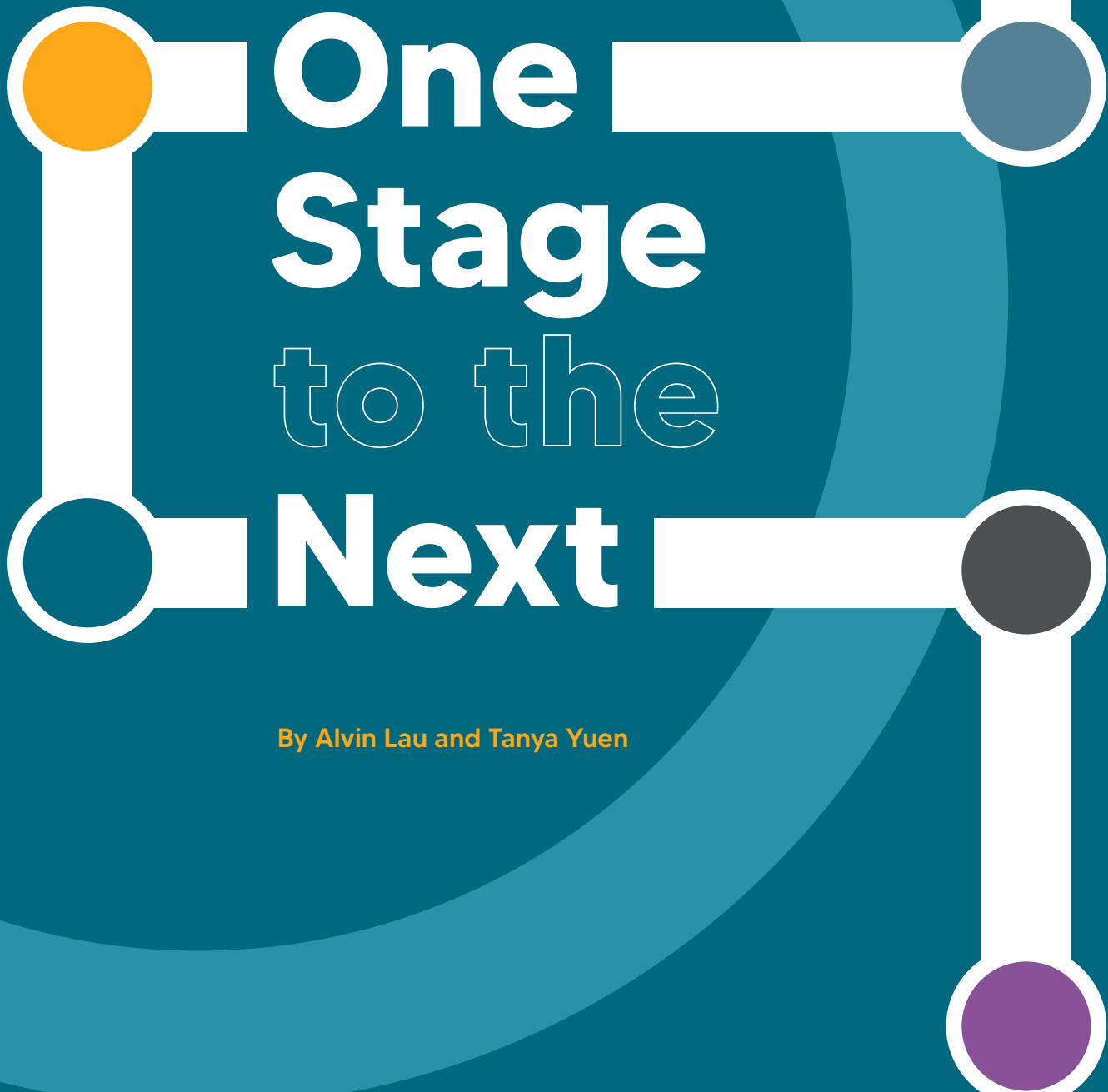




CANADIAN  
BAPTISTS  
of Ontario  
and Quebec



# One Stage to the Next

By Alvin Lau and Tanya Yuen

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# Executive Summary

For years, attendance at churches has been declining, especially among those under 30. Recent Canadian research projects such as *Hemorrhaging Faith* and *Renegotiating Faith*, show that children and youth “drop out” of church communities during transitions.

*One Stage to the Next* provides an overview of how those shifts from one stage of life to another can be done effectively as a church community to minimize the dropout rate through the identified roles of parents, mentors, ministry leaders and church leaders and understanding the interconnectedness and the responsibilities of each role. Together, these strategies provide a more comprehensive framework to developing faith in children and youth, which helps them feel more connected and more likely to stay.

- First, a holistic understanding of discipleship must be agreed upon as a church community. This definition is then managed by the church leadership in conjunction with all the other ministry leaders.
- Secondly, the concept of “sharing life,” its practical applications and its beneficial implications set a scalable and customizable approach as a key influence those shifts.

With that concept in mind and the four roles (parents, mentors, ministry leaders and church leaders) identified, the exploration of how these roles interact with one another is crucial. By understanding both the expectations of and from each role to one another, a church can better complement and integrate its overall influence in faith formation.

Taking all those building blocks, a church can formulate intentional ways to bridge children and youth from one stage to the next. Having the agreed-upon definition of discipleship as its consistent foundation for all ministries, children and youth ministries can appropriately move children and youth to their next phase and maintain a more consistent, cohesive development in faith.

The adage, “It takes a village to raise a child” applies to faith formation. All the influences within a church family must work together to provide the most fertile space for faith to develop in a child.

# Introduction

## Transitions: Revealing the Cracks Children and Youth Can Slip Through

James<sup>1</sup> was new in my (Alvin's) youth ministry. Invited by a friend, he had a lot of energy—some might say too much! Within a few months, James accepted Christ at a city-wide outreach event hosted by several local churches. I remember sitting with him as he made that decision. In the months to come, his faith seemed to explode. He shared with others the good news of Jesus and invited them to our youth group. He studied his Bible (although he wasn't known to be an “intellectually-minded” person). He prayed fervently. He made every attempt to incorporate faith in every walk of his life. His parents, who were not Christians, remarked on his change of attitude. There was definitely a transformation in his life.

After high school graduation, James went to Kingston, Ontario, for post-secondary studies. As I moved on from that church my connection to James faded. A few years later, I found out from some mutual friends that James was growing distant in his faith. The spark didn't seem to burn deeply anymore. He slowly drifted away from this church and, to my knowledge, from his faith. I've lost contact with James. Many of his youth group friends did as well. I don't know where he ended up. James fell through the cracks during a transition and became another statistic, like so many other young adults who have walked away from the church.

We all know of children and youth who have slipped through the cracks in life, particularly when there's a major shift in their lives (whether a life stage or other circumstance). While there are plenty of resources for helping with micro-transitions (like a commissioning service or a tool to bridge graduating high school students into post-secondary school), many churches do not know how to address this from a macro, comprehensive, or “big picture” level.

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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed for privacy purposes.

# Purpose

**The purpose of this resource is to highlight key elements that churches, including church leaders, parents, mentors, and ministry leaders, can use in supporting children and youth as they move from one life stage to another.**

We aim to catalyze the conversation surrounding the topic of how churches can invest in children and youth as they move through different life stages, both from developmental as well as programmatic perspectives. Through our combined ministry experiences at CBOQ's Next Generation department, the shared expertise of others who serve in children and youth ministries, and the research and trends that currently confront us, we have become convinced that it is necessary for churches to adapt their approaches when discipling the next generation.

Together, we will consider some “big picture” elements that church leadership needs to address, from “gatekeeping” the definition of discipleship as determined by the congregation to setting a structural foundation that moves their church forward together. We will approach transitions from a programmatic need as well as the necessary investment into individuals, which we call “Sharing Life.”

It is our hope that this would serve as a helpful resource for our family of churches as they consider their approaches to ministry and the discipleship of young people. While this document intended to offer both abstract and practical ideas, CBOQ Next Gen will continue to add more recommended resources and practical tips at [baptist.ca/nextgen](http://baptist.ca/nextgen) to better equip you for moving children and youth more effectively towards their next stage.”

**Notes:**

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Section **ONE:**

**A Response to the  
Hemorrhaging Faith  
Report**

**1**



In August 2012, James Penner and his associates released *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why & When Canadian Young Adults Are Leaving, Staying & Returning to the Church*, which was commissioned by The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable. Its purpose was to understand this demographic's engagement with the church in Canada.

In October 2018, Power to Change—Students, InterVarsity, Youth for Christ, Truth Matters Ministries and The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada released a follow-up report called *Renegotiating Faith: The Delay in Young Adult Identity Formation and What It Means for the Church in Canada*, detailing the transition from high school to the next stage in life for Canadians ages 18 to 28 who had a Christian religious affiliation as a teen and who attended religious services at least monthly at some point during their teen years.

