

Mentoring in Junior High Ministry Brad DuFault

Genuine spiritual growth is one of our primary goals, and it consists of not only increased knowledge but also increased service of others and character development in day-to-day life. Therefore, **mentoring is one of the foremost responsibilities of a junior high cell group leader**. A cell leader who doesn't drive students could have someone else pick up and drop off students. One who doesn't teach could have the others fill in. One who does no administration or planning for the cell could have their weight effectively pulled by a left-brained co-leader. However, when cell leaders do not mentor, this is purely a missed opportunity. Who would do it in their place? Perhaps those spiritually hungry students will seek to apply the word to their lives, or maybe they will be satisfied to view cell group as a place to go to have fun. One thing is certain of even our most spiritually-minded students: they could sure use our help!

What Is Mentoring in Junior High Ministry

In Xenos Junior High Ministry, we consider mentoring to consist of *at least* the following:

- *Meeting weekly or biweekly for at least an hour.* During this time, a mentor meets together with the same one or two students consistently over the years, unless there is a vital reason to stop meeting with someone. The process of *establishing* a mentoring relationship may look different (e.g. hanging out with students in order to determine their interest level), but the end goal is to have specific mentoring relationships established.
- *Regular Study.* Learning is essential for spiritual growth, because life transformation starts with mental transformation (see Romans 12:2). Studying the Bible or other resources together is the cornerstone of the mentoring time.
- *Prayer.* Seek out God's help in your study and present thanksgiving and requests together. Mentors ought to give their students an inside perspective on their walks with God by the way they pray.
- *Counseling.* Pre-teens want your wisdom and direction! The world is a bewildering place at that age, as I'm sure you'll recall! You have years of following God behind you and so much to pass on, and students genuinely want to know what you think about the situations they are facing (even if they act like they already have all the answers). This is especially important in touchy areas like dating and sex. They're getting deluged with the world's wisdom on sex every day, but you might be one of the few sources they have for godly input.
- *Coaching Toward Serving/Ministry.* Middle school students are self-centered, but this is a time when you can help them develop a taste for ministering to others. You could get them hooked on the satisfaction that comes from serving, so that they can truly find life by giving up their lives for others (Matt. 10:39). Part of the process here is teaching general principles and core values behind serving others. In addition, you will need to work together to develop specific ministry goals for the student, such as inviting one friend to cell group this week, asking a brother at cell group three questions about his life, or speaking up during group discussion at least twice.

Each of these five elements is necessary for effective mentoring. Keeping this list in mind is helpful because it is easy to let an area slip. As long as we are consistently correcting our course when we get off track, we will be able to make the most of our mentoring time. For example, if you realize that you always run out of time before you get the chance to pray together, you could start your time with prayer, rather than always waiting until the end to pray.

Why Mentor?

Perhaps the best way to approach the question of why we should mentor is to consider the reasons why we might *not* want to do it:

