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Stopping the Spiritual Falloff Between Elementary and Middle School

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A Bridge Not Far Enough

A tween ... giggly, active, innovative, loving, bright-eyed, energetic, creative, helpful ... eye-rolling, pouty, apathetic, lazy, moody ...

Twenty-seven million of them live in the United States — kids navigating the bridge between childhood and the teen years.

In recent years, church leaders, coaches, educators and parents have become alarmed at the lack of motivation in many of these kids. We are not losing kids when they reach high school; we are losing kids during the tween years ... and before.

According to George Barna, by the time kids get to high school, only one in four attend a church youth group.

In an August 11, 2010 article in *USA Today*, Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville, Tennessee, stated: “A decade ago teens were coming to church youth group to play, coming for the entertainment, coming for the pizza. They're not even coming for the pizza anymore. They say, ‘We don't see the church as relevant, as meeting our needs or where we need to be today.’”

SideBar: We know that many tweens do not reflect the statistics expressed in this article, but a majority of tweens do. Though many tweens attending our clubs come from homes where they *are* lovingly nurtured and disciplined, where they've been taught responsibility and also to have a gracious attitude toward those around them — many of the tweens whom you reach through your Awana® program *do* reflect society's attitudes.

Again, many clubs and clubbers are thriving. One indication of that — every year Awana headquarters receives hundreds of leader-appreciation letters, games and tracts done by kids who have not only completed their books but are working on extra credit. But even in thriving clubs, clubbers are encouraged to bring friends and many of these friends do not know anything about the Lord, much less care about the guidelines He gives us for living our lives.

What can we do?

First, let's look at the problem.

Why the apathy?

A lot of research is being done by many different organizations, educational groups and think tanks. Here are some of the conclusions.

1. Kids want the easy way out. They have been raised in a society that focuses on instant. Mom hurries through the drive-thru lane to get them a hamburger, they download

their music with one quick click and they research their history paper on Wikipedia®. If it doesn't happen right now, they have no desire to wait around for it.

That has led to an increase in cheating.

Why spend time doing homework when you can copy that homework from someone else or simply download your paper online?

According to the Josephson Institute of Ethics, 35 percent of kids have copied from the Internet and 83 percent have copied from a classmate.

So whether it's doing a paper for history or learning a verse for Awana, if you can't do it in a few minutes, then why waste the effort to do it at all?

Who is teaching them to be diligent?

2. Kids have a false sense of self-esteem. Ever since they were toddlers, they have heard praise for everything they've done.

Sports teams not only reward winning teams, but losing teams as well. A child shows up, however reluctantly, daydreams out in left field as the balls shoot by him and yet he still receives a large participation trophy.

Schools keep everyone behind until everyone catches up. The child quickly grasps the first math concept, but is not allowed to move on to the second concept until everyone at his or her table understands the first concept. School becomes unfulfilling and unengaging to that child, but to the non-motivated child, school becomes a place where he doesn't have to work very hard. After all, no one will get that far ahead. They need to wait for him.

A fifth-grade teacher told me about the dynamics of her class after the top five students were moved to a newly-organized "gifted" class.

"No one tries anymore," she said. "Everyone is satisfied with the status quo because they no longer have the high-achieving students to motivate them to do better."

What's the point to working if you win or "get by" anyhow?

Materialism also plays into this. Kids have so much (although many will deny this is true). They don't understand that kids in most parts of the world don't have the big houses, the brand new sports car presented on your sixteenth birthday, the myriad of technological gadgets ...

Factors such as these add up to a false sense of entitlement. Most bosses who employ teens lament how difficult it is to find kids who actually know how to work well and work hard. Some kids won't even work at jobs unless the job offers a specific pay scale. They might as well stay home and watch TV.

The attitude is: "Give it to me. I deserve it."

Who is teaching gratitude?

3. Kids lack discipline. No one's watching the kids. Parents are busy doing all the things that parents do without kids and they aren't paying attention to what is happening.

Newsweek labeled tweens as a "generation stuck on fast-forward." Instead of being influenced by nurturing parents, they're being influenced by the Internet, TV and video games.

Two-thirds of 8- to 18-year-olds have a television in their rooms. Sixty percent of those kids have absolutely no restrictions on what they can watch. Think about the choices on TV these days. Do we want our kids to hear and absorb the language? Do we want them to see the sex scenes? Do we want them to listen to the lyrics of the music?

Yet this is exactly what tweens are doing because no one is watching them or if they are watching them, they aren't setting down strict guidelines.

