



# Goldilocks in Our Midst: Ministry with Young Adolescents

Mary Lee Becker

**R**ecently I volunteered to help set up for our church's Vacation Bible School week. When I arrived I found myself in charge of creating the "environment" for the program, which meant transforming a room with blank walls and gray carpeting into a "National Park" setting. Although I enjoy watching HGTV, an interior decorator I am not! Fortunately for me I had the assistance of four young adolescents. Armed with several boxes of artificial plants, rolls of colored plastic, a few bird houses and various miscellaneous items, we began. The greatest resource was not the objects, but the youth themselves. After a quick brainstorming session I assigned them various sections to be "in charge" of creating. Their creativity and enthusiasm was a delight to watch. In ninety minutes they transformed the room into a scene with a picnic area and pond that included lily pads, cattails and strategically placed stuffed animals nestled in the bushes. And they did it all without cell phones or computers – simply using their God-given gift of imagination!

This experience reminded me of the three keys to working with young adolescents: *understand* them, *engage* them, and *empower* them. These elements are critical to success in both what we provide (content and format) and how we interact (process and relationship) with young adolescents. All the innovate ideas, approaches and resources will be useless unless we first understand the nature and needs of this unique age.

## Understanding Young Adolescents

Young adolescents (age 10-14) are a bit like Goldilocks, trying to find what's "just right" for themselves at an age when they are "too old" for this and "too young" for that. They are too old for Kool-Aid and too young for coffee, too old for daycare and too young for dating. Our

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challenge as church is to find the “just right” strategies that will assure young adolescents are connected, cared about, contributing members of our church before they enter their high school years. Church and faith need to be integral to their life before they get a driver’s license, a job and a dating life.

## Ministry Inside-out

When I ask the average group of adults what first comes to mind when they hear “middle schooler” I often hear the following words: trouble, moody, loud, energetic, messy, out-of-control, disrespectful. But when I ask them to recall their own experience of being twelve or thirteen years old their descriptors are typically: awkward, confusing, wanting to fit in, lonely, unsure, frustrating. The first list typically describes what we observe from the outside, but the second list describes the thoughts and feelings found occurring within. This captures one of the dilemmas of this age: external appearance and behavior do not necessarily reflect the internal reality! To effectively minister to young adolescents we need to minister inside-out. Our starting point is to understand the nature of this age, what’s going on within them—and then help them understand and navigate the rollercoaster experience of adolescence on which they have embarked.

## Years of Change in Changing Times

The early adolescent years are a unique time in a person’s lifespan. They are the bridging years between childhood and adulthood; a time of constant change and crucial identity formation. At one point we were all that age, however we were never *their* age. We all went through adolescence, but not in the world in which young adolescents live today. Today’s world is changing at an unprecedented rate, particularly in terms of information and technology. The latest digital device becomes “obsolete” nearly as quickly as a new car depreciates the moment it is driven off the

dealer’s lot. And yet in this constantly changing world one thing that remains relatively unchanged is the process of human development. Although the onset of puberty is occurring at an earlier age today and we are gaining new scientific insights into human development, the process of human development itself has remained relative the same as described by Erik Erickson in the 1950s. In other words the external environment and influences of today are significantly different compared to past generations, but the internal process of human development is the same.

The “theory of two’s and three’s” suggests humans deal with similar developmental issues at the ages of two and three, twelve and thirteen, and twenty-two and twenty-three. The primary issues involve **autonomy** and **belonging**. There is a tension between the need to be independent and self-sufficient (autonomy), while at the same time needing to matter and know someone cares (belonging). Consider a toddler who exerts her independence by releasing her grip on mom’s hand while announcing “I can do it myself” and then dashes down the grocery store aisle—only to turn around and be assured that mom is still nearby and watching him.

Fast-forward ten years and you may find a young adolescent who views “public shows of affection” from his parents as something to avoid at all costs, especially in front of his peers, yet he still relishes a loving hug goodnight in the privacy of his home. Another ten years and you may find the young adult who has moved out of the house and across town to live on his own, but frequently stops back home for use of the laundry and to take his rightful place at the family dinner table. (However, in many cases today young adults are moving back home due to more serious economic reasons.)

Balancing autonomy and belonging has particular importance and impact during the young adolescent years. These years, generally ages 10-14, are some of the most fascinating,

fun, frustrating and significant years of human development. Adolescence is a time of critical identity formation, exploring the questions of Who am I? What can I be? Where do I belong? How can I make a difference? These years can set the trajectory of life for a young person.