Together, these reports highlighted some key findings, two which are the foci of this resource.

## 1. Children Leave the Church During Transitions

One of the key findings of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* report was that, as suspected, almost two-thirds of children raised in the church had minimal to no involvement in organized church by the time they reached adulthood. However, the report revealed that the majority of the departures happened not just after high school graduation but also in the earlier transition points. In fact, the greatest drop-off transition was between children's ministry and youth ministry. The research in *Hemorrhaging Faith* reveals that "we are losing more young people between childhood and adolescence than between adolescence and young adult years."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See *Hemorrhaging Faith* (110)

Based on the research, the following conclusions were made:

The transition years to middle school, junior high and high school are highly stressful—many churches don't expect and plan for supporting kids through these transitions.<sup>3</sup>

We lose young people when they “graduate” from the ministry group for one age to the next (and ministry transition points may also include times when youth and church leaders are in their own transition periods)—especially if they are tightly connected to a youth ministry that gives them little exposure to other members of the church community.<sup>4</sup>

Based on these findings, we recognize the need to identify key transition points and effectively move students through each stage, whether at a personal or corporate level.

## 2. The Impact of Early Adolescence

Some may find it surprising that the data reveals that early adolescence may be the most critical time on which to focus when it comes to nurturing an environment that fosters faith development well beyond the teenage years. Understanding this critical time of development is key to developing an effective transition strategy.

First, acknowledge that today there may be more overlapping developmental issues between children and youth ministry than in previous generations. Typically, a youth ministry begins at grade 6 or 7 (i.e., ages 11 to 12). However, because of early adolescence children's ministry may need to begin addressing issues that were typically seen as “youth ministry issues.” For example, sexuality was previously not discussed until high school youth ministry. Given the biological changes happening in some children<sup>5</sup>, some of those issues may need an appropriate, initial addressing in children's ministry. Therefore, both children and youth ministry must have a common understanding so their messaging is consistent. Much of this is based on holistic discipleship as defined by an individual church.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> *Hemorrhaging Faith* (113)

<sup>5</sup> The onset of puberty can now begin as early as age 8 ([www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/04/why-is-puberty-starting-younger-precocious](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/04/why-is-puberty-starting-younger-precocious)).

Secondly, the actual moving of students from children’s ministry to youth ministry is vital. As noted in *Hemorrhaging Faith*, many students “drop out” from church between these stages because there was an inefficient bridging between the two ministries. It is often an overlooked area of ministry because this age group is “too old” for children’s ministry but not yet ready for the youth ministry, at least not the way youth ministry is currently organized. It may also be a challenging stage for adult leaders, as young teens are often unpredictable in their behaviour. However, it is important that churches consider the ways they minister to the kids moving through this period. We will go more in depth in section 4.

## The Biggest Faith Influences in an Adolescent’s Life

The *Hemorrhaging Faith* study found four key drivers that influence lasting faith development and young adults staying connected to church.

Here is a summary:

### Parents

Parents are still strong influencers, whether positive or negative, in their children’s faith development. Many student respondents to the *Hemorrhaging Faith* study indicated the faith practice (beyond going to church and praying at mealtimes) and lifestyle their parents exemplified and modelled were key in their own spiritual development. Unfortunately, some ministries have seen parents as obstacles in their students’ faith lives. If we do believe that parents are the primary caregivers ordained by God to raise their children (whether or not they are Christian), our ministries need to work under that mandate and partner with parents. This doesn’t mean just keeping parents in the loop as to what we are doing, it involves parental care: supporting them as they raise their kids. At the same time, we also know some situations where parents are neglectful or absent. We will address this later (see Section 2 under “parents”).

### Experience of God in Unique Ways

There are moments when a person reflects and acknowledges the presence of God at a specific time in a specific place. These moments could be answers to prayer or perhaps they are specific events where the outcomes are attributed to God or the witnessing of God’s actions in a particular circumstance. These “God moments” help to anchor a person’s faith walk, especially in times of doubt. These examples of experiencing God in a unique way often come through experiences such as retreats, missions trips, and Christian camping experiences.

## Community

It's clear, both biblically and anecdotally, that people need one another. It's part of our social needs. However, this isn't just a community of similarly-aged peers. Intergenerational friendships are vital in both the practice and journey of faith. They allow for a broader understanding of how faith is lived and provide a unique support that's different from parental or same-age peer relationships. *Hemorrhaging Faith* found that being in mentoring relationships was a key driver to establishing and maintaining intergenerational relationships.

## Teaching and Beliefs

The accuracy of doctrine is of course important, but also important to development is the space to doubt and process information. God's truth can be difficult to comprehend at times. Students are looking for the space to process and wrestle with how God's truth intersects with their lives in meaningful ways without losing their belonging in their community. There is a distinction between teaching that empowers versus teaching that restricts. Empowering teaching is not the compromise of truth. Rather, it encourages students to explore God's truth more deeply, especially with controversial issues. Restrictive teaching essentially shuts the door to any discussion. It is usually seen as a "That's the way it is and that's it" approach. One question to ask yourself is whether the teaching actually embodies "truth in love." Is God's word being taught without compromise within a community that allows others to doubt, question and wrestle without risking condemnation? These spaces are vital in allowing for faith growth in an individual.

*Hemorrhaging Faith* gave us a snapshot of the issues we need to address. It also gave us hope in seeing that we can foster life-transforming, Spirit-driven opportunities for students to thrive.

**Notes:**

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Section **TWO:**

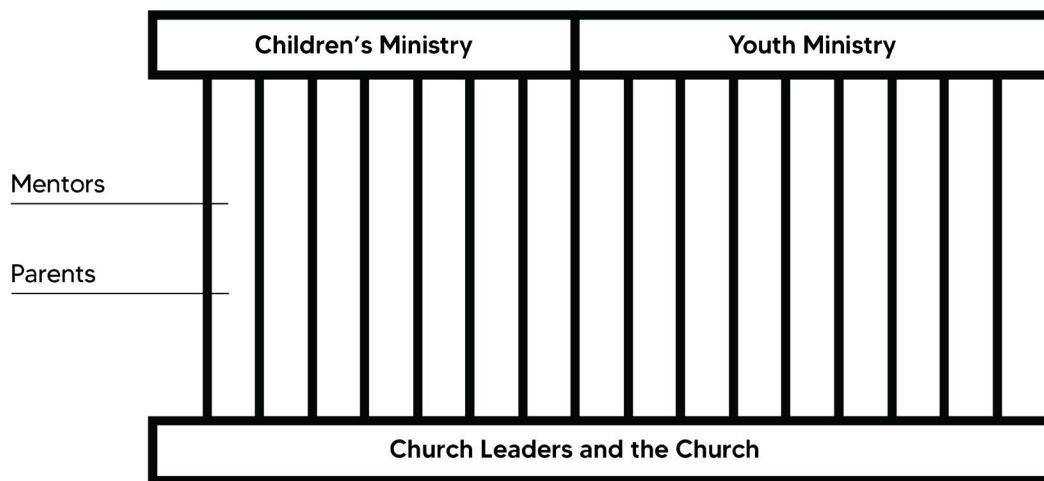
**Recognizing  
all the  
Players**



2

As we mentioned above the adage “it takes a village to raise a child” applies to a child’s Christian faith development. Ultimately, we recognize it is God who desires children to develop profound, life-changing faith in Jesus. No one person is responsible for the entire faith development of a child. After all, the Apostle Paul reminds us that God assigns various roles and responsibilities to different people<sup>6</sup>, recognizing that no one role can complete the discipleship process on its own.

In a church ministry context, we identified four key roles that complement one another in that faith development process<sup>7</sup>. In some ways, it’s like a pocket-coiled mattress. All individuals are connected into the base, which is the church governed by the church leaders. Each coil or individual is supported by the parent (hopefully) and a mentor. The various ministries the individual is part of are highly visible connection points.



In this section, we will clarify the influence of the key roles and how they are complemented by the other roles.

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Corinthians 3:5-9

<sup>7</sup> We recognize that faith development does not happen solely within the local church community. There are other parachurch organizations and agencies that have a role. For the purpose of this discussion, we will focus specifically on the local church community.

## 1. Parents

As noted in the previous section on the significance of parental influence (see “Parents” under the section “The Biggest Faith Influences in an Adolescent’s Life”), parents<sup>8</sup> play a key role in a child’s development, including faith development. From a sociological perspective, the majority of parents are the dominant influencers, especially for very young children. As a child grows older, influencers will come from a growing range of sources, including people, content and life circumstances.

In an ideal world, parents or guardians would be the catalysts in their children’s faith formation. They would begin teaching and passing on the stories of God to their children, training them in the ways of the Lord. In essence, they would be making disciples who happen to be their children.