- “I don’t have the time.” This is a legitimate concern, as many of the people who volunteer to lead junior high cells are the same ones who already have a schedule full of serving others! However, this is really a question to consider before applying to lead a cell. Two points are essential here: the first is that mentoring is part of the role of a cell group leader, and if someone has no time to invest in students through mentoring, they just don’t have the time to be a junior high cell leader... which is okay because it’s not a sin to not lead a cell group! Some people are spread too thin to work in a cell group, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. It’s also important to note that we make time for what we find most important, as long as we believe it is *doable* and *worth the effort*. Our schedules reveal our true priorities, as the way we live out our lives reveal what’s in our hearts (Prov. 4:23). Perhaps if we were more convinced of the value of mentoring, we would find the time to work it into our schedules.
- “I’m not sure it will do any good.” This is the voice of cynicism, a self-protective outlook that eliminates the possibility of failure by eliminating risks. Unfortunately, like most activities that are worth our time, mentoring *is* risky! You could pour out your heart to someone who turns on you personally, or you could invest a lot of time and energy into seeing someone succeed in their walks only to see them sell out to the world system. Many of us know from experience just how painful both of those situations are! This is simply the reality of working with people: your mentoring time could end up blowing up in your face, or it could result in the advancement of God’s kingdom through your student. However, if God is behind it, the risk is truly worth the effort. Don’t forget that even Jesus lost a disciple! In the end, if you don’t believe success in mentoring is *likely*, you are in a great position to trust God to come through in a big way. Put yourself out there and let God surprise you! Hasn’t he done it in the past? On the other hand, if you don’t believe success in mentoring is *possible*, then frankly, this ministry just isn’t for you, because such defeatism could poison a whole group.
- “I feel inadequate.” If you reach the point where you see that your internal resources are not enough to handle the demands of nurturing a student’s spiritual growth, then you are in the perfect position to trust in God, whose strength is perfected in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Our feelings of inadequacy can lead us to give up, or they can lead us to tap into the power of God that is available to those who have reached the end of themselves. Then you will be able to follow Jesus’ teaching on intercessory prayer in Luke 11:5-8, a parable in which a man wants to provide for his visiting friend, so he pleads with his neighbor for help. It is because the man *realizes that he has nothing of value of his own to offer his friend* that he turns to his rich neighbor and pleads for the resources to meet the needs of his friend. In the same way, when we realize our own weakness, we (the man in the story) recognize that we don’t have what it takes to meet the needs of those we serve (the visiting friend), and that drives us to effectual prayer to God (the rich neighbor) to supply what we lack. God is glorified by using us in our inadequacy if we give him the chance! We just need the faith to let it drive us to dependence rather than despair.
- “I feel unequipped.” If this is true, then keep reading! There are many helpful insights distilled from many junior high leaders’ years of service below. However, your sense of being unequipped may be exaggerated. You know how to build relationships, how to show kindness and patience, and how to read the Word with someone. You can learn as you go and let your experiences drive you to deeper prayer and study. In addition, we have team leadership for this very reason. We should always be bouncing ideas off of the rest of our team, especially in the area of mentoring. This can range from general questions about mentoring practices to specific questions, such as what activities you could do on the north end on a rainy day.

Hopefully this list of reasons why someone wouldn’t mentor has helped removed some hurdles. However, in addition to the *negatives* being overblown and deceptive, there is a wealth of *positive* reasons to mentor. Here are our top four:

1. Mentoring Is Biblical

In Jesus' famous last words before ascending, he traced out the mission of the church: to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded*" (Matt. 28:19). In addition, Paul provides us a window into his example in Colossians 1:28, of "teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may *present everyone fully mature* in Christ." Striving for the spiritual growth of the people we serve is the biblical model, both in principle and in powerful example. Mentoring is the best method we have for promoting this essential New Testament work, and is therefore an area in which we should be striving to *excel*, not just doing enough to get by!

2. Mentoring Is Jesus' Master Plan

The brilliance of Jesus' method for reaching the world with the Good News of the Kingdom is spelled out in Robert Coleman's book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. He explains:

The multitudes of discordant and bewildered souls were potentially ready to follow Him, but Jesus individually could not possibly give them the personal care they needed. His only hope was to get men imbued with His life who would do it for him. He concentrated Himself upon those who were to be the beginning of this leadership. Though He did what He could to help the multitudes, He had to devote Himself primarily to a few men, rather than the masses, in order that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of His strategy. (33)

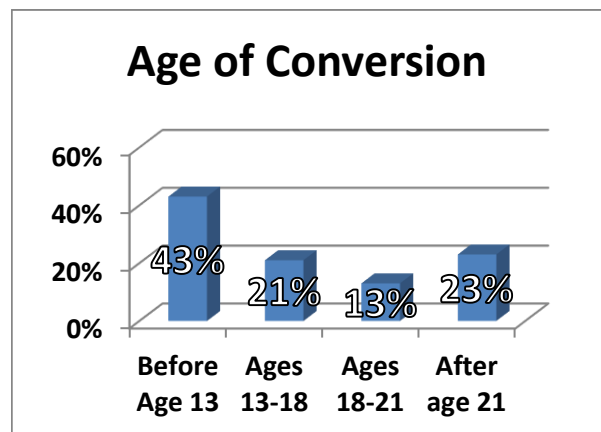
Jesus short-term impact seemed meager, but the true nature of his earthly ministry was revealed when *the process of multiplication through discipleship* began to take root. He knew that if the few disciples under him each got a few disciples of their own, and if they imbued the principle of multiplication into their disciples, then the proliferation of well-trained, godly ministers would sweep the world. Historians scratch their heads at the explosion of Christianity from 500 followers in 33 AD to over 1,000,000 in 100 AD without the use of force, political pressure, wealth, or class advantage. Jesus' investment of his message and his very life into these men opened the door to reaching the nations.

