

*Ten Surefire Ways to Engage
Junior High School Students*

1. Take It Personally!

Junior high school students have excellent “duplicity radar.” They can completely tell when we adults say one thing and do another. They have a great sense of a catechist’s investment, and a vast desire to know that you are truly interested in their lives. For this reason, it is of critical importance that you get to know them, and get to know them well. Show an authentic interest in the lives of the students who have been entrusted to you. Ask questions, find out what’s important, and never be dismissive. Things that may seem trivial to us as adults are matters of huge importance to students, especially at this age.

2. Meet Them Where They Are

In the battle to win the hearts of our students for Christ it can be tempting to want to give students lots of information all at once and then want them to be immediately convicted of their faith and devoted to living it out. However, junior high school is an age punctuated with the question of *Why?* For this reason, we must take as much time as our students need to explain to them why it is we believe what we believe, rather than just expecting them to understand, accept, and believe all at once.

3. Give Them Examples

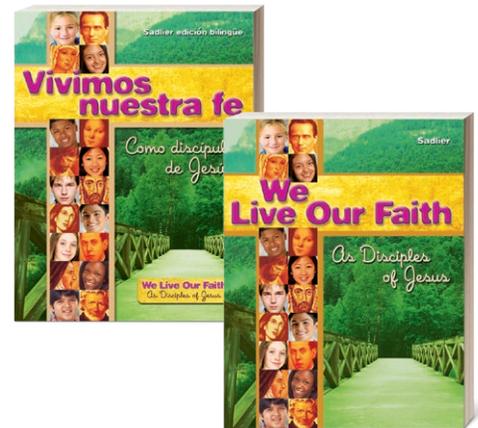
I’ve gotten the opportunity to talk and brainstorm with many youth ministers who are responsible for directing vibrant and thriving programs. It seems that all of their programs have one thing in common: a leadership team. Many programs invite dedicated members of their high school youth ministry programs to come and serve as leaders for retreats for the junior high program. This gives the junior high school students relatable examples of other teens living their faith. Junior high school students desire to be a part of a community, and forming relationships with older team leaders will help them to find role models to look to and become more comfortable living their faith.

4. Be Realistic

Especially for those of us who have worked in senior high youth ministry, it can be tempting to equate junior high students with their older counterparts and have impractical expectations of them. While we should have high expectations of their behavior, it is important to understand and be realistic in terms of the expectations we hold for the issues we ask our students to grapple with. This is a great time to set the foundation for healthy discussions on the key issues of morality and faith that will take place later into their high school years.

5. Get Technical

I've found that nothing is more effective in working with junior high school students than engaging them with technology and media. They communicate through multimedia and technology in their classrooms, at home, and with their friends. They often relate to others through texting, social media, or video chat. For this reason, we should take advantage of the technological resources available to us in order to engage our students and help them open their hearts to a relationship with the Lord.



Help junior high school students “get technical” with these digital features from Sadlier’s *We Live Our Faith/Vivimos nuestra fe* catechetical program:

- **Discover Polls** allow students to weigh in on issues and see what their peers think, too.
- **What If I’m Asked About...?** offers answers to real questions posed by 7th and 8th graders about their faith.
- **We Believe and Pray: Prayers for the Big Questions in Life** mp3s allow students to listen to and pray along with other young people.

6. Make It a Team Effort

Building an excellent relationship with the parents of the teens you’re working with is key to building a strong program. Keep communication open and build trust with the families of your students, and you will see enthusiasm coming from both their parents and the youth.

7. Keep it Active

It is critical to keep learning active in order for junior high school students to process information. To help students attach meaning to the concepts we teach, we must actively engage them. Intermingling teaching and active learning in every lesson is necessary for teaching this age group. Try to use activities that require students to get up, move around, and interact with one another. Then, allow them to take time to reflect and process what you've taught them.

8. Raise the Bar

There are big difference between junior high school and high school students and elementary school and junior high school students. It is important to raise our expectations for the behavior and achievement of junior high school students. When we treat them as younger than they are, or don't give them the opportunity to prove their maturity, they become disengaged. If we, as their educators raise the bar of our standards, we will be pleasantly surprised as how far they will rise to meet them.

9. Stay in Contact

Consistency is key with junior high school students. So many things are changing and moving in this very transitive phase of their lives. Keep consistent contact with junior high youth through frequent events and opportunities for social interaction. Service and prayer are vital in keeping youth interested in being a part of this ministry. By remaining a constant presence in their lives, junior high school youth ministries can encourage students to continue a constant relationship with Jesus Christ.

10. Affirmation is Key

Junior high school is a period marked by transition. With everything changing around them, and all of the social struggles that can be associated with these transitions, it is important to remind them of what a wonderful gift they are to the world. Helping them to feel valued and important will help them to experience the love of God in their lives.