However, even in an ideal world, parents are not the sole influence of our children. As children move into adolescence, they attempt to make sense of this faith that has been passed to them. To do so, children will question, wrestle, doubt and revisit their faith. This is what makes the community of God so essential in faith formation. Parents can draw on others to come alongside their children as voices of influence—not to be a mouthpiece of the parents, but to pass on the stories of God and be living examples of God’s love and truth. This isn’t to say parents can now shift the responsibility onto others, but rather they share the responsibility more broadly with others.

In our world today, we recognize that not all children have positive role modelling happening at home, specifically as regards a parent or parents who are modelling an active Christian faith. In some circumstances, parents may be neglectful or absent in this role. In these cases, it is even more imperative that churches come alongside the children and, if possible, also alongside the parents to see the whole family engage in this spiritual journey.

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<sup>8</sup> Our use of “parent” refers to any guardian or caregiver who has the primary responsibility for the raising of that child.



### What parents should look for in:

- **Church leaders:** As the overseers in the discipleship process for all its church members, church leaders can help parents understand how they and their children fit into the “big picture” of faith development. They help to provide the 10,000-foot look at ways the church can support families in discipleship, both individually and as a collective.
- **Sharing Life relationships:** These individuals provide voices of influence specific to their children. Parents can seek out key individuals to invite into their children’s lives. Just as important is parents having for themselves mentors and trusted older fellow believers to support them at each stage of their children’s lives.
- **Ministry leaders:** They provide shared opportunities to understand and stretch faith for all children and youth. Parents can look to ministry leaders such as a Sunday school teacher or a youth leader for key resources to help understand their children and ways to deepen their own parenting.

## 2. Church Leaders

In some churches, the only time the church leaders get involved in children or youth ministry is when there is a problem. Sometimes, they accept the ministry report at the annual meeting, discuss details like the number of participants and the budget items, and move on.

Church leaders, whether they be the senior pastor, elders, deacons or the board of directors, need to recognize their role as being responsible for the intentional and strategic disciple-making process in their church context. After all, Jesus' mandate to his church via his disciples is to go and make disciples. Even in a congregational model, while the congregation has the final say on major issues, the church leadership is entrusted with the day-to-day oversight of the church's operations. While the leaders may not be intimately involved in every church member's development, they are entrusted to understand and support the overall scope of the faith formation process and how people can grow closer to Jesus and his church at different stages in their journey. With that knowledge, church leaders can ensure appropriate resources and ministries are available (as far as possible) in their context to all members of the family.

As the above diagram suggests, church leaders are vital in both the establishment and the solidification of that foundation so that the church as a whole knows the direction of discipleship in their church's understanding of it.

### What church leaders should look for in:

- **Parents:** These people typically have lived the longest with their children. While they may not understand everything that is happening with their children or how to respond, they usually know them best. Ask parents for input in how they see their children are developing, and what kinds of supports the children and/or the parents need.
- **Sharing Life relationships:** If Sharing Life is an ethos an entire church embraces, church leaders should expect and equip ALL their Christ-following members to be engaged in a mentoring or Sharing Life relationship. While church leaders are not expected to coordinate those connections, they can hold congregants accountable and ensure they are provided with resources to connect with others.
- **Ministry leaders:** While church leaders oversee the overall framework for discipleship, ministry leaders give insights on how it can work best. Ministry leaders take ownership in how a particular ministry group (e.g., preschooler, primary, junior high, senior high) can effectively disciple children and youth in conjunction with the other ministry resources in churches.

### 3. One-to-One (Sharing Life) Relationships

One-on-one intergenerational relationships are a critical need for healthy faith development in children, especially for those in their adolescent years. Each Christ-following member of the church has a mandate to pass on the stories and teachings of God to the next generation.<sup>9</sup> While some may choose to influence as ministry leaders, all Christians have the responsibility to do so no matter what their ages. (We will discuss the concept of Sharing Life under Section 3.)

#### What Sharing Life friends should look for in:

- **Parents:** Parents can give day-to-day insights on what their children are experiencing and other factors that could impact these children's faith formation.
- **Church leaders:** Church leaders need to give clarity in the biblical mandate of discipleship and how they as individuals can contribute to it.
- **Ministry leaders:** Ministry leaders are usually the primary teachers of faith understanding and knowledge. By knowing what is being taught, the Sharing Life friends can help the students unpack the teachings and help make them applicable to the students.

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<sup>9</sup> See Psalm 78:1-4

## 4. Ministry Leaders

Ministry groups (e.g., children, youth, seniors) give a common-ground foundation for a particular age and stage. They establish the common metanarrative and vernacular of the group in age-appropriate terms. Usually, ministry leaders are specialists in that age group and have key insights into the culture of that age range.

The uniqueness of age-specific ministries is their opportunities toward outreach into the community. While a church would invite a whole family to participate together, most children and especially youth first-points-of-contact happen through their peers. The age-specific ministry is a bridge between the invited friends and the church community. As that individual becomes more established hopefully in their faith, they become grounded within the church community.

### What ministry leaders can look for in:

- **Parents:** Parents can give day-to-day insights on what their children are experiencing, and other factors that could impact the children's faith formation.
- **Church leaders:** Church leaders need to set the overall direction and understanding of discipleship.
- **Sharing Life relationships:** Sharing Life friends need to take the teaching done within the ministry group and help students apply it in their lives.

## **Bonus: Peer-to-Peer Relationships**

Peer-to-peer, age-similar friendships are unique from the other roles. As children get older, those friendships become stronger influences. Since the peers are on journeys of their own, they may not want or be able to grasp the overall faith formation process. Nonetheless, whether or not it is intended, peers play a key role in the faith development. By caring for people individually—taking time with each one—the church can help establish a more fertile space for faith growth as a peer group.

In many ways, the way these four roles engage with one another is a dance. There are intricacies and layers of engagement that cannot be expressed in a simple matrix. (We would need a 3D virtual model to show how all four roles dance together.) As a dance, each role has unique responsibilities and dependencies to operate in harmony to support a child or youth in their faith development.



Section **THREE:**

**The  
Underlying  
Foundation**



**3**

Before we can address transitions directly, we need to look at four key factors or influences that precipitate this discussion of discipling our children. These factors provide both the launching points and a framework of understanding of what it will take to facilitate effective transitions.

- A holistic definition of discipleship is foundational.
- Mentoring and Sharing Life relationships are key in this process.
- Parents are the primary faith influencers in their children's development.
- The church's role is to equip and encourage parents in raising their children while assisting in their children's faith development process.

## 1. Holistic Discipleship

Common understanding and vision are key when it comes to addressing transitions. Without these, every person and ministry splinter off into their own ideas and objectives. Having that common understanding gives everyone a defined starting point and the vision gives direction to everyone.

Common understanding and unified vision begin with a shared definition of discipleship. Discipleship is a word regularly used in our Christian lexicon, but it has ambiguous connotations.

- What is a disciple?
- What elements are core to the disciple-making process in children and youth?
- What are characteristics that young people demonstrate after coming through your next-generation ministries?

As a local church body, there must be consensus of what the discipleship process (or disciple-making experience) looks like. This is not just a one-sentence definition, but instead a clear, concrete understanding of where the disciple-making process takes a person. It must include markers that serve as signposts after each stage (e.g., at ages 5, 11, 13, 17, 20 and 25) to ensure intentional bridging through life stages. Some people define it through a discipleship matrix.

By having that high-level understanding, the various ministries more easily recognize their overall objectives and how their ministry's mandate achieves them. This unified, common vision enables the different ministries to know, at least to some extent, about the children's and youth ministries—the general needs, strengths and challenges students face and the kind of students they intend to send out into the next stage of life.

It is important to recognize that not everyone enters the discipleship process at the same time. Some people begin very early in their lives, many in their tween years. Others enter discipleship in high school, still others in adulthood. What this means is there is another dimension to the discipleship matrix. The matrix needs to include both spiritual development and life stages.

In this construct, a discipleship matrix does not become a linear progression, but as with almost all matters of faith, there is an ebb and flow that does not necessarily follow a sequential order. Therefore, there is a need for other “dimensions” in this matrix. The main point is having those common markers is critical to ensuring churches know the direction in which they are moving, both at the collective and individual levels. Without common markers, we are pulling people in fragmented directions that do not help disciples thrive in their faith development.

One challenge we have come across is that discipleship is seen as a program. North Point Church refers to this in their document *Practically Speaking*<sup>10</sup>. Their Practice #2 is “Think Steps, Not Programs,” which involves first understanding the end goal or objective then formulating the appropriate steps to reach it. In other words, it is not about creating a series of activities for a person to go through like an assembly line. Rather, given an individual’s unique faith journey, the “thinking steps” approach seeks to identify where God is leading that person and provide the appropriate tools and experiences that will help move that person forward well. When there are overlapping opportunities that God is moving a person towards, we can then synergize and cluster them into a “program.”