We participate in this work when we invest in the lives of younger believers. While a discipleship ministry with adults has more potential to result in exponential growth (because we can invest in someone to the point where we duplicate our progress in them), we are able to participate in this process at the beginning stages. We are investing into students' spiritual growth right at the time when they are first able to make the decisions and develop the perspectives that will enable them to bear fruit someday. Chances are, someone else will finish the work that you start by investing in this student, but you still play a part in the world-altering, eternity-shaping process of discipleship. By equipping a young person, you could be unleashing the power of God to multitudes!

3. Mentoring Provides a Window of Opportunity in Young Minds

Studies have confirmed that most people who come to Christ do so in their youth (see chart from *The Barna Group of Ventura, California*, www.barna.org). This seems to point to a time of spiritual openness that eventually goes away when thought patterns and worldview get entrenched.

In addition to conversions to Christ being more likely, adolescence is a window of opportunity for spiritual growth as well. For the same reasons



that students are open to the gospel, they are open to further input. While childhood has its own disadvantages, one thing that children have on us adults is a willingness to see other points of view. Becoming stubborn takes time, and we can help students see and accept various aspects of the Christian worldview before the world system floods their minds with ideas that make biblical positions extremely difficult to accept. Not surprisingly, this presents a window of opportunity for proclaiming the message of Jesus' reconciling death and resurrection when people are at an age where they are less hardened to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Another advantage to working with students is the amount of time and energy they have. While some students are flooded with a flurry of activity in schoolwork and extra-curricular activities, most do not *feel* nearly as busy as adults do. In my experience, students jump at the chance to hang out with an adult who wants to give them direction and have fun with them. This points to an additional benefit: they will learn that time spent with the Body of Christ can be a source of *refreshment* in their lives, not just another to-do that bogs them down.

4. Mentoring Shapes our Cell Group Ministry

In addition to all of the benefits that mentoring in junior high brings to the students' individual lives, one of the most potent effects of mentoring is the way it shapes our cell groups. First of all, it provides an outlet for the most knowledgeable and experienced students to grow and be challenged. Hopefully, the cell group will be seeing students receive Christ and become incorporated into the Body of Christ. If so, cell leaders would need to teach on a level that would give appropriate grounding to these new believers. Such a content level would likely be far different than what would be appropriate for a student who has been learning the Bible his entire life through attending Oasis (children's program), reading with parents, or taking theology classes at private schools. Part of the solution here is to make sure there is a little something for everyone in every teaching: try to *engage* the most advanced students, while trying *not to lose* the least knowledgeable ones. Another part of the solution is to make sure that the students who have benefited from earlier instruction are able to grow in their knowledge through mentoring. This practice helps the group to "*pursue* righteousness" (1 Tim. 6:11) across the board and avoid an ethos of simply making sure everyone is meeting the bare minimum. Just because some of your students have good answers to all the discussion questions doesn't mean they have no need to continue to advance! Failing to provide more content for such students could lead to stagnation in their spiritual lives.