Think about this statistic:

Seven hundred and nine thousand U.S. tweens (in this case 12- to 14-year-olds) drink. In one month, 200,000 of these kids will drink alcohol served by their parents. Not only are parents teaching kids that it's all right to break the law, but they are establishing a pattern that is likely to turn into a serious drinking problem. (Kids who start drinking at this age are five times more likely to become alcoholics than kids who don't drink.) These statistics are findings from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Since Dad and Mom aren't teaching respect, kids learn from movies and TV. The kids on TV are disrespectful to their parents, so the kids at home are also disrespectful. Dad or Mom's commands are met with sarcasm, a refusal to obey or a refusal to even pay attention.

Defiance is applauded. A person is murdered or a kid is kicked out of school for some misdeed and immediately a Facebook® site goes up glorifying the act.

Who is teaching respect?

4. Kids who are apathetic have parents who are apathetic. Apathy might start in mid-elementary school, but apathy continues into adulthood. Colleges are bemoaning the lack of class attendance, student responsibility and a good work ethic on the part of their students.

In a few years, those college kids graduate, get married and have children (or the other way around — 60 percent of children will be in a single-parent family at sometime during their lives). The apathy, lack of responsibility and work ethic now affect their parenting skills.

They don't want to put forth the effort to raise a child well. Blame someone else. If the child doesn't do well in school, blame the school or the teacher or the child's inability to concentrate. But don't blame yourself or your child for not doing the work.

Parents are also apathetic about church. If a parent doesn't drive a child to church, the child can't get there. So if parents are apathetic about being involved, the kids will be apathetic too.

"Why do I have to be here?" a high-school junior asked me after church one Sunday. "My dad's golfing. How come he says I have to come to church, but he doesn't come to church?"

Kids notice and pick up on parental attitudes.

Who is teaching responsibility?

The picture is not encouraging.

Here are some additional facts.

1. Statistics vary, but some findings say that as many as 20 percent of 14-year-olds have participated in some type of sexual activity. Recently, a seventh-grader confided to her Awana leader that she was pregnant.
2. According to an MTV/Associated Press poll on online activity, 3-10 percent of kids have been involved in sexting. Twenty-two percent have spread lies online and 19 percent have experienced someone else writing something mean about them online.
3. Emotional anorexia is a new term used to describe tweens and teens who have withdrawn emotionally. Instead of getting together with friends, they spend time on Facebook or other social media sites. Most of their answers to questions are "I don't know." They numb themselves to what is happening around them and withdraw from reality.
4. Self-injury which includes activities such as cutting, hair-pulling and even bone breaking has now reached epidemic proportions.

Look around

We know that Awana is not immune to these statistics. We can see the result of these findings as we look around our clubs each week. (Unless we have a club that is solely for church kids from core families and all the clubbers receive encouragement and help from their parents — but that is not the norm.)

- We see the child who never, ever brings her book to club. (Sometimes this is understandable knowing the background of the child. Other times, we shake our heads in puzzlement, knowing that the parent attends church and acknowledges the importance of spiritually guiding their child.)

- We hear the bad language coming out of a boy's mouth or hear him make lewd comments to his friends.
- We listen as the kids talk about the TV show they watched the night before or the movie they went to last weekend (a show or movie we wouldn't watch even as an adult).
- We see their lack of interest in everything: church, school, the Bible, even sports. The only thing that seems to get their interest is a violent video game.

At Awana our goal is to provide parents and leaders with the resources needed to help kids navigate the tween years and come out the other side continuing to grow spiritually and desiring to know, love and serve the Lord.

So, What Are We Doing?

The Basis of the Awana Program

No, the biblical Joseph was not in Awana, but the five Master Life Threads weaving through our curriculum reflect his life.

Joseph's biography is a familiar one. He was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and ended up in Egypt. There his work ethic got the notice of Potiphar, who put Joseph in charge of his well-to-do household. But Mrs. Potiphar had other plans and Joseph soon found himself in prison. Yet Joseph always remembered that God was with him, and he remained faithful. Later, because he interpreted the king's dream, Joseph was made a VIP and placed in charge of the entire land of Egypt. In that position, he was able to publicly forgive his brothers.

Through it all, Joseph concluded that it wasn't his brothers who sent him to Egypt, but God. God had a plan for him, and Joseph listened to God and fulfilled His plan — something he was later able to testify about to his brothers: ... *God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance (Genesis 45:7, NIV®).*

Joseph's life reflected five godly character qualities which we have adopted as the Master Life Threads.