As a family of God, if we are to walk alongside others in building their faith, we need to have a clear idea of who God created us to be, and then move towards that end in a collective effort.

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<sup>10</sup> [insidenorthpoint.org/practically-speaking](https://insidenorthpoint.org/practically-speaking)



## 2. Sharing Life and Mentorship

Mentoring has become the buzzword in the discipleship of children and youth. It's the biblical model of discipleship that Jesus demonstrated, and Paul with Timothy exemplified. That is more than a buzzword! It has been shown to be one of the most effective and high-impact means for supporting students in their faith development because mentors are able to address very specific developmental needs (while ministry groups address chronological needs). Studies show that intergenerational relationships are vital and formative in faith development.

James Frazier, author of *Across the Generations*, says, "The best way to be formed in Christ is to sit among the elders, listen to their stories, break bread with them, and drink from the same cup, observing how the earlier generations of saints ran the race, fought the fight, and survived in grace."<sup>11</sup> However, it's not often we see children and youth relating deeply with adults from their communities, despite the research showing that young people desire to be mentored. Adults give several reasons for not mentoring:

- They do not have time to mentor on a high level every week.
- They are not sure what mentoring really is. (Many adults have never been mentored themselves.)
- They are uncomfortable being around youth. This usually translates into fear of conversing or relating to youth because some adults just "don't get them."

While it is true mentoring is part of a Christ-follower's biblical mandate (cf. Psalm 78:1-8), we can't expect people to just "do it" without first being equipped. It is important to note that investing in the next generation is not just for youth or children's ministry workers. This is something that every mature follower of Jesus is called to do.

Therefore, as the church, we need to invest in people and equip them for this calling. The Sharing Life model helps with the transition into mentoring, as jumping right into being a mentor might be tough for some. Sharing Life involves sharing life with one another, teaching and learning from one another, so think of it as an on-ramp to mentoring. While this may not fit the strictest definition of mentoring, Sharing Life is a way to build intergenerational relationships that foster trust.

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<sup>11</sup> See *Intergenerational Christian Formation* (17)

We'll use a six-degree scale to break down different aspects of this continuum. Think of them as degrees of involvement instead of a sequential progression. People can move between these degrees of involvement depending on their life circumstances.

### 1st Degree (1D)

Every relationship begins with some basic knowledge of the other person. What's their name? Parents' names? What grade? Which school? What interests? The key to this is consistency. Is that adult<sup>12</sup> regularly connecting with that student? This does not have to be a long conversation (maybe just a couple of minutes), but it does need to be consistent. It's proactively interacting with students each week—greeting them, seeing how they are, and finding out about their lives (e.g., “How was that math test last week?”). The crucial part of this level is following up. The key is reminding students they are noticed and are missed if they are not around. It is a way to demonstrate that they have a place in this community.<sup>13</sup>

### 2nd Degree (2D)

This is the deepening of the conversation from 1D. Whereas 1D's purpose was to connect for a brief time, now the adult extends the conversation. Consider this the 2+ level conversation. Here is an example:

- A: How was your math test last week?
- C: It was really hard.
- A: What did you find most difficult?
- C: I still have trouble with fractions.
- A: How much time did you spend studying?
- C: At least 3 hours.
- A: It sounds like you've put a lot of effort into this. I'm proud that you took that much time.

This degree maintains that consistency but delves deeper into students' lives. To engage the next generation is to enter their world rather than pulling them into yours.

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<sup>12</sup> While we use the term “adult” in this section, this person can be a youth Sharing Life with an elementary student. It refers to the older individual in that relationship.

<sup>13</sup> In CBOQ Youth's ministry cycle, the first step for most students is the recognition they need to experience a sense of belonging in a faith community before they identify with or embrace that of a personal faith ([cboqyouth.ca/about-us](http://cboqyouth.ca/about-us)).

### 3rd Degree (3D)

At this level, the adult is looking for ways to enter the student's world. This can include:

- Attending special occasions like a sports tournament or a recital (mentors may consider bringing along their families)
- Meeting at a coffee shop after class near their school.

It does not have to be frequent. However, entering their world gives a vantage point into other areas of the students' lives. It also broadens their familiarity with the mentors by seeing them in a context outside of the church building. (We've all had moments where we recognize a face but forget a name because we see someone in a completely different context.) Stepping into their world deepens the sense that adults are making time for them on their turf.

### 4th Degree (4D)

At this level, adults have gained trust so now they can begin to invite students into their world. In Doug Fields's book *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*, he uses the example of bringing them along to run errands. Perhaps an adult would like to invite the student's family over for dinner. Adults can even partner with a friend and invite both students and their families for a meal. 4D looks for opportunities for the student to see the adult living outside a church context.

### 5th Degree (5D)

One great way to share life is by serving together. Typically, this involves common interests and/or gifts. The key here isn't just ministering together but continuing those God-exploration conversations. It also provides ways to share common experiences where the mentor and student begin to see each other more as peers versus leader and student. For example, an adult may teach a student how to use the soundboard in the sanctuary. The adult intentionally goes beyond the "how-to" stage of operating the soundboard to helping the student unpack how this is a ministry. They can continue conversations like in 2D. The focus is not just the ministry itself, but another opportunity for the adult and student to learn and serve together with shared experiences.

### 6th Degree (6D)

Formal mentoring occurs at this stage. We define this as intentional, intensive, time-defined explorations of God's directives for that individual. Let's break this down:

- Intentional: Both the student and mentor understand the purpose of gathering.
- Intensive: They realize this may delve into appropriately "hard" moments as the student moves deeper into his or her own faith and exploration.
- Time-defined: Most mentors cannot commit to being "mentors for life." An understanding exists between the student and mentor on how long this context will last.
- Explorations of God's directives: Mentoring isn't about going through a curriculum or a set of learning objectives (although that may be part of it). The purpose is helping students hear and understand what God is saying to them. Mentors are to help facilitate and create space for God's directives to become as clear as possible.

The point of this is to intentionally focus and assist students in uncovering what God may be revealing, whether through Scripture, through everyday circumstances or through in-depth self-reflection. Bo Boshers' book called *The Be-With Factor* explains this process well.

These personal mentorship relationships are extremely influential and important, but mentorship is broader than these levels of engagement. Communal mentorship really takes the form of Sharing Life. Sharing Life is about a whole community engaging in holistic discipleship. It is not a program to implement; rather, it is a culture a church embraces, and the adults take ownership in doing their part. It is imperative to build those relationships with the support of the parents. This isn't to say the adult reports to the parent, but the adult builds the parent's trust as that individual walks alongside the child. Through it, the adult becomes another voice that child trusts. The mentor cares for the child, models a life following Jesus and is there for the child as he takes the next steps in his faith journey.

### 3. The Role of Parents: To Nurture the Faith of Their Children

Parents are the primary faith influencers in the lives of their children. In addition to resourcing children's and youth ministries, we strongly believe that churches must intentionally resource and support parents in their role as the primary faith influencers in their children's lives.<sup>14</sup> Parents need encouragement for the small and crucial steps along the way.

#### While Children Are 2 to 8 Years Old

While children are very young, it is important for parents to model and establish healthy rhythms of growth in their own walks of faith. This sets the tone for how they interact with their children about God, faith, discipleship and growth.

#### While Children Are 8 to 12 Years Old

During these tween years, parents are in the trenches of the biggest transition that children will go through: early adolescence. It can be a confusing time with all the hormonal, cognitive and spiritual changes their children experience. This is where the adage "it takes a village to raise a child" is most evident (as discussed in section two). Bringing other trusted adults into a student's life benefits both the child and the parent. It is vital for parents to build a network of supportive peers and trusted mentors to help navigate early adolescence.

#### While Children Are Adolescents and Into Adulthood

As kids begin to push the boundaries of their independence, parents want to appropriately prepare them for adulthood. This becomes the final stage before their children take their own societal-contributing, independently thinking, on-their-own life path (although it may take several years before it comes to fruition). This can be defined as "differentiation" i.e. the child is becoming distinct from their parents.

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<sup>14</sup> We recognize that families come in a variety of configurations and there are situations where a parent may be neglectful or absent in a child's life. For our purpose, "parent" will also refer to the legal guardian of that child.

In Section Two we discussed the different players in a child's faith formation. As a child gets older and starts puberty, this is a key time for parents to connect the child with another trusted adult. The default is to expect the children's ministry leader or youth leader to be that person. While those ministry leaders are a vital asset in a child's faith formation, the burden of every child's faith formation cannot be completely shifted to them. Rather, parents can "diversify" the voices of influence to include people who are not ministry leaders to be in those Sharing Life relationships. It becomes the parent's responsibility to help involve those key adults in their child's life.