One word describes these years: **change**. Outside of infancy, humans grow most rapidly during the early years of adolescence. This explosion of growth involves all aspects of development: physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Therefore our approach to faith formation needs to be *holistic*, recognizing that spiritual growth happens within the context of all other aspects of development. The rate of growth varies between different aspects of development within one individual: there may be rapid physical growth and slower intellectual growth (stereotype: jock), or rapid intellectual growth and slower social development (stereotype: nerd).

Each young person develops at his or her own rate and manner resulting in a tremendous level of diversity within a group of young adolescents, more so than any other age group. There can be as much as a four year developmental difference among a group of seventh graders, at times some may function more like fifth graders and others more like ninth graders. Typically we would not plan programs that include elementary (5<sup>th</sup> grade) and high school (9<sup>th</sup> grade) participants as peers, but that is often the developmental dynamic when working with young adolescents. And the nature and rate of development is not predictable. In fact the one thing that is predictable about young adolescents is that they will change next week! Some adults find this fascinating and fun, while others find it a source of frustration.

One thing is certain, working with young adolescents will never be boring! The important thing is that adults remember that young people have no choice and no control over the process—adolescence is something

that happens to them. When adults comment that the middle school youth are so “out-of-control” I affirm them in their astute observation, and remind them that it is due to God’s design of human nature, not the conscious choice of the youth! Our role is to accept, affirm, encourage, support and guide young adolescents as they discover and develop into the persons God created them to be.

## What is Important to Remember When Working with Young Adolescents

### 1. Lacking Judgment: Developmental “Brain Freeze”

Have you ever asked “*What were you thinking?*” only to hear the young adolescent respond “*I don’t know.*” In fact, their response may be surprisingly accurate. Or have you ever heard someone say to a young person “*If you want to be treated like an adult, then act like one.*”? This statement is not only absurd in its logic, but sadly reflective of our times. Young adolescents are not adults, nor should we expect them to act like adults. In fact, they are literally incapable of functioning as adults—yet!

Brain research has shown that the pre-frontal cortex of the brain is under major construction during adolescent years, and into young adulthood. The pre-frontal cortex (PFC) functions as the “CEO” of the brain—the center for decision making, planning, impulse control, and weighing options and consequences. Just when adolescents need it most, the PFC’s ability to act rationally and think through problems and challenges breaks down.

Even though the adolescent PFC is much closer to being mature, it is no match for the overwhelming hormone-driven impulses during these years. As David Walsh describes

it, during adolescence “the brain gets the gas before the brakes.” It is normal for adolescents to act without thinking of the consequences, to react impulsively, and to display raw emotions and mood swings. For boys impulsive behavior can be aggressive and angry. For girls it can show up as amplification of a wide range of emotions. At times this can produce adolescent “drama” deserving of an Oscar statue!

Although they clearly lack the judgment capacity needed for adult responsibilities, adolescents will often mimic what they perceive to be “adult” behavior (perhaps expecting to be treated as adults in the process). Imitation may be considered a high form of praise, but it also can reveal some painful truths and traits. In today’s technology, internet, and media driven world young adolescents are exposed to adult-like issues and situations rarely faced by previous generations. In some ways, young adolescents are the “mirrors” of our society. When we are surprised or outraged at their actions it might serve well to consider where they have seen the behavior modeled in the world around them.

During early adolescence congregations need to create a “safety net” for young adolescents and their parents as they navigate these formative years of new-found autonomy and vulnerability. We need to provide positive role models for young adolescents; adults who strive to live healthy and holy lives that reflect gospel values. Not perfect people, but authentic people of faith willing to be companions on the journey with youth. Adults who will set healthy boundaries and patiently guide young adolescents in their choices as their brains are growing toward maturity.

## **2. Concrete Thinkers: Cornerstone to Learning**

Young adolescents are just beginning to develop abstract cognitive abilities; for the most part they are still concrete thinkers. For

something to be understandable, it needs to be tangible – which means they need to experience it through their senses. When the content of a learning experience is beyond an adolescent’s capacity to comprehend, the result is frustration for everyone involved. Sometimes when young adolescents demonstrate disruptive or distractive behavior it is simply because they do not understand the abstract concepts being presented. Given the choice of being perceived by peers as either “stupid” or “bad” many will opt for the latter to save face. When we make the message tangible and understandable we increase the odds that young adolescents will be attentive and engaged.