Preschool — **Respect** for the awesomeness and authority of God (Genesis 39:6-9)

Early Elementary — **Wisdom** for living life based on a knowledge of God (40:6-8)

Older Elementary — **Grace** in relationships with others (41:51-52)

Middle School — A sense of **destiny** and purpose that come from God (45:4-10)

High School — A **perspective** for life based on the sovereignty of God (50:15-21)

Our goal for those kids crossing the bridge from tweens to teens is that they will have a sense of destiny, of knowing that God loves them and can give them purpose for their lives.

Destiny

Kids who have grown up in the Awana program have learned respect for God's authority, gained godly wisdom and understand God's grace and the importance of reflecting that grace in relationships with others. Now as they approach the teen years, they should begin to understand the destiny God has planned for them if they seek His will. A life lived in obedience to the Lord is well beyond any temporal, earthly destiny. This message is one of great hope, but we must teach it with great patience and sensitivity to their mixed-up, chaotic, will-I-ever-feel-good-about-myself delicate feelings.

Our goal with these kids is in two parts:

1. That they recognize who they are in Christ.
2. That they desire God's will for their lives.

Philippians 2:12-16 speaks to both these points and concludes: *Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life ... (NIV)*

That passage leads to this outline:

1. Recognizing who we are in Christ

- A person whom God uses to do His will
- A child of God
- A person who shines like a star in the middle of a crooked and depraved generation

2. Desiring God's will for our lives

- In being obedient to Him
- In being blameless and pure before Him
- In holding forth the Word of Life

We must steer our tweens and young teens through the barrage of peer pressure, media hype, mood changes and lonely feelings so they become shining stars. What better destiny could there be than that?

We can teach them Scripture that counteracts their apathetic attitudes, verses such as Colossians 3:17 or Proverbs 22:29 or Philippians 4:4. We can show them that verses like these have influence in our own lives.

We need to continually remind them that God gives them purpose, meaning and significance. They do have destiny in Christ.

We want to make a difference. Yes, we want to help. At the same time, we know we can't individually work with every tween, nor can the leaders work one-on-one with every child who walks through the door. Life gets crazy. Clubs get chaotic. So many kids. So few leaders. So much Scripture to explain. So little time ...

No, Awana can't provide tools to reach every tween in every club, but we can provide tools and resources that leaders — the ones on the front lines — can use to motivate their clubbers.

Ideas to help your clubbers bridge the tween to teen years.

1. *They like to go places and do things.*

- Teach them to appreciate what God has done for us and don't allow them to be bored. God, in His Grace, has provided so much for us, we need to actively teach our kids to respond.
- Limit their exposure to danger, while at the same time teaching them to handle difficult situations.
- Try new and different ways of doing things at club. Play different games, sing different songs, change the order of what happens when. Have some off-site club meetings. Meet at a park or in someone's backyard — or even a different room in (or outside) of your church.
- Invite Large Group Time lesson speakers who have different jobs, abilities and talents. Invite a missionary, a horse trainer, a pilot — anyone with a great testimony and love for kids — who can tell your kids about something they may not know.

2. *They want proof.* Tweens no longer believe something simply because Dad and Mom and the people at church said it. (Though **most** tweens still believe their parents **most** of the time.)

- Teach external Bible evidence. Kids this age enjoy learning.
- Invite experts — on archaeology, creation, history — to visit your club. Appeal to the tweens' desire to acquire new information.

3. *They're hero-worshippers.* Have you had an argument with your son because you won't let him hang an inappropriate celebrity poster in his room? Have you had arguments with your daughter about what magazines she reads? Have you been to a teen clothing store and looked at the immodest, celebrity-look-alike clothing that your clubbers "must" have?

I remember asking a group of middle-school students (just one notch above elementary school age) about their heroes. The answers were astounding as kids listed celebrities

with blatantly-bad lifestyles. Encourage your children to emulate Bible characters, Christian musicians, Christian athletes, or even a high-school or college kid in your church who's living a godly life.

And don't despair. Many children this age say their parents or their church leaders are their heroes. What better heroes could there be than those?

4. *They desire justice.* They want to know if something's right or if it's wrong, and don't want to hear some speech about middle ground. When listening to a group of third-to-sixth-graders at play, you often hear the cry, "That's *not fair!*"

This is a hard lesson we must teach our kids: Life often *isn't* fair. Sometimes very bad things happen to very good people. Sin messed up our world. Instead of living in a perfect garden, we live in a world with tornadoes, hurricanes, fires, crime, hatred, racism, and other tragedies.

But God *is* just (Isaiah 30:18). He's also sovereign, and nothing that happens in our sin-filled world surprises Him. He's a sovereign God with a sovereign plan.

