Engage your preteens before they check out

Preteens hold unprecedented influence, more than any other time in history. Yet, anyone who has spent time in children’s or middle school ministry has stories of preteens who sit against the back wall, roll their eyes at what’s said on stage, and barely tolerate the hour. Or of some who just don’t show up at all.

Today’s preteens are getting lost in transition as they shift from childhood to adolescence, a unique and challenging time when they are not quite one thing and not quite the other.

In Caught in Between, Dan Scott draws from his experiences in both the education and church worlds, adds in the latest research findings, sums up conversations every ministry leader is having, and crafts a comprehensive plan to engage your preteens to ensure they have what they need to build an authentic faith.

Dan and his wife, Jenna, live outside of Atlanta, Georgia, with their four kids, Liam, Eli, Addi, and Taye.
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Not too long ago, I was sitting in a coffee shop when a pack of fifth grade girls walked in. They were chatty, loud, and moving through the coffee shop like a force. I happened to glance over at the girl behind the counter and couldn’t help but laugh at what I saw. She gave the biggest eye roll and let out the largest sigh. She knew chaos was on the way to her counter. And who could blame her. On the outside, these girls looked like trouble. But as a middle school pastor watching from the sidelines, I saw something different.

I caught a glimpse of the space between “little kid” and “teenager.” I saw a mix of energy and confidence and uncertainty all at the same time.

These girls were all ready to be grown-up . . . but they weren’t quite there yet. I saw the middle before middle school—otherwise known as the preteen years.

Now, you might be asking, “Is a preteen really a thing?” Yes. Preteens are real. But don’t mistake them for little kids—because they are not. And don’t mistake them for teenagers either. They are a unique group that exist in the most “in between” space in the church. And because they are such a unique group, they require a unique ministry approach to reach them.
When I first read Caught In Between my very first thought was, “I have never read anything like this.” This book is dedicated to helping us understand the “in between” space of the preteen years. The pages ahead are filled with an in-depth look at who preteens are, how we can best minister to them within the church, and practical tools you can begin using in your church tomorrow. Dan Scott has created a thoughtful blueprint for building a strong ministry to preteens in the church.

As a middle school pastor, leading the ministry that follows a kid’s journey beyond children’s ministry, I am grateful for those who are willing to thoughtfully engage preteens. A strong preteen ministry will set your youth ministry up to win and will help kids remain on the trajectory toward a life-long faith.

Katie Edwards
Junior High Pastor
Saddleback Church
How this book works:

The research, ideas, and information we’ve collected on preteens falls into two major categories:

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Who is a preteen?  

How can the church help them?

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**Part 1** is for anyone who wants a clearer understanding of the new challenges preteens face.

**Part 2** lays out a dynamic preteen strategy any church can adapt to fit their needs and the steps ministry leaders can take to implement it. These chapters walk you through creating a dynamic preteen ministry at your church.

In **NEXT STEPS** you’ll find a practical guide for how you can start your preteen ministry or take your existing preteen environment to the next level. Included in this section are worksheets and checklists to help you along the way.

When you’re ready to get started, turn the page.
Boom boxes. The Bluetooth speaker of the 80’s. Where my generation sat for hours waiting to record a song off the radio when our moms wouldn’t take us to Sam Goody to buy the single on cassette.

I’ll never forget the day the DJ introduced a new single by a band from across the pond by saying, “This new song will change your life.”

And then I heard the vocals that really would change my life:

“I want to run,
I want to hide,
I want to tear down the walls that hold me inside!”

In that moment, U2 became my favorite band. I pored over their lyrics and discovered their back catalog of music. In the process, fifth-grade me discovered that music was more than notes and lyrics. It was emotion and passion. That was the moment I began to realize how much I loved music. It became an obsession that continues to this day—I make a playlist literally every time I travel. I even created a playlist to write this book!
But what does this have to do with preteens and why is it even important?

Sitting in front of that boom box at age 11 changed the trajectory of my entire life. Because of what’s happening in preteens bodies and minds, new ideas and experiences have the potential to set the trajectory for a lifetime.

For me it was music; for others it may have been the first time they touched a soccer ball or put on ballet slippers, held a kitten, or earned their first $20. Whatever happened, while seemingly insignificant at the time, a seed was planted that grew into a lifelong passion. Their preteen years set the course for the rest of their lives.