Taking abstract concepts of faith and values and translating them into concrete terms can be challenging, especially for adults who tend to naturally think in an abstract fashion. An effective strategy is to turn abstract concepts into concrete sentence starters. Here’s an example. When it comes to adolescents the issue of “respect” is a high concern for adults. However, respect, like all values, is an abstract concept. To simply ask young adolescents to be respectful of others will not necessarily produce the outcome you intend. Framing it as a sentence starter will help make it tangible for them: “You know you are being respectful when. . .” By completing this statement the abstract value of respect becomes a tangible list of attitudes and behaviors which young adolescents are more able to understand and practice. The same strategy can be used for all faith concepts: “You are being a forgiving person when. . .” or “You know you are being compassionate when. . .” In addition, incorporating analogies, symbols and stories into formation sessions will help young adolescents grasp concepts more readily.

### **3. Active Not Passive: Make it Real and Relevant**

Young adolescents don't want to be spectators, they want to participate. Think of a circus. When you take children to a circus they can sit fascinated by what they are watching. However, young adolescents would much rather get a chance to actually swing on the trapeze, ride the elephant or attempt to juggle the six objects at once! I suggest a 20/80 rule when organizing programs for young adolescents: 20 percent passive listening or observing and 80 percent actively participating. Active learning not only increases understanding, but also increases retention. Effective interactive learning allows participants to explore a faith topic, discover the message and connect it to life in a hands-on manner that makes it both real and relevant to them. Active learning engages the learner through dialogue, role plays, video, demonstrations, creative expression with art and music, real-time involvement or other participatory options.

This is the age to shift from "information" to "formation." To shift from the head (cognitive) toward the heart (affective) and hands (behavioral)! Our focus should be on helping them make sense of the information they have been receiving up to this point on their faith journey. To literally "bring faith to life" and help them make the connections between what we profess as our beliefs and how we practice those beliefs in daily life. Young adolescents don't want to "hear" more about faith, they want to "do" what people of faith do and with the people who are doing it!

### **4. Social Beings: Spirituality of Relationship**

Friends are a high priority with young adolescents; making, meeting and maintaining friends is a major focus in any setting. Their affinity for relationships shapes their spirituality as well. Providing avenues

for social interaction with peers and addressing relational issues is integral to effective faith formation. God created us as relational beings. As young adolescents become conscious of their capacity for relationships, it is an opportune time for us to encourage them in establishing and/or deepening their relationship with Jesus as their ultimate friend. This involves both a cognitive understanding and a relational experience. During adolescence, the relational aspect of spirituality is most impactful. As is often said, adolescents don't want to know about Jesus, they want to know Jesus. We can explore with them what Jesus taught about being in relationships: Gospel values of human dignity, inclusion, compassion, forgiveness and what it means to truly "love one another" as God loves us.

These years are also a prime time to emphasize what it means to belong to a faith community and explore the purpose and value of congregational life. We cannot expect them to be "the future of the church" if we don't engage them as valued young members of church today. What they experience as young adolescents shapes lifelong habits: being involved in the congregation today can become a pattern for adulthood.

Tending to the healthy social development of young adolescents takes on even greater significance in today's world of social networking and cyber bullying. Young adolescents do not understand the concept of "public and permanent" in the digital world. In many cases they are exposed to information and situations not appropriate for their age, and without the awareness or supervision of their parents. This is an issue church ought to address with both youth and parents through intergenerational efforts.

### **5. Gifted and Growing: Engage Their Strengths**

Young adolescents bring with them many gifts that are inherent to being young adolescents—those things that come into the

room with them simply because of their age. Their natural gifts include: energy, enthusiasm, curiosity, creativity, idealism, desire to learn, humor and unedited honesty. I once heard it said that sometimes a behavioral “problem” can simply be a gift over-used or out-of-control. That can be the case with young adolescents as well. When “over used” or “out-of-control” their energy can become an undisciplined distraction, their curiosity an annoying fixation (the never-ending question of “why?”), and their creativity unwanted graffiti! But the gifts themselves are priceless and invaluable to the mission of church.

Our challenge is to channel their natural gifts into an exploration and expression of faith. We need to involve them in the mission and ministries of congregational life, for where they are so will be their gifts from God! We may believe that young adolescents need the church, but more importantly we need to acknowledge that the church needs the gifts and presence of young adolescents. Consider where your church’s ministries can use some enthusiasm, creativity and humor—then find a way to involve the young adolescents.