As my (Alvin's) two children were close to the start of adolescence, my wife and I identified three adults per child who we believed would be key influencers. We invited them to become involved in our children's lives with the Sharing Life paradigm. These adults were keen on doing what they could to invest in our kids.

Recognize that these relationships will take on lives of their own. Parents cannot (or arguably should not) manipulate these relationships. Parents must trust that God will speak his truth through these adults and that their children will trust those other voices of influence. In time, a child's faith support network grows wider than what a parent can provide, which helps the child move forward into adulthood.

## 4. The Role of the Church: To Support Parents

Data collected by George Barna, a leading researcher in faith and culture, revealed the importance of churches empowering families to take the lead in the spiritual development of their children. He writes in his book *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions*:

“In situations where children become mature Christians, we usually found a symbiotic partnership between their parents and their church. The church encouraged parents to prioritize the spiritual development of their children and worked hard to equip them for that challenge. Parents, for their part, raised their children in the context of a faith-based community that provided security, belonging, spiritual and moral education and accountability. Neither the parents nor the church have done it alone.”

We also recognize that many parents do not have a church background that may have been common 1-2 generations ago. The role of the church is to provide that understanding of what discipleship is and empower parents to move forward in their God-given responsibility to raise their children.

It is important for churches to recognize that simply supplying good programs for children and youth is not enough. It is important that at each stage, churches connect with, equip, and support parents and caregivers with the encouragement and tools they need to navigate and guide the spiritual transitions children are moving through. Good communication and partnership with families is critical. This is something that can begin right from birth, for example as churches connect with families through planning child dedications. A church understands its role in a child’s life isn’t to take over the spiritual development process but to come alongside a parent in raising that child. While it’s true that “it takes a village to raise a child” not all those voices are equal. The primary responsibility lies with the parent.<sup>15</sup>

The church has a responsibility to both support the parent directly and to facilitate the common objectives many of them hold together (similar to the baptistic idea of “interdependence”). This is where church programs can be an integral part of a child’s discipleship, but they cannot be the sole source for discipleship.

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<sup>15</sup> This is true in an ideal setting. However, if the parent is absent or neglectful in that responsibility, the church needs to supplement the discipleship process for the child.

## Practical Ways for Churches to Support Parents

### Provide Parent Seminars

There are qualified experts who can provide a framework of understanding for parents as the culture and the developmental process affect their children. Feel free to contact the CBOQ Next Generation team for any recommendations.<sup>16</sup>

### Communicate About Transition Points

Transition periods from one stage to another can trigger just as much anxiety (sometimes more) for the parent as they do for the child. Church ministries need to be on the same page regarding what the upcoming transition will look like and discuss that with the parent(s). Section 4 will elaborate on this.

### Provide Parent Resources

There are different types of resources that churches may use to encourage parents at different points in their parenting journey. There are resources that will help them in the “big scope” of things; other resources may nourish parents at different seasons in the path. It is imperative for parents to tend to their own spirituality as they journey with their kids. Kids will look to them for cues. If a parent is deeply drawing from Christ and building strong and clear communication with his or her children, it will be smoother for children to experience Christ through the parents.

### Provide Parental Care

If we believe that parents have the primary God-given responsibility for raising their children, the church needs to affirm and support that premise in a God-honouring way. We can provide them with resources and cheer them on as champions in their own journeys of discipleship and their journeys alongside their children. We can also ensure that we don't leave them isolated, by having healthy and effective age and stage ministries and mobilizing the congregation to mentor those kids.

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<sup>16</sup> You can find CBOQ Next Gen at <https://baptist.ca/nextgen/>







4

Section **FOUR:**

**The Church and Children:  
Transitions They Travel  
Through Together**

## 1. The Church's Discipleship Approach and Structure

As explored earlier, in most cases parents/guardians have the primary responsibility to tend to the faith development of their children. It is the church's role to equip and mobilize parents in this endeavour and to provide the other players in that child's faith formation. We explored how the church can equip parents personally with resources and tools. In this section we will look at practical ways churches can support families by creating spaces for children to explore their faith through two parallel "tracks."

First, each individual's faith journey is unique. While no one template works for every person, we will discuss some common approaches that can be customized to individual faith development. Remember these are descriptive, not prescriptive approaches and guidelines. Within each child's personalized path, there are opportunities for leadership development and opportunities to share life (see "Sharing Life and Mentoring" in Section 2).

Second, we will explore transitions between ministry groups. Churches can create structured opportunities for children to explore their faith in different ways. While we won't look at the structural elements of programs themselves, we will explore the transitions between them. The focus of this section is what churches need to be aware of when considering structural elements in transitions with the understandings of each key age group.<sup>17</sup>

Before we tackle the "how" of church structure, we must establish our values and the approach we are taking to children in general. Children's ministry is not a form of babysitting. It is critical that churches intentionally invest in the spiritual development of children. A vital part of this investment is equipping parents to take the lead. While there are many different approaches to discipleship, the important thing is that churches affirm the presence and participation of children in our corporate bodies.

The next section will help you understand the different ages and stages of ministry, providing a framework to address the transitions between the stages.

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<sup>17</sup> See *ASAP: Ages, Stages, and Phases* by Patricia D. Fosarelli

## 2. Ages and Stages and the Transitions That Follow

It is our desire for churches to grow in their understanding of the characteristics and needs of children at different developmental stages. As we cultivate this understanding, and our understanding of age-specific discipleship, we can develop a deeper focus for each individual in those age groups. This section focuses on that customized, individual track. We will define characteristics of the stage, offer possible leadership development opportunities and reference the applicable Sharing Life degrees.

For our purposes, we will define the stages as preschoolers (2–4 years)<sup>18</sup>, elementary/grade-school children (4–10 years), middle school (10–13 years), high school (13–17 years) and young adulthood (18–25 years).

### Ages and Stages

#### a. Preschoolers: 2–4 Years

Preschoolers are beginning to get a sense of their capacities and a feel for what their bodies can do. They are gaining an awareness of their surroundings and experimenting with relationships between people and between objects. Association (such as understanding what labels represent) happens at the physical and spiritual level.

#### Leadership Development

Preschoolers are discovering their own autonomy. A key focus is taking responsibility for oneself, which gradually extends to responsibility for peers. Consistently giving preschoolers ownership of their actions and environment builds that self-responsibility. Leaders can facilitate this by encouraging preschoolers to help with the set-up of a lesson or ensuring they clean up their toys.

#### Sharing Life

A preschooler's language and level of thinking is generally very concrete, but always growing. Focusing on the 1st Degree solidifies a relationship. At this point, having leaders who are a consistent presence builds that trust and familiarity. Speak at the preschoolers' level and ask lots of questions about them. Some preschoolers may be ready for deeper conversations.

There are not always a lot of resources that acknowledge the relationship building that begins in the preschooler room. However, children's ministry voices really affirm that the seeds of relationship are nurtured at this age. Emphases such as the importance of eye contact with little ones, using physical touch (appropriately) to build connections, referring to them by name and joining them in play are the building blocks of a safe and secure relationship that has the capacity to continue growing over time.

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<sup>18</sup> The nursery stage, while distinct as a ministry setting, is not included because the Sharing Life and leadership development opportunities are very similar to the preschooler stage.

## **b. Elementary Children: 4-10 years**

We define childhood from ages 4 to 10 or 11 (i.e., from kindergarten to the end of middle school, which may be grade 5 or 6 depending on your school board). Developmentally, during this stage children are starting to make connections and correlations about the world they see. Language skills are reinforced. They are building key foundational blocks that will seem to be overturned when puberty hits. Some begin to phase into puberty with body changes, although cognitively they may still think and act “like a child.” Tangible understanding helps to solidify key truths.

### **Leadership Development**

Some kids exhibit leadership qualities as young as 6 years old. Although not all children are built to be the primary leader (i.e., the up-front person taking charge), all children need to lead to some degree. Look for opportunities to begin to stretch them outside their comfort zone. Peer leading can be a key component. Encouraging them to direct or coordinate a group of peers allows them to practice both giving and taking directions from one another. The scale of that directing depends on the child. For some, the next step is more logical (e.g., coordinating a group to move chairs from one location to another). Others can be given a bigger scope of responsibilities involving interpersonal supervision. For example, older children (i.e., 9+ years old) can also begin directing multi-aged groups and be responsible for them.

### **Sharing Life**

With deeper language development and a broadening of extracurricular activities at this stage, adults can stretch towards the 2nd and 3rd Degrees of Sharing Life. As kids grow older, they’re able to have lengthier conversations. Given recent studies on the effects of screen time and social cues<sup>19</sup>, having opportunities for deeper conversation effectively develops their social engagement skills.

Also, as kids become involved in extracurricular activities and don’t require as much parental supervision, the opportunities to step into their world increase. Maybe mentors will be able to attend soccer games or piano recitals. Even if they’re not able to commit regularly, mentors should identify one or two key events in the year and ask the parents if they’re allowed to attend. (They may choose to involve their own families as well.) For kids this age, the world is starting to grow broader and deeper. Let’s make sure we’re on that journey with them.

