

Letting Go of the Bike

a simple philosophy for preteen ministry

It has happened to all of us. You were teaching someone (or being taught) to ride a bike. You've gone over the structural mechanics of handles bars and pedals and brakes. You let them sit back and watch you try, making it look as easy as, well, riding a bike. They take their seat; feet to the pedals, hands to the handle bars. And with your hand firmly placed on the back of the seat providing extra balance and stability, you begin countless runs up and down the driveway.

And then it happens.

This next time down the driveway is different. Because this time you let go of the bike. You don't leave their side; you're still shouting encouragement and support. You're even there to stop them from crashing into a rogue tree or careening into the middle of the street. But you have let go, allowing them to steer, to balance, to brake.

Many preteens across the country are still waiting for this moment. Not with their bike, but with their faith and with their life. They are waiting for their pastors and parents to understand that if their faith were a bike, they are ready for that moment when we first let go.

From the moment they were carried into the nursery we firmly hold the back of their bike, telling them stories about God and God's people, about the life of Jesus, and more. As they move into their first years of elementary school we continue to build on these stories and ideas – that Jesus loves you, that God created everything, that they can be a follower of Jesus today. They have sung songs, prayed prayers, read stories, and more. All with the firm – and necessary – hand holding the bike seat of their faith.

But as they enter their preteen years – these years of pre and early adolescence for nine, ten, eleven, and twelve year olds – something unique begins to happen. In some ways they continue to see the world as a kid, but in others they are emerging toward life as a teenager. They're leaving one and heading toward the other. (We could call them "post-kids" but "preteens" sound much better.) Piaget calls this the move from concrete operations to formal operations. Erikson calls it a move from competence to fidelity. Fowler calls it a move from mythic-literal faith to synthetic-conventional faith. We call it letting go of the bike.

Whatever you call it, it's happening. Kids become teenagers, but between the two is this unique age called "preteen." And it is at this time that parents and pastors must let go of the bike, allowing them to continue owning their faith.

This doesn't mean we let them ride across town on their own. This doesn't mean we send them on their way, expecting them to learn it all as they go. We remain right beside them, running alongside as they pedal and wobble their way forward. Pastors and parents are constantly supporting and encouraging and helping direct the bicycle of their faith and life. Because one day they *will* ride across town on their own. And when that day comes – it comes closer every day – we want them to be successful. One day they will teach others how to ride this "bike" and we want them to be equipped and prepared.

So for us, the pastors and leaders of preteens and preteen ministries, what exactly does this mean? It means that instead of simply teaching them by providing the right information, we support them by allowing them to learn for themselves. Instead of simply telling preteens how their faith affects their life, we create environments and resources where they can continue discovering it. Instead of giving them all the answers about God, Jesus, the Bible, and the rest of life, we invite them to voice their own questions and even offer their own answers. Instead of telling them what they should be doing, we create opportunities to discover how God is calling them to bring God's kingdom to life in the world.

In many ways this is what you are already doing. And in many ways, it is exactly what you need to do more of. Whether your preteen ministry has five students or five hundred students, whether you meet in living room or in an auditorium, whether you function as a part of a children's ministry or a student ministry, your preteens need you to let go of the bike. No matter how much parents or pastors might unintentionally try to hold on, they are growing up and moving (or pedaling) forward.

Imagine a sixteen-year-old riding her bike, only no one ever let go. Imagine a freshman in college who can't keep his own balance and remains utterly dependant on someone else. Imagine a newlywed still unsure of their role and function in life. Imagine the parent who is trying to teach their son or daughter to ride a bike while they haven't taken the training wheels off of their own.

Let go of the bike. Because when you do, you empower your preteens to grow and develop, to learn and to question, and to discover who God has made them to be. But you have to let go.