### Young Adolescents Want & Need

1. To be respected and accepted for who they are at this stage of life.
2. To be involved and active (physically, mentally and socially).
3. To know the expectations and guidelines in a clear, concise and concrete manner.
4. To understand the “why” of matters: they are curious beings, often questioning and yet still struggling to comprehend abstract concepts.
5. To be challenged to grow and stretch their abilities, with the guidance and support of caring adults.
6. To matter to someone and know they matter; to feel connected and cared about—relationships are a priority.
7. To be acknowledged and valued for who they are as well as what they do.

8. To contribute in positive ways and given opportunities to share their gifts and make a difference for good.
9. To be affirmed and appreciated in their attempts, successes and even failures.
10. To express themselves through ideas, opinions, preferences, doubts, and dreams.

## The Importance of Family Partnerships

Recent research on adolescents and religion concluded that parents are still the primary influencers in the lives of youth, and often serve as the predictors of adolescent faith practices.<sup>2</sup> During the early adolescent years, the role of parents is magnified by the sheer fact that young adolescents are highly dependent on their parents even though they are striving for independence. We no longer live in a society where young adolescents can ride their bike to a nearby park and play with friends until it’s time to eat or sleep. As a result, much of their time involves organized activities, supervised recreation and scheduled social time. Young adolescents cannot participate in all these activities without parental approval. And since they are not old enough to have a driver’s license or job, they need parents to provide transportation and necessary finances. It’s no wonder the early adolescent years can stretch and stress family life. Parents today face many challenges in their role as “provider,” often with a limited network of support.

Congregations need to partner with parents: encouraging their faith growth as adults, helping them embrace their role as primary catechists to their children, and providing resources to support them in their parenting responsibilities. One strategy is for the church to become a clearinghouse for information, resources and programs that can assist parents with young adolescents. One resource is the Search Institute whose mission is to provide breakthrough knowledge and

innovative resources to advance the health of children, youth, families, and communities.<sup>3</sup> Search Institute has identified “assets” for youth and for families that will promote positive development and healthy living. The online resources are designed to assist both churches and families alike: [search-institute.org](http://search-institute.org). ParentFurther, the Search Institute website dedicated to parenting, can be found at [ParentFurther.com](http://ParentFurther.com). Another great resource, Vibrant Faith @Home, offers a variety of articles and practical strategies and tips for families: [vibrantfaithathome.org](http://vibrantfaithathome.org).

### Create Parent Connectors

Maximize the opportunities when parents are already in contact with the church.

1. Since young adolescents need parents to transport them, create a “parking lot” ministry. Example: One church distributed a “packet” to parents as they dropped their child off for a retreat: it included a prayer for support, highlights of the retreat content, and suggested “conversation starters” for at-home follow-up to the day.
2. Offer parallel programs: if youth are gathering for a program, offer a parent session at the same time. Parents can gain from the time spent at church rather than driving back and forth. The session can be educational by design, or simply a parent-to-parent networking opportunity.
3. Include a brief parent-youth segment within a program: ask parents to participate in an opening activity before leaving, or to arrive fifteen minutes before the end of a program to join in a closing prayer service with their child.
4. Integrate parent sessions within the yearly program schedule: once a quarter designate a session as a “parent session” when youth stay home and parents attend; or a youth-parent session where both participate together.
5. Provide parent materials and family at-home resources (paper and/or digital):

overview of program content, parent-teen conversation starters, at home activity suggestions, online resources, etc.

6. Create parent networks that connect families with young adolescents for faith sharing, support, and shared parenting strategies

## Creating an Effective Ministry for Young Adolescents

As you assess current ministry efforts, consider revisions, and explore new opportunities, the following questions provide a helpful framework for a congregational conversation:

- *How do we view young adolescents?* How we view young adults influences how we value them: are they problems to solve or disciples to empower; are they trouble to avoid or treasures to unwrap.
- *How does our perspective regarding young adolescents align with their reality?* Just as Jesus did in his ministry, we need to meet them where they are at and address their needs and concerns before challenging them to grow in discipleship.
- *What are our hopes for them?* As Stephen Covey suggests “begin with the end in mind.” We should know what we want for them and why; and the young adolescents and their parents ought to know as well.
- *What do we expect of them?* Young adolescents are eager to meet our expectations, if they are reasonable, understandable, and attainable based on their developmental traits.
- *What can we learn from them?* The Holy Spirit speaks volumes to us through the questions, concerns, insights and unedited honesty of

young adolescents: Where do we hear their voices? How well do we listen?

- *How might they contribute to our church's mission?* Young adolescents will be drawn toward places where they can be actively involved; they want to make a difference for good, how might they do that with us.
- *What do they bring to our congregational life?* God has given young adolescents some specific charisms, if you want to renew your church simply unleash the natural gifts of young adolescents into every aspect of your congregation's life!