In addition to providing for those who need higher content, mentoring provides an opportunity to shape the ethos of the cell group by directing key students into *ministry*. I know I can count on many people in my college home church to help welcome or engage someone who is there for the first time. However, in my junior high cell group, it is not that way. Middle schoolers are often too caught up in whatever is on their mind to consider the feelings or needs of others. From my own observations, this is true even of students who care deeply about the things of God and are seeking his will for their lives; they just tend not to notice the needs around them in social settings. Through mentoring, we have an opportunity not only to give direction to individual students to help them serve, but we can transform our cell group into a welcoming group by training key students how to welcome newcomers. They still might not notice the opportunities on their own, but if we have equipped them with the knowledge and skills they need to engage a new student, then we can simply walk up to one of our mentees and say, "Hey, could you go try to talk to so-and-so's friend over there? He seems bored." If you try that with a student you have not already taught what to do in that situation, you might be unpleasantly surprised at how they apply your advice. I still can't believe how many times I've seen an established member walk up to someone, look right at them and say, "Who's that guy?" A little input from us could help them realize that this new student would have a much better experience if the old member said instead, "Hi, I'm _____, what's your name?" Just one welcoming, intentionally serving young person can make a huge impact, but when there are enough students who are equipped to serve others that it changes the consensus of the group, you can expect the gospel to go out powerfully.

While the day-in day-out experience of mentoring often seems underwhelming, the results have the potential to shape eternity. The sacrifice and patience it requires are well worth it, and we will likely see such choices vindicated by God, probably even in this life. However, what does the day-to-day actually look like? Where do we start and what are we aiming towards? The following four principles give practical guidance for the process of mentoring.

4 Principles of Mentoring

1. Person: Who Do I Pick?

2 Timothy 2:2 offers valuable guidance to the process of discipleship: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” In this simple statement, Paul provides Timothy with a recipe for maximizing the impact of his instruction. If Timothy were to spend the bulk of his time trying to convince people who were resistant, then he could end up with no lasting results from all of his investment. Perhaps those who had not yet decided to yield their lives to God’s will would be moved as a result of Timothy’s input, but perhaps not. Their free will would determine whether or not Timothy’s ministry would bear any fruit. How much better for him to follow Paul’s advice! If Timothy takes the content he learned from Paul and teaches it to *faithful men* who will be likely to *pass on* that influence to others, then Timothy would be investing in a way that would lead to a multiplication of his efforts.

The same principle applies in our selection of students to mentor: stay on the alert for *faithful* students who would be able to *pass on* what they could learn through mentoring. We do not want to create some kind of caste system here; rather, we serve, engage and teach every student who comes through our doors. However, we do want to do everything we can to make sure the effort we expend has the greatest impact for the Kingdom of God. This would mean mentoring our most faithful students, those who are most likely to take what they learn from us through mentoring and use it to serve others. Put negatively, this means that it may be a mistake to invest most heavily in the student who seems to need our help the most. By all means, help out the students who are in need! But if we use our precious opportunity to mentor to try to help a struggling student turn his life around, we could be missing out on an opportunity to mentor a faithful student, which could lead to a greater impact, bringing more health to our group and more students to a saving relationship with God. There is one important caveat to this last point: it is better to invest in a student who is a difficult case than not to invest at all. If all of the students who are willing to learn, grow, and serve are already being mentored, then it is certainly worth the effort to try to study with a resistant student. It is only unwise if we are passing up willing and eager students right in front of us in order to focus on students who are less interested in following God.

If faithfulness is the key to selecting students to mentor, what does faithfulness look like for a junior higher? It does not necessarily mean having good manners, good grades in school, good answers to discussion questions, and good hygiene (they might get there in their 20s). It doesn’t necessarily equate to the ability to sit through a boring teaching without being disruptive. There are two key elements that help us flesh out the idea of faithfulness: a desire to grow and a desire to serve. Students who desire to grow might do the following:

- confess their sin (not just comply externally)
- ask questions about the Bible
- interact about spiritual topics when asked
- mention things about themselves they would like to see change
- act on things that you suggest

Students who desire to serve may:

- invite their friends to cell group

- talk about spiritual things with non-believing friends (it's a good sign if they even know what their friends think: "I talked to so-and-so, and he's an atheist.")
- contribute to the meeting somehow (share, clean, etc.)
- try to get the other students to listen to the teaching
- interact (at all) with a first timer
- talk to you about problems their friends are having

Some of these factors are difficult to discern accurately, because many junior highers have learned how to be "good kids" at school in order to get by there, and they may be doing the exact same thing at cell group without even considering pursuing God in their hearts. Therefore, we should always confer with co-leaders when making decisions about mentoring, even in the early stages.