When I first joined the staff at Orange, I came to the team with a deep desire to address the issue of disengaging preteens both because of my ministry experience and because my own kids were aging into this newly challenging phase. Over the past five years, I have worked with other leaders on the team as well as ministry friends across the country to evaluate what we believe may be one of the most important linchpins for both an effective children’s ministry and a thriving youth ministry.

What we’re just starting to uncover is that ministries lose kids at every transition. We lose them from preschool to elementary, younger elementary to preteen, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school, as well as the drop off between tenth and eleventh grades.

What if we’ve been looking at the wrong numbers? What if we could stop losing kids and keep them longer? Is there a way to catch kids before they get lost in transition?

If you’ve ever wondered about these questions, you’re not alone. Children’s and youth pastors alike are frustrated, trying to find a solution for engaging preteens.
If you’re a children’s pastor, you have two choices:

1. Turn a blind eye to the disengaged and dwindling preteen population until they make it to middle school (at which point you can point fingers at the youth program, keeping you and your team blame-free).

2. Set your youth ministry (and preteens) up for success by doing something to catch them now.

If you’re a youth pastor, you also have two choices:

1. Stay in “your territory” avoiding the fourth and fifth grade rooms at all costs (so when you get low numbers on promotion Sunday, you can point fingers at the children’s ministry, proving you weren’t set up for success).

2. Cast your net wider and begin to prep the rising youth by doing something to catch them now.

With a few shifts in your perspective and programming, you can easily engage the preteens in your church. You can be sure they don’t fall through the cracks, but instead get caught in between. Our investment in this impressionable season of a person’s life will have unparalleled influence on their future.

Here are three things to keep in mind as you consider preteens.

**PRETEENS ARE MORE POWERFUL THAN WE REALIZE.**

Preteens hold unprecedented influence. More than any other time in history.
By 2020, the United States alone predicts there will be 23 million tweens.

According to a 2016 article, preteens account for $260 billion in direct sales annually.

A 2017 study shared that tweens and teens influence $600 billion in family spending.

Another 2012 study cited that tweens influence 60 percent of their parents’ new car purchases.

THE MARKETING WORLD TARGETS PRETEENS.

Marketing executives have created entire agencies focused on attracting and nurturing the influential preteen demographic. They’ve done their homework. They know the statistics. They monitor the trends.

And with 40 percent of preteens on a smart device, consuming an average of 9 hours of media per day, it’s more possible than ever for companies to understand their world and influence their decisions.

Is this not alarming?

Look, I’m not a conspiracy theorist. This is our reality. Big data drives the marketplace. Businesses know they’ll make a killing when they market to preteens.

Compared to the world in which we grew up, our preteens basically live on a different planet. With a Google search, we can find out all we need to know about what it’s like to live on Planet Preteen. While it may take time to wade through it all, the church has much of the same access to the information used by marketing agencies building preteen tribes.
Yet, when it comes to building engaging environments in our churches, we often don’t leverage what we know about preteens to affect our ministry initiatives.

The church sometimes operates as if the data on this demographic is irrelevant to the goals we have for the spiritual lives of teens. Yet the goals of corporations and churches are basically the same: life-long engagement. The church just has a more hopeful outcome.

We are raising adults who, we hope, will have a life-long relationship with God and participate in a faith community.

**THE CHURCH HAS HOME COURT ADVANTAGE.**

Good news.

Not only are you a simple Google search away from knowing everything the market knows about preteens, but you also know something the marketers don’t about the kids in your church family.

You have a major advantage the market doesn’t have. You already have an established relationship with many of your preteens, several of whom you’ve known since they were in the church nursery. You might even have some sort of relationship with their parents, peers, or extended family.

How can the church leverage what the market knows and use it to reach this demographic? How can the church build lasting relationships with preteens that will carry on into adulthood?

It starts with knowing the world of preteens.
CHAPTER 1

Caught In Between Childhood & Adolescence
We all know preteens love a good fart joke and obsess over YouTube videos. However, defining them is way more complex than just saying they’re anyone who has not yet turned 13.

In 10-plus years of research and experience, I’ve yet to find a definitive age range for preteens. Some experts say as young as age 8 (the earliest average-age for hormonal changes associated with puberty) while others simply go with double digits—kids between the ages of 10 and 12. For the purpose of this book, we’ll stick to the 10 to 12-year-old range, or somewhere around the fourth grade. While many start their fourth grade year as 9-year-olds, most catch on fairly quickly to what’s happening in fourth grade and start acting more like 10-year-olds by Christmas.