## A Framework for Purpose-Driven Ministry

Ministry is driven by the mission of Jesus and the Church, and ministry responds to the needs of those being ministered to. The "possibilities" for ministry are endless and can be overwhelming. There is no "one right way" to develop ministry with young adolescents, but it helps to know these three things: why choices are made, the outcome intended, and how it will be achieved. Here is a "formula" to help clarify the what, why and how:

*"Because. . . Our congregation needs to. . . So that. . . By. . ."*

- *"Because. . ."* identifies the current needs, issues, concerns, or interests that form the real life situation of young adolescents and their families; and/or identifies the biblical or congregational mission being addressed.
- *"Our congregation needs to. . ."* describes strategies that could respond to the current reality in a manner that supports, engages, equips and/or challenges youth and families in their faith growth.

- *"So that. . ."* defines the outcome or objective that is intended—what we hope youth and/or families gain from their experience.
- *"By. . ."* identifies the specific ways the strategies might be implemented. There may be multiple ways a particular strategy is developed within the congregation both through its programs and its members.

Here's an example:

**Because** *families with adolescents are often stressed, stretched and scattered*  
**Our congregation needs to** *strive to reduce stress and increase support for families; and become a companion on their journey*

**So that** *parents and youth experience the Christian faith as life-giving and integral to family life, not in competition with life*

**By** *offering intergenerational activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships; providing parents information on understanding adolescent development and resources for parenting teens; providing resources for at-home faith activities including online options; creating support networks of families with teens; offering multiple program scheduling options to meet diverse family schedules.*

## Developing Viable Programs: A Formula for Success

**First**, we need to recognize "one-size-fits-all" is a myth! It doesn't work with clothes, airplane seats, and especially, not with young adolescents. There is no perfect program or perfect time that will attract all the young adolescents of our congregation, and yet any program at any time will attract some, if we meet three simple criteria. Here is a "formula" for determining if a program is viable:



**interested youth**  
+  
**caring adult leadership**  
+  
**resources needed**  
*equals*  
**program**

As we apply the formula we need to address three important questions:

1. *How will we know what will capture the interests and desires of the young adolescents?*
2. *Which adults are best suited to understand and enjoy working with this age?*
3. *What resources are best suited to our needs?*

Clarifying the answers to these questions will assure that programs provide a positive experience for all involved. If one element of the formula is lacking, the effectiveness of the program will be in jeopardy.

It is a simple formula, but not necessarily easy to achieve. It changes the “numbers” game and challenges us to relinquish the “bigger is better” mindset. At the same time it frees us from the “too few to make it worth it” limitation. You may find you can increase your capacity to reach more youth with several small and diverse programs rather than striving to form one large youth group to satisfy everyone. If even four young people want to study the gospel of John, and you have two adults interested in leading them, then why not offer it as one option? Or if six youth want to help serve at the next church festival, why not find a place for them to do so? In fact, Jesus taught us ministry is grounded in faith and rooted in relationships. And our experience teaches us that personal relationships develop in small settings much better than with crowds at a sports arena. Jesus spoke to the masses, but he ministered directly through personal relationship. Even amidst the crowd it was the direct personal

contact that healed the hemorrhaging woman, and the personal invitation that changed the heart of Zacchaeus.

If you are a large congregation managing hundreds of youth, the formula still holds true: to be viable there needs to be adequate adults and resources for the youth involved – or you may need to limit attendance to match the committed leadership. And remember that being a large congregation does not mean all programs have to be large. Smaller groupings and individual apprenticeships have value in any size church.

## Technology and Ministry

In the 1990s “media literacy” became a topic of great interest, especially for those working with youth. The Center for Media Literacy became a leader in promoting and supporting media literacy education as a framework for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating and participating with media content.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis was clear: “media” itself was value-free, not “bad” nor “good,” but rather a vehicle to convey a message. The explosive growth of technology in the last decade has increased the saturation level of media in our lives, especially for young people. I believe the same is true of technology today—in itself it is simply a “tool,” how we choose to interact with it defines its value and determines its influence on shaping our values.

Here are four strategies to consider regarding technology and ministry with adolescents:

1. *Incorporate technology within ministry:* use technology to enhance the message of your ministry. Help youth and parents use technology as a resource for growing spiritually and living as disciples
2. *Use technology as one tool* to reach and evangelize young people in innovative ways. Become digital-friendly without

excluding those who are limited in technology resources.