These early stages are also when we need to start communicating frequently and positively with the parents. Let them know that you are on their side and want to help their kids develop in maturity and their walks with God. It is also a good idea to meet together with the students you are interested in mentoring at least a few times in order to gauge what their interest level is like outside of the cell group meeting. In these pre-mentoring get-togethers, you could just hang out and get to know them or you could try to crack the books. Personally, I prefer to offer to hang out and look at a passage in the Bible together right off the bat to see if they enjoy reading the word and drawing things out of it. The first time I got together with the two boys I mentor now, we looked at Psalms 1 and 23. We talked about what it says and how cool it is, and they ate it up! I'm sure it didn't hurt that we went sledding right before reading.

A final factor in selecting a student to mentor is what to do if you are the parent of one of the students in the group. Hopefully it goes without saying that we should be investing into the lives of our own children! I have a weekly time with my son and one with my daughter, in addition to our Bible and prayer time at bedtime each night. However, when my son is in a cell group, I would not consider the time we get together to be *mentoring*, since it's already just a normal part of our lives. It seems like that would be a waste of an opportunity to introduce more input through mentoring in middle school group. However, there are two great options for parent-leaders in cell groups. First, you could meet together with your own child and another student as an opportunity to serve together with your kid. This would provide a great opportunity to coach your son or daughter in ministry (e.g. "What do you think we could pray for in so-and-so's life?" "What do you think she meant by _____?" "I loved the point you made after he said _____. That was right on!") Another option would be to switch up mentoring time so your kid is getting input from another source. This option could help diminish the *this-is-my-mom's-group* effect for some students who want a little more space from their parents.

These factors in selecting a mentee can be overwhelming, so don't forget the most important factor in selection: select someone! Give it a shot! Rely on your own prayerful judgment and the input from your co-leaders and don't feel the need to wait until you feel sure. If all it takes to stop us from initiating is a sense of uncertainty, then Satan and our own reluctant natures can easily prevent the impact we could make.

2. Purpose: Key Content Areas

When we get together with our mentees, there are certain topics that are essential to cover. In addition to showing students that we are there for them and want them to enjoy their experience in junior high ministry, it is our interaction with the student in these key areas that form our *purpose* for getting together. Things happen, so we may not have a great interaction on important topics every time we meet, but we should certainly *intend* to have a worthwhile personal and spiritual conversation each time we get together. Here are five essential areas to cover:

1. *Genuine interaction with God.* Praying together is a must. In addition, we should be attempting to gain a window into the student's own private life with God. Jesus teaches that it is by abiding in him that we bear fruit (John 15:5), so we should do everything we can to promote students' personal time in prayer and scripture, patiently encouraging them toward progress in this area.
2. *Ownership.* We need to help them get real about their walk with God and particularly their involvement in the cell group. Have they truly made the decision to pursue God and serve, or is their involvement purely an extension of their obedience to their parents? Do they truly believe that this cell group is the place where God has placed them so they can serve and grow here? We need to think through the type of questions we can ask and the exhortations we can make in order to get to the bottom of this. Do they have doubts or reservations that they admit to you? Are there any that you can see in their actions that they don't realize they have? Helping them develop more *ownership* of their own involvement will pay dividends in the amount of zeal they bring to their involvement in the cell group.
3. *Building Relationships.* Mentoring is a great venue to discuss their relationships with their peers. We can find out who they feel closest to and seek out ways to help them develop those friendships further. They might need instruction on why they ought to *value* their friendships as one of the most important parts of their lives. Maybe they don't realize that this is an essential element to what it means to be a disciple of Christ, being a member of his Body in such a way that we are wrapped up the lives of those around us (1 Cor. 12:26). Or, they could be on the opposite extreme and need help moving away from codependence (Gal. 6:5). On another level, we could teach them specific, practical steps they can take to help their relationships with acquaintances become real friendships, or to help their friendships become more Christ-centered.
4. *Love for the Lost.* Students are often lost in their own little worlds. It can be difficult for young adolescents to open their eyes to the ocean of need and suffering around them. These years are the perfect time to awaken their hearts to the tragic situation of the vast majority of the people around them, people who are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd," "without hope and without God" (Matt. 9:36, Eph. 2:12). Students are in a great position to take in this difficult truth, including the Bible's teaching about hell, and orient their lives around reaching the lost before they get caught up in pursuing comparatively worthless things. In addition, some of our students' non-believing friends might be eager to start a relationship with God if we can motivate them to share the gospel.
5. *Transformed Thinking.* Our times of studying the Word or other books, and our conversations during mentoring, should be full of valuable instruction from across the spectrum of Biblical teaching. We are helping them fill out their worldview, not merely providing some direction. After all, the ultimate direction their lives takes will flow from their outlook on life, and this is largely determined by whether lessons from scripture or from the world system have taken deeper root.