<sup>19</sup> See article from Newsweek: [bit.ly/1k9809](https://www.newsweek.com/1k9809)

### c. Middle School: 10-13 Years Old

With the onset of puberty, life for tweens will never be the same as it was before. They are beginning to test their independence, finding their own gifts and passions, and wrestling with who exactly they are outside of their parents' construct. With the earlier onset of adolescence, the sexualizing of preteens, and the pressure to be vocationally successful (many grade 8 students are taking aptitude and career assessments and choosing courses that have a bearing on their post-secondary career), the stability and belonging within a faith community is crucial. Spiritually, kids this age begin questioning the faith of their parents and deciding whether to internalize this faith.

In the same way, adolescents relate to each other differently<sup>20</sup>, they also relate to Jesus differently. We call these different languages or outlets spiritual disciplines. One child might relate to Jesus deeply through prayer, while another experiences God more vividly through worship or through service. All the disciplines are important for us as believers, but it is good for kids and youth to explore how they uniquely relate to God best.

#### Leadership Development

Many middle schoolers are becoming more adult-like and need their responsibility skills extended. This allows for the testing of their gifts and gives them opportunities to develop, question, reject, embrace, succeed and fail in the context of a loving community. Their scope can begin to extend beyond one-off leadership opportunities to a more time-invested role and responsibility. They can serve in a short-term ministry role such as being a junior leader in the Sunday school or a staff member at VBS. These intermediate "stepping stones" of opportunity can enable healthy transition into broader ministry and leadership contexts as they grow in maturity and experience.

#### Sharing Life

Tweens begin to seek some separation from their parents. They are gradually given more freedoms in what they can do and where they can go. It's also the time when they begin questioning life and faith. Having other adult connections beyond their parents and family is vital. Sharing Life can begin to extend up to 5D (*see page 27*). We must continue to intentionally enter their world, especially as their extracurricular activities broaden. Mentors can begin to include them in more areas of their lives. For example, a mentor could invite the tween's family for dinner, have the tween join in grocery shopping or serving needs in the community, or invite a few tweens over for an afternoon of baking. Ministering together creates natural spaces to share life.

<sup>20</sup> The premise of Gary Chapman's book *The 5 Love Languages* is people relay and receive love in different manners.

Because tweens start making a gradual separation from their parents, some parents may feel threatened by other adults who seem to be closer to their kids than they are. For this reason, it is valuable for those investing in tweens to connect with the parents regularly to understand where they believe God is leading this child. This isn't to say that mentors are just mouthpieces for the parents, but it affirms and respects the parents' role as the primary caregivers and the mentors' support. Sharing Life adults will not be keeping secrets from parents, but appropriately encouraging children to be forthcoming about certain issues. If possible, this role should not try to referee the parent-child relationship. There may be times when mentors feel inadequate while handling a situation. It's not their job to deal with those situations by themselves. Enlist the help of a pastor or another trusted, appropriately trained adult to address the situation.

#### **d. High School: 13-17 Years Old**

High school can be the most memorable and/or most tumultuous four years many young people experience. There are many factors that impact a teen's development, including life, physical, spiritual, psychological, relational and external influences. Erik Erikson, a renowned psychologist, refers to this part of life as "Identity vs. Confusion" (i.e., the individual seeks to find his identity, and if he is not able to by the end of the stage, he will carry confusion until it is resolved)<sup>21</sup>. While some of those identity questions have already begun with early adolescence, often they extend well into adulthood. Cognitively, they're stretching their abstract-thinking skills. Spiritually, their faith internalization continues, especially as they face more profound life issues and circumstances. From this stage into emerging adulthood, adolescents are trying to differentiate themselves from their parents to become their own person.

#### **Leadership Development**

During this stage, teens are testing their burgeoning adulthood. With the development of abstract thinking, they have the capacity to embrace more long-term roles. For some, this might be a role as a student leader shaping the youth ministry's direction. Many can take on significant responsibilities. There is still a safety net, as youth lead while receiving coaching and mentoring from caring Christian adults. These leadership opportunities are a step towards taking directorial responsibilities as adults.

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<sup>21</sup> See [www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html)

## Sharing Life

With the onslaught of developmental changes, adult friendships—especially with mentors—are crucial. These relationships provide space for teens to wrestle with life and faith questions as they internalize faith for themselves. These relationships become lifelines as teens sometimes feel like they're barely treading water. Teens have the capacity to engage in the 6th Degree of Sharing Life (i.e., mentoring defined as intentional, time-based exploration of God's directives for an individual). Even if teens are not in formal mentoring relationships, churches need to be aware of how their faith is shaping and provide space for them to work through the person and message of Jesus.

### e. Emerging Adulthood/Post-Secondary: 18-25 Years

Reaching the age of majority, these former kids will soon have all the rights and responsibilities of adults. Post-high school is a new chapter in life. For a variety of reasons (whether it's the individual, the parents or other influences), some people stagnate in adolescence<sup>22</sup>. This stage is the final shift before they become independent, contributing members of society (some perhaps faster than others).

## Leadership Development

Essentially, young adults can serve in any capacity just as older adults do if they have the qualifications that determine a person's viability in a role. Age is not a barrier because, as mentioned before, they are adults. Continue to find those next-step opportunities in their development. For example, if young adults are assisting in Sunday school, provide opportunities for them to teach a class. If they are already doing that, have someone apprentice under them or include them in higher levels of leadership such as a Christian Education committee. You may even consider sending young people into other ministry settings for learning opportunities, for example a student exchange program to another church. The learning benefits both the individual and their sending churches. (See [cboqyouth.ca/postsecondary](http://cboqyouth.ca/postsecondary) for a template of this arrangement.)

## Sharing Life

The effects of age-specific, corporate programs become less influential as a person gets older. The continuation of Sharing Life relationships is vital, even though students likely have less available schedules than they did before. The shift comes when that former teen becomes more of a peer than a mentee. But many of the Sharing Life principles remain, as people never stop shaping and reshaping their faith (until they meet Jesus one day). There may be higher highs and lower lows. It becomes that much more critical to continue these Sharing Life connections, even if the young adult has moved away from church.

<sup>22</sup> This trend has been thoroughly documented with both positive and negative consequences (e.g., in this NY Times opinion article: [nytimes.com/2014/09/21/opinion/sunday/the-case-for-delayed-adulthood.html](http://nytimes.com/2014/09/21/opinion/sunday/the-case-for-delayed-adulthood.html)).



### 3. Effectively Maximizing the Transitions Between Stages

Transitions are inevitable within systems and relationships. For many, transitions of any type can be stressful, but this stress need not cause the entire system to crack and splinter. The healthier the system, the less likely transitions will cause distress. In the church, there are things that can be done from a leadership level to develop stability and unity, so that when change does happen (no matter the type), it causes healthy growth, not brokenness.

While it is important that churches and leadership teams grow in their unity of vision and spirit for the overall body, there are also action steps that they can take to support child and youth transitions effectively. The following are five significant transitions that children and youth encounter in their development and ways that the church can engage them within their ever-changing reality.

### **a. The Preschooler to Elementary Transition**

The transition between the preschooler ministry and children's ministry can be a challenging one for young kids. It is important to note that while a church may set a certain age at which children move out of the preschool room, not all children will be ready at the same time, and it may take months to fully transition. It is important for leaders to work with parents closely during this transition. Often parents have an indication of how their children will respond to change (some parents are reluctant to let it happen). Give clear instruction to parents as to what they can expect of the church ministry program and what the church expects of them.

This can be a challenging transition because young children are often moving from an environment they are used to, perhaps since birth, to a new routine and structure. For some children this new environment can cause anxiety and stress. There are new leaders, a new room, a new schedule, and new expectations. Some children are ready for this, and others take a little longer to get used to it. Therefore, it is important for staff and volunteers to lead well through this transition. Some suggestions include:

- **Using Consistent Teaching Tools Across the Age Groups:** There are many curriculum tools that provide resources from infants into childhood. Using a familiar style and structure with children will help them adjust more quickly to new classrooms and leaders.
- **Orientation Sunday:** Kids, perhaps with their parents, are invited to the new room and are shown the new routine and structure and meet the new leaders.
- **Sharing Articles with Parents and Teachers:** Short, encouraging articles like can help reassure and encourage the adults involved in the transition.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** As kids are learning the new routine, it is important to use positive reinforcement. Affirm them often as they learn and follow the new expectations.
- **Presenting a Long-Term Plan:** It is important for parents and volunteers to decide where to take kids in their growth process over the long run.

Just like the transition from daycare or home-parenting to a more formal school structure, children need to gain confidence while entering this new chapter with affirmation from their parents, other adults, and the church. Helping to make this transition a smooth one sets a good precedent for other changes ahead.

