be a matchmaker. Once you get to know them a little, work to match up kids who have similar interests. Go to their schools at lunchtime to make sure no one's sitting alone. If you gather your group's loners once or twice at lunch in the cafeteria, you've likely created a new connection among them that has a chance to stick.

2. Gender Issues Most junior highers don't obsess about sex. Instead, it's all about who "likes" who. They're in love with the feeling of infatuation, and that's about as far as it goes. And even if they're thinking about acting on their impulses, most of them don't. Our job is not to discourage sexual promiscuity, or even talk that much about lust and temptation, but to encourage healthy friendships between genders. Guys need to learn how to be unselfish, less dominating, and more caring. Girls need to learn how to respect guys more than they do (that includes their clothing choices) and to curtail their destructive gossip and slander. Focus on the do's of gender relationships, not the don'ts.

3. Parent Problems-For some middle schoolers, parental control is a big concern. Some of our kids feel that their every move is scrutinized, then condemned- it's damaging. Encourage good behavior and create fewer rules and regulations. Let freedom reign in your ministry. Give kids the freedom to be who they are -to be creative, have fun, and express their true desires with people they can trust. Your kids don't need another parent, even if they seem like they need one.

4. Pressure at School- The top stressor for teenagers is their school performance. Academic pressures" are by far their greatest stress source (43%). Middle schoolers' relationships occasionally keep them up at night, worrying about which friend might not like them anymore. But school is a persistent emotional drain. Bad grades lead to more peer and gender issues, more frustrations with parents, and more anxiety about their future performance. It never goes away, at least not until summer. Our job is to understand this stress and to create safe space for them to be kids. That's especially true for your student leaders, who often need more freedom to focus on school than a high schooler. And a sudden turn in their school performance is perhaps the best signal that something else in their lives is not well- usually something at home.

5. Appearance Issues-Junior highers experience radical changes in their appearance. And even though their inner lives are changing just as fast, their "Looks" are more critical to them because that's what everyone notices first. Consistently compliment them on their appearance- junior highers need this kind of positive feedback. Be specific- in fact, the more specific the better. For example, "I like how you changed your hair" or "Cool shoes!" or "Those clear braces are barely noticeable" or "I had freckles when I was your age- my wife says she loved them," or "I saw you playing the piano- you carry yourself so well." Your words carry a lot of weight. If you don't say it, it's likely no one else will either.

6. Verbal Attacks- Your consistent, targeted encouragement is vital for other reasons, too. The air junior highers breathe is permeated by cut-downs, jabs, and just plain mean-spirited judging. If they're worried about how they look, they can find plenty of prosecutors who will convict them. Anything goes.

We're called to counteract these verbal attacks with affirmations that speak to their inner beauty; searching for evidence that your kids reflect God's glory. Specifically, watch for and affirm in them the fruits of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control.

7. Is There Anything Special About Me? -Some kids have not yet discovered a talent for a certain sport or musical instrument, or they feel clumsy and awkward, or they don't do as well as their friends in a particular school subject. Every middle schooler has God-given talents-some just have an easier time finding them. Our job is to dig deep with kids to unearth their gems. Ask what they want to be when they get out of school, mostly because it reveals a lot about who they are and what they want to become. Use their answers as portals into their secret world, where God is slowly revealing their "bent." When one says "I have no idea; get a little concerned because most kids like talking about their future plans and already have a pretty good grasp on their likes and dislikes. Follow up by asking: "What did you think you wanted to do when you were little?" or "What are some careers or lifestyles you respect and admire?" or "What's something others have said you're good at?"

8. Problems With Guilt and Shame- Many junior highers don't know how to deal with the consequences of their sins, and they sometimes practice unhealthy forms of repentance. It's crucial they learn that the only acceptable "payment" for their sins is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, and that's exactly where they need to take their guilt and shame. Help kids understand the difference between forgetting and forgiving, and show them how to trust Christ for their "get out of jail free" card.

9. Low Energy- Some junior highers just get tired frequently. There are more than a few loungers. So recognize their need for downtime. Structure your events and regular weekly meetings to include breaks, quiet time, and even silence. Junior highers need more time to digest (their food and your message) and rest than their older brothers and sisters.

10. Problems? What Problems? -Some young adolescents must grapple with a strange "challenge" -they have no serious problems worthy of your attention. A lot of kids have problems-their issues shoot out, explode, and are gone in the space of five seconds. Ignore 99 percent of these issues-save your time and energy for the ones that have the power to reach orbit. That means don't be too quick to jump in and rescue a middle schooler. Give them opportunities to overcome their smaller issues without any adult intervention.