It would be difficult and probably unwise to attempt to cover each of these areas every time we meet together. We want to avoid approaching our time with a checklist. However, we do want to go into our mentoring time with a *purpose*. If you set the bar too low, that's exactly what you'll get! Don't settle for: "I will see if they want to take it in a spiritual direction," "We'll just hang out and talk," or "As long as we pray, I'll feel good about it." *Intentionality is the key.* God has put you there as the spiritual leader for a reason: so you can lead! So be sure to take charge of your mentoring time and don't passively allow the time to be wasted for a lack of planning or fear of confrontation. Don't settle for pseudo-discipleship! This really goes back to the question of selection. If you feel like you are constantly steer-wrestling your student in trying to make your time focused on spiritual things, then he or she is probably not a great fit for mentoring. If you find yourself in that position, it might mean that your original discernment about whom you should mentor was a little off, or it could mean that the student's interest level has changed. Either way, settling for a lame, unspiritual time together is not the solution! At that point, you and the student would both be better off if you either try to fight it out or move on to mentoring someone else. Obviously, "fighting it out" doesn't mean fighting with your student, but rather maintaining a certain standard. Just be honest with such students, letting them know that

you care about them and want to see them experience abundant life in walking with God, but you fear that is not happening. After a number of these gentle yet candid conversations, you and your leadership team would need to make a decision about the right time to move on. If you do end up discontinuing your time with a mentee (while maintaining a consistently loving posture), you could be providing a huge service. They could realize that they had never actually made a decision to center their lives on God's will when they might have just assumed they had. You could be opening the door for future repentance.

The key to consistently leading your time with your student into something worthwhile is to *intend to do so*. However, even when we are convinced, it can still be difficult! We can't demand perfection every time, and we should expect that every once in a while the students' squirreliness will outweigh their spiritual interest. Here are some practical suggestions that can help us make our mentoring time count:

- Do something fun before cracking the books, something active for most kids (especially boys).
- Let them be crazy until it is time to get serious.
- Decide when you want to get into your study and make it clear to them that the tone is shifting, but allow a little bit of time to transition.
- Redirect students' triviality when you are studying or discussing something.
- Come up with a set cell phone policy and stick with it.
- Come up with a set schedule (e.g. 30 minutes to run around, 20 minutes of study, 20 minutes of something relational like getting food or taking a walk, etc.).

3. Prepare: How Do I Get Ready?

This point goes hand in hand with intentionality. Part of leading the mentoring time rather than just reacting is preparing our hearts, our time, and our study. Foremost in importance here is preparing our hearts to serve the students each time we get together. Thankfully, in Christ we have every resource we need (2 Pet. 1:3). This is true *regardless of our emotional state*: we can present ourselves to God for his service as those alive from the dead, ready to serve confidently and effectively because of our position in Christ (Rom. 6:13). Of course, our prayer of committing ourselves to the work is in addition to praying directly for the students' needs.