5. *They enjoy planning and building.* How-to books (about the right subjects) are big hits with third-to-sixth-graders. They want to know how to do things — whether it's building a tree house or braiding hair. Use this desire as a teaching tool. For instance, you could suggest they build a scale model of the tabernacle or the marketplace in Nazareth.

6. *They understand that adults are fallible.* Younger children often think parents can do no wrong. But as our children move into the older elementary years, they begin to notice the flaws. They pay attention when parents have an argument about unpaid bills or about how the scratch got on the car. They notice when parents break a promise because they're busy watching the football game or emailing Aunt Sue. Children begin to understand that even the best parents fail.

Children also pick up on inconsistencies at church. They get to club every Wednesday night, but their leader misses all the time because his son is in soccer or the lady who does the Large Group Time lesson once again isn't prepared.

In fact, sometimes outside circumstances cause adults to break promises they truly want to keep. Explain to your clubbers that you weren't at club because you broke your leg ... or you couldn't get the candy bars you promised because your car broke down.

But when we break promises because of our own choice, we need to admit it. Since breaking a promise can hurt a child in several ways, we need to carry through on what we say.

We, as adults, need to talk about human fallibility. Only God can keep all promises. Only God never makes a mistake in relationship to His children. We can remind our children

and clubbers that God's promise-keeping is another aspect of grace. Even when we don't deserve the fulfillment of a promise, God is faithful.

Tweens are forgiving. We need to be open with them about our mistakes.

7. *They can be motivated — but you need to be creative. Don't do the same old thing every time.*

Teachers take advantage of this characteristic in school, and we should take advantage of it while teaching them the Bible. Allow them to put events along a timeline or to categorize which Bible characters showed trust in God and which didn't.

8. *They're more aware of those around them and enjoy service projects.* They're learning that others may have a different perspective on life than they do. They can become burdened for their friends who live in difficult situations. They may hurt for the child whose dad left home, or the kid whom everyone teases. This is a great opportunity to encourage kids to show God's grace to those around them, and to praise them for doing so. (See Passport and Passport pins under the tools section below.)

9. *They enjoy friendships.* Friends are the people they do homework with, play with, laugh with, whine to, dress like, talk like, email, text, and call on the phone. Friends are a huge part of their life. Our responsibility is to teach our kids the biblical instructions on friendship (and there are a lot of them). We need to talk about the importance of sharing God's grace with friends. We need to plan activities where they can bond and become friends with each other.

Tools to help you as you help your clubbers bridge the tween to teen years.

After much prayer, thought and research, we have developed a variety of tools to motivate fifth- and sixth-graders to stay in club — and by staying in club, to learn and grow in their desire to know, love and serve the Lord.

Awana is and will continue to be providing tools for the local church to reach these kids, which led to the major fifth and sixth grade changes rolled out in the 2010-2011 club year.

Name — The fifth- and sixth-grade years are now called T&T Ultimate Challenge[®]. By separating the two groups, we are giving tweens an identity and not meshing them with the third- and fourth-graders. We understand that most churches using the Awana program are not large enough to have two separate groups: T&T Ultimate Adventure[®] and Ultimate Challenge. At the same time, even within one group, the fifth- and sixth-graders can have a separate identity.

Books — The handbooks also reflect the change. New graphics present the T&T characters as older and also reflect a tween-appealing cartoon style.

Shirts/Emblems — Probably the most noticed change is the new uniforms — a blue and white soccer shirt (much loved by kids and leaders).

A series of 16 emblems was designed to be attached to the shirt as a reward for each Challenge completed by a fifth- or sixth-grader.

Book-completion Awards — These were redesigned to look great on a shelf, but also to be kid-friendly. Glitter and sparkles look appealing and catch the attention of upcoming Sparkies.

Large Group Lesson Book — The large group lesson book corresponding to *T&T Ultimate Challenge Book Two* has lessons specifically geared toward older kids.

Passport and Passport Pins — A motivator for keeping kids in church at this age is involving them in service. If they feel part of the church ministry and part of the outreach of the church, they will feel connected. The Passport and Passport pins reward that involvement.

Encourage tweens to get involved in service and therefore, to be involved in their church.

Jack Eggar, President/CEO of Awana, explains it like this, “Kids this age want to be part of a ‘we’ but they want to be a ‘me’ within the ‘we.’ Our program updates emphasize individuality and at the same time encourage the tweens to feel as if they’re part of the group.”

Conclusion

The tweens with whom we work are often overwhelmed with all the messages they receive from media, from teachers and from peers.

As their leaders, we face a challenging task as we assure them that the Lord loves them and by His grace has crafted a destiny for their lives.

Remember the goal as found in Philippians 2:15-16a. *So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life (NIV).*