The word “preteen” seems dictated by a number, so you may think it’s all about the math. But, in order to understand the meaning of the word, it’s important to take a deep dive into child and adolescent development.
Rather than assigning an age range, defining the preteen stage starts with a question:

When does childhood end and adolescence begin?

We often think about physical changes in our answer to this question. But the subtle shift into the preteen phase is the result of mental, social, and emotional changes. So a child who is physically a teenager could mentally be a preteen, or vice versa. Fun times.

This question also has challenging ministry implications. Somewhere between childhood and adolescence, we find kids in a highly transitional phase of development. They are realizing that their church experience is exasperatingly too young or too old, too simple or too intimidating. And like Goldilocks, they are searching for something in the middle, something that is “just right” because, after all, they are caught in between.

Preteen kids are a bundle of paradoxes:

Complex and simple  
Curious and naive  
Abstract and concrete  
Physically maturing and acting immature

Preteens are experiencing a unique phase of life where they’re caught in between. They’re not quite one thing, yet not quite the other. In order to better understand and serve them, we need to deeply understand this phase.
NAVIGATING THE PRETEEN PHASE

The navigation app Waze has changed the game for getting from point A to point B. Not only does it crowd-source from drivers actually on the route in real time (brilliant!), it alerts drivers of future accidents, delays, and trouble spots. It also recalculates another route for you to still arrive at your destination. On time. Unharmed. Unfazed by the obstacles along the way.

When we identify a preteen’s struggles, we can use the information to help them navigate from the point A of childhood to the point B of adolescence. And if we’re smart about it, we can help them have significantly fewer accidents, delays, stalls, breakdowns, traffic jams or off-ramps along the way.

A few years ago, we decided to embark on a journey to learn everything we could about human development. We were motivated in part by two primary concerns.

1. Churches get theology, but they don’t always get child development.
2. Parents love their kids, but they aren’t effectively resourced to understand their kids.

We began a research and development initiative that later became known as the “Phase Project.” We interviewed teachers, educators, and experts in the child development field for over a year. We collected every significant book written about life stages over the past decade. The effort was designed to give parents and leaders resources to help them understand what is happening at every phase of a kid’s life so they can lead and parent better.

Just like every other phase of a kid’s life, we believe every preteen is changing in six ways: physically, mentally, culturally,
relationally, emotionally, and morally. **However, especially in the preteen phase, each child experiences these changes at different rates. So your uniquely challenging job is to create an environment that appeals to kids who are in different places developmentally.** But before we talk about how you do that, let’s sum up a little phase research about these six changes.

**WHAT’S CHANGING PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY**

In the preteen phase, girls start to tower over boys. Their rate of growth and change is all over the map. Walking down the fifth-grade hallway is proof that kids experience a wide scope of physical changes. Many are starting to experience the hormonal changes associated with puberty, whether or not they are showing the physical signs. And while it’s important to note that kids are changing physically, for the sake of this discussion, we’ll focus on the mental changes that preteens experience in this in-between stage.

*Elementary kids think like scientists.*

In the elementary years, kids are concrete thinkers. Most kids have no difficulty with the world of symbols and objects that can represent letters and words, as well as numbers and math equations. Literal thinking is just that: whatever you say, the younger kids will understand the most literal interpretation of that thought.

If you lead younger elementary kids, maybe you’ve asked if they want to invite Jesus into their heart forever and been met with confused looks from the audience. It’s not that they don’t want to follow Jesus. They’re just trying to figure out the mechanics of how Jesus gets inside of them. They might wonder if a surgical procedure is required—after all, how else can a fully grown person fit inside a human heart? While this might sound ridiculous, it’s a valid explanation of how some
younger kids interpret that phrase.

Literal thinking also limits a kid’s ability to see the same problem from different angles. Take this math problem for example:

\[
\begin{align*}
x + 5 &= 9 \\
5 + x &= 9 \\
9 - x &= 5 \\
9 - 5 &= x
\end{align*}
\]

You probably took one look at those math problems and answered “4.” And you’re correct. You know that answering one of the equations actually answers all four of the equations. While that’s easy for adults to grasp, not all kids can immediately see how answering one is answering all. Concrete thinkers struggle to see the basic relationship of those four problems. Instead, when things don’t look the same at first, they are believed to be different.