We must also prepare the actual time we spend during mentoring. Make sure the specific time you get together is made clear in advance so there is no confusion. A consistent weekly time is best. In addition, you should plan out the place or places you will go and what you will do there. If a student is eager to do something else, feel free to change your plans as you see fit. Just have some fall-back plan to avoid the old "I don't know, what do *you* want to do?" back and forth discussion. Planning out some of the conversation you want to have that day is also helpful. Don't feel the need to write a script, but there is a great benefit to having relational questions in mind that you want to ask (yes, even those scary questions!). For instance, maybe you could focus on the topic of school this week, then ask a lot about their sibling relationships next time, and then cover self-image the following week. Make sure you are ready to answer some of the same questions if they ask you, too. Finally, when planning out your mentoring time it can be a good idea to plan out items to pray for. Having a prayer list is a great means of showing them answered prayers in addition to helping focus your time.

We also need to plan out material to study with our students. There is a list of suggested readings on the Junior High Leaders webpage (xenos.org/jrhigh/lead-jr-high-ministry). Here are some of the studies we have found most effective:

- Bible overview and time line
- How to do Bible research (pick topics and show student how to find out what the Bible teaches about it)
- How to study the Bible (e.g. inductive study, assign a passage and prepare questions)
- Topical Studies

- Chapter/Book on prayer
- Spiritual Books:
 - *Case for Christ: Student Edition*, by Lee Strobel
 - *Peacemaker: Student Edition*, by Ken Sande
 - *How Good Is Good Enough?* by Andy Stanley
 - Kevin Johnson Books
 - *Why Grace Changes Everything*, by Chuck Smith

If you are studying something directly from the Bible, be sure to plan out what specifically to discuss from the passage to make sure you are exploring the text on a deep level but not to the point that you lose them. Students' reading fluency and comprehension levels vary greatly at this age, so make sure you are asking questions to see if they really understand what you read. The most effective instruction in a setting like mentoring, where you and a student are working together on a study, is to have material at a content level that is just a little more difficult than what they could fully comprehend on their own.

4. Practice: Weighing In

As with many elements of the Christian life, the really profound part of mentoring is not in learning about it, but in doing it. At some point, we need to admit that we are as ready as we are going to be. Get out there and serve some kids! Be prepared to enter the rough and tumble of the experience. Adolescents sin in the same ways we do, but working with them can be frustrating because they are less sophisticated about it than adults. Be ready to enter into their bewildering worlds even when it is frustrating for both of you, even when they are resistant. Be willing to go down rabbit trails, not as a way to water down your time together, but as an acknowledgement that middle schoolers *think* in rabbit trails! Be flexible as issues come up: getting them to stop doing that annoying thing they do is probably not the top priority in their spiritual growth. Not every problem they have deserves equal airtime, and there might be issues that you never get a chance to really address because you need to focus on other things that will have a greater impact on their lives. Be ready to fail! Much of what you attempt to do probably won't work, so decide in advance *not* to go on strike and *not* to hold them in contempt for making you feel like a failure. Be like Paul, going all in: "But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:7-8).

In addition to studying and discussing important topics with your students, you should use your most powerful motivational tool: *encouragement*. This is the number one way to foster lasting, significant change in people, and the type of encouragement that psychology has determined to be most effective is *positive reinforcement*. Unfortunately, this term is more used than understood, and most use it to mean something like "positive anything," but what it really means is to reinforce a behavior (i.e. get them to do what they did over again) by means of a reward. In this case, the reward is simply verbally praising their effort, but as our own experience tells us, that can be a powerful motivator!

To make positive reinforcement effective, we must first catch them doing something good, especially in an area where we most want to see them grow. This process can be painfully slow at first, but it builds on itself, which is why I like to call it the *encouragement snowball effect*. At first, you are just trying to get them to do something that is a *little bit* beyond them. Set the bar too high, and you're less likely to get movement. Set the bar at the status quo, and that's exactly what you'll reinforce.