## b. The Elementary to Early Adolescence Transition

The developmental transition into adolescence usually corresponds with a transition from learning environments at church: from children’s ministry to junior high ministry or at school from elementary school to middle school. This is a critical time in the lives of young people. It is important to develop a transition strategy for moving up children to junior high ministry.

### Functional Stepping Stones

There are also functional stepping stones for churches to consider as they explore the transition of children into adolescence. For some churches, this transition will mean starting up new ways of engaging kids as they develop. For instance, a smaller congregation that has not had structured experiences for youth may begin to see each youth get mentored. This can be an exciting season of birthing new ideas for the same group they have been working with all along. For other churches, the transition might have more to do with bridging between an established children’s class or small group and the junior high ministry.

We all have different transition needs in our congregations. However, we all need some stepping stones to keep kids moving along the path of discipleship. Here are a few examples from churches that have provided for elementary kids transitioning into junior high:

“In our church the children meet in the church basement and the junior highs meet outside in a portable. ‘Going to the portable’ is an exciting transition time for our kids but it can be intimidating. Usually in late spring we introduce grade 5 students to the portable environment by throwing a pizza party for them hosted by the junior high group. Then over the summer we have a few blended events where those graduating elementary kids can socialize with the older junior high students”

-Elaine, Youth Pastor

In Elaine’s case, the challenges with transitions are largely environmental. Kids are intimidated to have to go to an entirely different place that operates much differently than what they are used to. By exposing them to this new environment and these new faces bit by bit in their last six months of being a part of the children’s group, they can adapt more naturally.

“In our church we hadn’t had a youth group for a few years so when a cluster of elementary kids reached pre-adolescence, we didn’t want to lose momentum and see them walk away. We first celebrated the end of a season with this group and the parents threw them a graduation BBQ. Then in the fall we started with having a once-a-month ‘hang-out’ for the kids to bond together as peers. Up until this point, they usually had just seen each other in a classroom environment on Sunday morning. We knew that if we wanted them to solidify as a youth group, they would need space to relate to each other as friend.”

– Patty, parent of a “new” junior higher

In this example, the graduation BBQ at Patty’s church is a rite of passage for the growing children. Additional ideas for this approach may be to host a time in a worship service with a prayer of blessing or a small gift to the students moving into junior high. If you have a separate children’s worship time, have younger children involved in blessing the outgoing children as they move into junior high ministry.

“In our church we have ‘youth ambassadors’ who come and meet with the incoming students and share what junior high ministry is like, what happens. We also try to have our older students involved in children’s classes Sunday morning and our summer VBS each year. Our hope is that by the time a child has developed into an adolescent they are completely familiar with older faces because they have related to and interacted with older kids all the way along.”

– Brandon, Family Ministries Pastor

In Brandon’s example, there is an effort to create cross-generational relationships and connections between the children and youth. In this way, the hope is that kids will naturally continue progressing along the path of development in church and don’t walk away out of intimidation from having to join an older group of strange faces. Whatever your church’s circumstances are when it comes to the elementary to early adolescence transition, there are a few practicalities to keep in mind.

First, remember to include everyone in the transition process: children, children’s ministry leaders, youth leaders, and parents. Have a plan for good communication and connection. Partner with parents by sending letters or emails that explain the coming transition. Include a note from the new leaders. Host an activity or theme night to explain the transition. In some cases, you may want to meet individually with parents to discuss their children specifically. Ensure parents are aware of the changes and expectations of them and their children. Clear communication with parents is essential.

Second, friendship remains an anchor for adolescents as they are experiencing so much change. It is important to recognize that, developmentally, children in this transition stage can be experiencing a challenging time with so many physical, emotional and social changes. Their friends are very important, so it is crucial to connect kids and facilitate relationship building. With so many things in their world changing, it is helpful to create a sense of security and familiarity as much as possible amid the program changes.

Finally, remember that post-transition is just as important as transition. Ensure there is follow-up with the children that have moved into junior high ministry. Encourage former leaders from the children's ministry to check in with the newly transitioned kids. Ensure their new leaders intentionally invest in—and connect with—the new students to the junior high ministry.

Some key stepping stones to ensure an effective transition include:

- Have an attendance database to use as a reference for who is transitioning.
- Invite junior high workers to participate in the children's ministry, especially with the graduating class.
- Have some leaders move with the graduating class (like a cohort).
- Host a commissioning service where the graduating students are acknowledged in the Sunday service as they move into the youth ministry.
- Encourage some older junior high youth to “buddy up” with incoming junior high students.
- Have a weekend retreat that includes some of your key junior high student leaders, adult leaders and all the incoming junior high students.
- Host the children's ministry graduating class at a junior high meeting before they move on from the children's ministry.

### c. The Early Adolescence to Adolescence Transition

In many ways, this transition is like the previous transition. Much like the transition from elementary to early adolescence, the success of this transition depends on the stepping stones put in place. Likely the change from junior high ministry to senior high ministry is not as challenging a transition as the one out of children's ministry. These young teens are continuing to develop and grow in new ways in their thinking. Friends continue to be the more important influence in their lives. Identity formation and independence are shaping their thinking.

Some stepping stone ideas for this transition could be:

- In late June, hold a youth event to welcome the incoming students.
- Involve older teens in planning and welcoming.
- Involve older teens as “youth ambassadors” who intentionally get to know and mentor new students who will be joining the group.
- Invite incoming students to join in the summer youth ministry activities, which can become part of the transition time.
- Mark the transition with a rite of passage in a worship service, during which you recognize this move of young teens towards adulthood throughout the senior high years.
- Host a social event for both the junior high and senior high students
- Have a Sunday School class that overlaps between junior and senior high.
- Have some of the youth leaders “move on” with a group of students (like a cohort).
- Provide an overview of the transition to parents with follow-up questions they can use with their children.
- Host a “holy ground moment” event for students to debrief on their first few months in this new chapter ([stickyfaith.org/blog/holy-ground-moments](https://stickyfaith.org/blog/holy-ground-moments)).

There are lots of ways these ideas could be tweaked and personalized.

Simply put, remember to celebrate the small steps that kids have taken to get to this point. The steps forward can vary, but consistency of approach and relationships are key factors.

#### d. The Adolescence to Adulthood Transition

As young people transition from high school to young adulthood it is important to recognize this as a new chapter in their lives, whether they will be leaving home and going on to post-secondary studies, staying home and working, or doing a fifth year of high school. Churches can signify this new change through a rite of passage, such as a recognition and celebration of high school graduation, as an important way to mark this transition.

Some stepping stones as they prepare for post-secondary life could include:

- Arrange a “senior summer” where recent grads can help the upcoming grads prepare ([stickyfaith.org/blog/how-do-you-prepare-seniors-for-college1](http://stickyfaith.org/blog/how-do-you-prepare-seniors-for-college1))
- Give a small gift from the church and a prayer of blessing.
- Plan a time of commissioning when the church community recognizes this move by praying and blessing the students who will be moving on.
- For students moving away from home, assist them in connecting with communities of faith in the new cities they will be moving to—this is a great way to continue to invest in these young adults. Remember, the *Renegotiating Faith Report* reminds us that if the sending church connects the grad to a new faith community, they are FOUR TIMES more likely to remain with that new group.
- Help them create an “emergency plan” for responding to crisis situations, especially when they are on their own.
- Provide a “College Transition Package” for their first week away.
- For those staying home, facilitate connections, perhaps with other adults in the workforce, who can offer wisdom and guidance. Connections could also be made with other local churches or ministries for a short period of time, to help young adults gain a different perspective and experience.
- Have a young adult exchange with another church to help mark a new chapter, as they will be experiencing a new church context (similar to their peers going to school out of town). This is not a “send them away from your church” moment but rather an opportunity to extend their faith experiences while maintaining a relational connection through those Sharing Life with them.
- Connect them to a gap year program or use a gap year template to further strengthen their foundation towards adulting. ([cboqyouth.ca/gapyear](http://cboqyouth.ca/gapyear))

### e. Children and Youth with Exceptionalities

There is an increase in students who have an exceptionality designation (from physical exceptionalities to neurological ones like autism or ADHD). Transitions for these individuals become that much more individualized because no two children, especially those with exceptionalities, will transition exactly the same. Many churches do not have the resources to address all exceptionalities adequately<sup>23</sup>. However, churches can assist with some key steps in the transition of these individuals, complementing the previous guidelines:

Some stepping stone ideas for this transition could be:

- It is vital to gain understanding of the exceptionality from the parents. Those who are supporting their children will have the best knowledge of how to engage them and in what manner (especially if they have had the diagnosis for a long time). Adaptation and accommodation are key factors in working with parents to identify the most appropriate transition methods.
- Utilize community resources. While not all agencies may have the capacity to assist you as a ministry leader, they may have guidelines to supplement the process. Some agencies may be able to provide training for your ministry staff and volunteers in this area.
- Seek potential financial funding from other agencies. Most churches do not have the expertise to manage exceptionalities. Some individuals have access to respite funding. If you are looking to extend your ministry group uniquely to those with exceptionalities, there may be grants available through community agencies and possibly through CBOQ grants.

