

## What Do You Do With 6<sup>th</sup> Graders?

To some, they're too young, innocent, naïve, and child-like to be with seventh and eighth graders. To others, they're too grown up, street-smart, and smart-alecky to hang with fourth and fifth graders. Yes, it's the sixth grader up for discussion here, and much of your view on where they are placed in your youth ministry structure depends on your angle. So what's a youth pastor to do?

"Keep them with the elementary children," some say, "and you might shelter them too much from the real world, isolating them in a way that's not healthy. It's best to let 'em get their feet wet now."

"Move them on up into the Jr. High Department," others retort, "and you could expose them to elements of maturity they're not ready to handle. Why force them to grow up so soon?"

One thing is true – if these are your only two options, you'll accomplish at least one objective: frustration!

Your best choice? None of the above! Instead, create a separate and distinct group comprised of just sixth graders, a transition-minded group who stay together for a year working to leave behind the things of children's ministry and get ready for Jr. High. I call this group the "bridge" group simply because sixth graders are on the bridge that spans elementary ministry and youth ministry; they're entering the time in which they'll cross from being a child to being a pre-teen. What better way to focus on this one-year transition than with a targeted approach to only sixth graders.

But how? Here's a quick list to get you started – nine things you'll need to do to get your bridge group of the ground.

### Nine Steps to Bridging the Gap

1. *Build the need.* Talk about the idea with other parents and students as a way to lay the groundwork. Show the positive side to this expansion by highlighting the needs of the sixth graders in your group.
2. *Identify and train leaders.* Don't even think about starting without qualified leadership. Find the best, then empower them for ministry with extensive training and support.
3. *Develop structure and strategy.* Start with a blank page and your new set of leaders, then put in words, pictures, and symbols the burden and mission God has placed within you for sixth graders. Start with the general (mission) and move to the specific (program).
4. *Pinpoint a target start date.* Developing a strategy is motivating, so with the group in gear, put a starting date on the calendar. Try and link it with other natural kick-off times, such as the beginning of school or a new year.
5. *Obtain student commitments.* Go to your best sixth graders and let them in on the scoop – get them on board before you let the cat out of the bag to everyone. Bring them into the loop early and specifically ask for their help.
6. *Promote, promote, promote!* You'll need at least six weeks to get the word out, and do it through the mail, Internet, church publications, word of mouth, local bulletin boards, free newspaper space – any way you can find to let others know what's happening with your sixth graders.
7. *Start.* At some point you must actually begin. Now that you're putting action to intention, expect some obstacles. You may need to tweak what your doing, just don't stop. You've waited too long and come too far to stop at the first hurdle.

8. *Evaluate.* Give your team a month, then sit down and talk about the first 30 days. What worked? What didn't work? Why and why not? Are you "on mission?" Identify problem spots and work towards solutions. However, note your strengths, and stay with those.
9. *Keep going consistently, evaluating constantly.* If you'll repeat step eight every four to six weeks, you'll be well on your way to developing a sixth-grade-only youth group that will truly bridge the gap between elementary and Jr. High.