Let's say you have a student who does not reach out to friends, share the gospel, or greet new students at cell group (i.e. a normal 7th grade boy). In addition to modeling ministry by talking about your own outreaching efforts and studying good materials, you'll want to pick something small and doable in that general

direction and try to get them to do it. This process might take a long time. Trying to get them to share the gospel with someone or invite a friend to cell group might be aiming too high at first. Remember, they've never had *any* type of spiritual conversation with a peer! A better place to start would be to try to get them to welcome a newer person in your group. You could suggest that and explain that it could be a big help in seeing this newer student receive Christ. Maybe you could try to get them to say, "Hey, you're _____, right? I'm _____." If they don't do it, just try again next week. If they keep not doing it, be *patient*. Before you jump to the conclusion that they just don't care or that you need to confront them about their attitude, consider if there's any way that you could suggest something smaller and more doable as an intermediate step. Remember, the point is to *start* the snowball effect of action-leading-to-encouragement-leading-to-more-action. Once it does, you might be surprised at how quickly it picks up momentum.

Eventually, you'll probably succeed in seeing them take action on something that they weren't doing before, and this is when you bring a *flood* of encouragement. Next, you want to do two things. First, you need to make sure they are continuing to do what they did before. They probably will because they were encouraged so much for it, and if they do, be sure to encourage it less than you did at first, or you will be reinforcing them to simply stay there. Second, you need to think about something that is slightly more advanced than what they did before. If they greeted the newer student last time, you could see if they will try to ask the student a question about their lives the next time (you will probably need to give them a stock question to ask, like "Do you play sports?" or "What school do you go to?"). That is a small step further in the direction of relational ministry. If they do that, then encourage them again! Next, you could urge them to ask them what they think about the teachings, and so on until the point where you are coaching them through the process of inviting their friends or sharing the gospel.

Part of the reason the encouragement snowball effect is so effective for junior high students is that they are typically able to reason from concrete things to abstract ideas, but not vice-versa. In other words, you could tell a student that they should "look for ways to serve the cell group" until you are blue in the face, but they aren't going to know what you mean unless you give them a specific example. The encouragement snowball method relies on getting students to *act*, and then building on that action with why it's important and what they could do next. Please note, this is all *in addition* to studying the word, building relationships, and developing a prayer life, so the point is not to bypass the heart and just get students to obey. Rather, these different strands of mentoring go together, resulting in growing inner understanding and outward ministry simultaneously. I have found that many students who do grow spiritually in junior high often don't do much to reach out or serve unless they are given specific direction, opportunity, and encouragement. When all of our instruction is on the motivational and mental level, they might value ministry, and they will probably do it later in life when they are at an age when they think more about why they do what they do. But we have to get down to the *practical* level if we want to see action in the meantime.

Another point of practical importance is how to get started with mentoring. This is usually where the process breaks down, so we wanted to provide a step-by-step guide so we could remove any barriers to getting started.

1. Take potential mentee(s) home last. In the car, encourage their spiritual interest and ask if they would be into getting together to hang out and do some deeper study.
2. If they are into it, contact their *parents* to explain mentoring and ask if you can meet with their kid. Do not assume that parents, even parents in the church, know what you mean! If you are worried that parents might not understand, you could mention that it is similar to a Big Brother/Big Sister idea, simply having an older, more mature person meet with a student to help them navigate through what can be a difficult time in life.

3. Meet up with the student(s).
4. Continue initiating with the *parents* to schedule upcoming mentoring times. There might come a time when you have built enough trust with the parents that you can switch over from communicating through them to directly communicating with the student, but err on the side of more communication with parents.

You are ready, at least more-so than you were ten pages ago! So jump in with both feet! As you do, here are some more helpful practices to have in your toolbox:

- Say something stupid they can make fun of you about
- Write an encouragement letter
- Squeeze in an additional fun outing
- Keep communicate with parents, not just at the beginning
- Frequently reiterate your overall purpose and specific goals for getting together
- Cast a vision for their lives and point out their gifts
- Tell them they can call you whenever they need to talk
- Go to their extra-curricular event

Imagine the Impact

We are called to live and serve “by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Mentoring provides us with an opportunity to go out on a limb and trust God to come through in ways that we may not see, and that we might not even believe even if we saw it! After investing for three years, we could send out an army of motivated, knowledgeable freshmen into incredibly lost high schools, equipped with an accurate view of their identity in Christ and their role as ministers of the Good News. While they will not have arrived at maturity by the time we send them off, our investment into their lives could spark a ripple effect of the power of God.