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<sup>23</sup> This document will not be able to engage fully with the topic of special needs supports. One recommended resource is Stephen Bedard's book *How to Make Your Church Autism-Friendly* ([amzn.to/1Cxqve](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B071C9XQVE)).



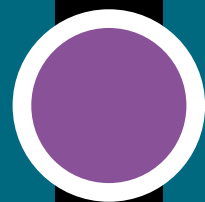
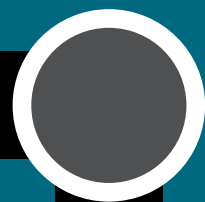
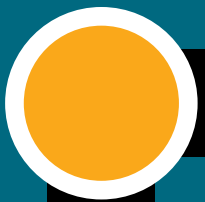




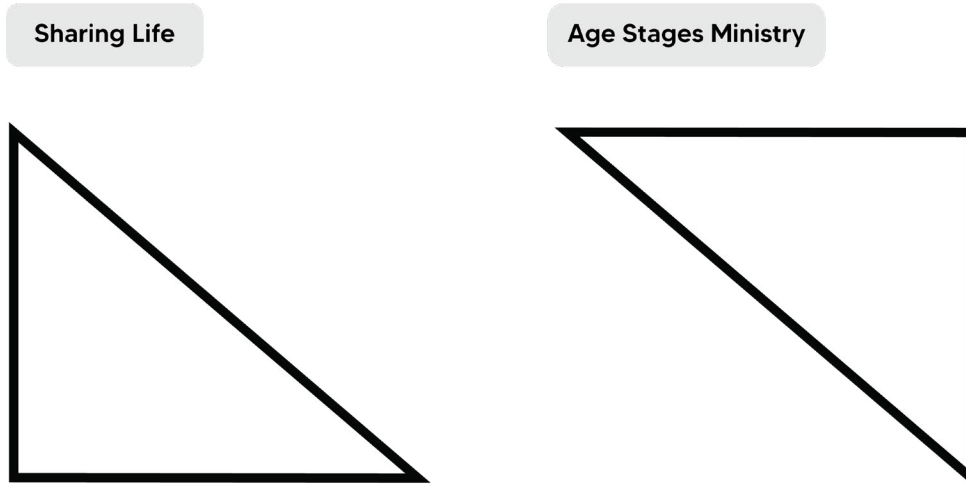
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Section **FIVE:**

**Changing Influences**



Traditionally, churches have focused on ministry programs as the primary way of ministering to people. Typically, these ministry programs are geared towards age-specific audiences. It seems to work generally when children are younger. However, as research has shown, as people get older, these ministry programs seem less and less effective.



The diagram above demonstrates that a church can still have a great influence on people's lives as they transition from youth to early adulthood. In order to continue that influence, the means of achieving it needs to shift. On the left are the individual relationships (i.e., Sharing Life and a person's individual leadership development opportunities). On the right are ministry programs and in particular the transitions between them. All things being equal, a church can have a significant impact on a young person's life throughout all stages. Those collective ministry programs will likely be most significant in a child's faith development. The individual relationships, while important, will not yet be as impactful due to the nature of the adult-child relationship. However, notice as a child gets older, the ministry programs' impact begins to decrease. This is not to suggest that they aren't useful. But their overall impact will not be as significant. Inversely, those individual developments (both in Sharing Life relationships and in their own leadership development opportunities) will have a larger bearing on that individual.

A few observations to note here:

- Ministry programs are still worth doing and play a critical role despite the changing emphasis over time. Opportunities for collective learning and growth should be encouraged.
- Individual relationships are worth fostering at an early age. Adults can't automatically assume all teens want to enter a mentoring relationship when they turn 14 years old. However, by building that relationship at an early age, the level of trust needed has already been growing.
- Church leaders need to ensure there are sufficient energies in both areas to foster a faith-sustaining environment.

# Final Word

There is the desire in many churches to see children and youth flourish in their faith as God created them to do. Ultimately, that relationship depends on individuals and their responses to the God who constantly seeks to draw them near as he redeems, restores and empowers.

This book, along with the additional resources provided at [baptist.ca/nextgen](http://baptist.ca/nextgen), is not a fail-safe in faith development and transitions. No one can guarantee the faith sustainability of any individual. Jesus warns us all that while his good news will be widely preached, many will not choose it.<sup>24</sup>

What we are charged to do is to provide that groundwork and space so that all children and youth in our care can consider the person and message of Jesus for themselves, and in their own timing will choose to follow him. We simply need to recognize what areas of responsibility God has entrusted us with and fulfill them honourably.

This is our prayer for you and with you:

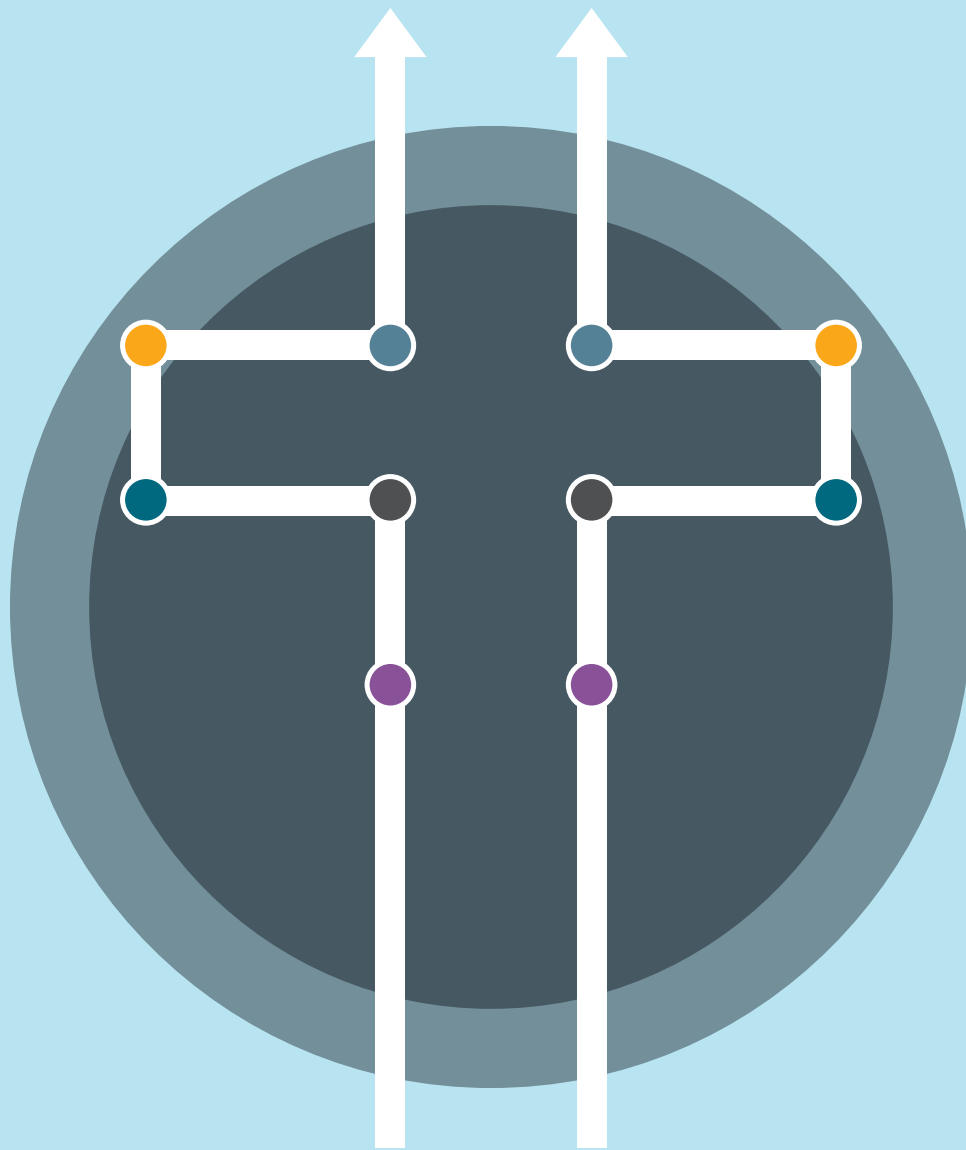
*May you as a Christ follower and your church guide this upcoming generation*

*to the Father who loves and created us,*

*to his Son Jesus Christ who redeemed us through his death and resurrection*

*to the friendship, the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit,*

*now and forevermore, Amen.*





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