3. *Empower youth and parents* to become conscious of the role technology plays in their lives (“technology-literate”) and how to manage technology as a tool for living rather than be defined or controlled by it. Address issues of personal privacy and healthy boundaries of disclosure. Be aware of the generational differences in understanding of and comfort with technology.
4. *Provide opportunities to disconnect* from technology, to experience God and others in face-to-face moments. Encourage a balance between “on-line” contacts and “in-person” encounters.

Technology is a tremendous asset in communication, education and connecting people around the world. However, the call to “be still and know that I am God” can provide a healthy balance. In my retreat work I often see young adolescents react in near panic when I ask them to turn off all digital devices and cell phones for the duration of the retreat. And yet as the retreat progresses and they become engaged in the experience of reflection and personal interaction the devices become unnecessary.

## A Voice, a Choice, and a Chance

In summary, young adolescent want a **voice**, a **choice**, and a **chance**. As they become more self-aware they need an outlet for self-expression, to speak their mind and know they are heard. As they grow in autonomy and discover personal preferences they want to make choices, not have them made for them. And as they discover their gifts, talents and passions they want to contribute and to know

they can make a difference. Congregations need to:

- provide ways for young adolescents to express their needs, opinions, ideas and concerns.
- provide a variety of appropriate choices and let the young adolescents and families choose what best meets their interests and availability.
- provide opportunities for young adolescents to participate and contribute to the life of the congregation, to share the gifts God has given them and be affirmed in their value to the church.

Congregations need to respond with opportunities that give young adolescents their voice, their choice and their chance.

### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Why Do They Act That Way?—A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, David Walsh, Free Press, 2004.
- <sup>2</sup> The National Study of Youth and Religion (youthandreligion.org), *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> Search Institute, 615 First Avenue NE, Suite 125, Minneapolis, MN, 55413 ([www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org))
- <sup>4</sup> Center for Media Literacy, 22631 Pacific Coast Highway, #472, Malibu, CA 90265, ([www.medialit.com](http://www.medialit.com)).



# A Voice, A Choice, A Chance

## Mary Lee Becker

Young adolescents want and need. . .	Congregations need to provide. . .
<b>A Voice</b>	Ways for young adolescents to express their needs, opinions, ideas and concerns and know they were heard
<b>A Choice</b>	A variety of appropriate choices and let the young adolescents and families choose what best meets their interests, needs and availability
<b>A Chance</b>	Opportunities for young adolescents to actively participate and contribute to the life of the congregation, to share the gifts God has given them and be affirmed in their value to the church

### Suggestions

1. **Provide ways for young adults and families to express their needs, interests, and suggestions.**
  - Create surveys (digital and/or paper) and distribute through a variety of methods. Incorporate feedback strategies: assure participants are asked to comment on their experience of the overall ministry as well as specific programs and events.
  - Create “suggestion boxes” (physical and digital) that allow young adolescents to express their ideas and opinions. Example: One church asked the young adolescents to determine which charities would benefit from a church fundraiser. A team of young people were given the selection criteria and a list of possible organizations. After a designated time for research, the youth presented their recommendation and became co-sponsors for the fundraiser.
  
2. **Create “apprentice” roles in which young adolescents can assist adults and grow in both their understanding and experience of being an active member in the congregation.**
  - Provide a tangible way to “identify” them in their role: designated badge with title, special T-shirt, pin, etc. Some churches ask all their organizations and ministries to consider how young adolescents might be involved in their activities, and then create a special “youth time and talent” form that outlines the specific roles designated for young people. These forms are distributed to youth as part of the church’s volunteer involvement campaign. Examples: assistant ushers, greeters, teacher assistants, servers at congregational events, game organizer for younger children at church festivals, assistants at Vacation Bible School, choir members and musicians for worship services, youth volunteers in service activities, prayer partners and “pen pals” to the home-bound, chore assistance for elderly members, and child care providers for parent programs.
  
3. **Acknowledge their contributions.**
  - Use the church bulletin, website, emails, pulpit announcements, etc. to acknowledge the contributions of young adolescents when appropriate.
  - Organize a special appreciation event for youth volunteers (ice cream social, pizza party, taco bar, etc.). Invite parents to join the event for a closing segment at which organizational leaders and staff acknowledge and thank the young people for their contributions. It is a great way to also affirm parents in their effort to support the spiritual development of their adolescents. (If an adult “volunteer appreciation” event is organized, include adolescent volunteers if possible.)