**Middle schoolers think like engineers.**

By the end of the preteen years, middle schoolers and early high schoolers are able to make connections throughout their world. They can see how two different things relate to each other, even holding them in tension with one another. They build on previous knowledge and connect how it relates to what they’re learning now. They’d look at the same math problem presented to their elementary counterparts and immediately answer “4” without even thinking about it.

**Preteens’ thought processes are caught somewhere in between.**

Preteens are only starting to move toward abstract thinking
and are just beginning to manipulate abstract ideas. The emergence of new ways of thinking can be overwhelming for some kids, and may even cause anxiety. The mental world of a child has parameters and limited possibilities. But around age 11, the brain starts to awaken to the idea that the world is bigger and more complex than they previously realized.

As their thought processes change, preteens acquire new mental abilities. They transition toward the ability to see a problem from a point of view other than their own. They begin to move from inductive reasoning (“The last three spiders I’ve read about are black. Therefore, all spiders are black.”) to deductive reasoning where they can take a general principle learned in one setting and apply it to an unfamiliar setting (“All spiders have eight legs. A black widow is a spider. A black widow has eight legs.”).

Whether your group of preteens is a room filled with upper-elementary fourth graders, or not-yet-teenage seventh graders, working with preteens means working with kids who are in the middle of transitioning not what they think, but how they think. **Very few of the leaders in either age group are prepared for the inevitable moment when concrete thinking gets in the way of understanding or abstract thinking catches them off guard.**

When you consider the changes taking place, you can be more prepared for the potential hurdles you’ll face in communication. Here’s something to remember and share with your volunteers: the magic age is 11.

Here’s how it works:

At birth, a child’s brain has the exact same amount of neurons as a full-grown adult. Yet, as a baby interacts with the world, these neurons make connections that are constantly being trenched deeper with each interaction. By age three, certain
connections have doubled or even tripled that of an adult as the young toddler grows into a small child who is ready for school. At this point, they learn patterns that build literacy and help them speak in sentences, and at some point, make so many connections that they can identify words and comprehend what they’re reading as they chunk those words into sentences and paragraphs. Along the way, the brain is getting rid of what it doesn’t really need anymore, as it’s adapting to this new phase of life.

By the time a child turns 8, the brain has tapered off and is back to the original model that looks more like an adult brain. This continues throughout the next few years. This 8 to 10-year-old phase is the golden age for teachers, as kids have plenty of knowledge and the ability to engage whatever the teacher throws at them—and they’re not snarky yet! Jeff Foxworthy was right that there’s no one smarter than a fifth grader. But this golden age only lasts a few years because something big is on the horizon . . .

You guessed it, puberty. Which starts when? Correct again! The magic age of 11!

While 11 might seem young, the average age for a girl to start puberty in the United States is actually 10 years old. For boys it’s a bit older. Still, 11 is the second time the brain starts doing all that doubling and tripling of connections. This time it’s to get them ready for the rest of their lives. Along with the multitude of connections being formed, all of the information that helped many a fifth grader beat adults on trivia game shows is getting pruned away. What the brain doesn’t need in working memory, it either buries deep inside the brain or forgets altogether. This pruning lasts until almost the end of high school.

Don’t miss the most important piece. The brain of an 11-year-old is changing at a rate similar to that of a 3-year-old’s. That’s
right, **an 11-year-old basically has the same brain as a 3-year-old.**

*It’s all starting to make sense now, isn’t it?*

All joking aside, an 11-year-old’s brain is changing fast. In his book *Brain Rules*, David Medina writes, “From a connectivity point of view, there is a great deal of activity in the terrible twos and then during the terrible teens, a great deal more.”

It’s no wonder our kids seem to be freaking out—they are. But so did you. So did I. So did everyone.

Just remember, preteens are constantly moving with two steps forward and one step back. And, every kid progresses through changes at their own pace. While some kids may be asking deeper questions, others may not. Be careful not to rush kids through their childhood before they’re ready. You will walk a fine line as you push the kids who are ready to be pushed while making space for others in the room to play with Legos and draw butterflies.

Mental and physical changes are only the first of what’s changing for preteens.

**WHAT’S CHANGING CULTURALLY**

What happens in the world as a person grows up affects them in ways they can hardly imagine. We don’t even have to experience an event in order to experience the way the world changes in reaction to the event.

For example, kids born since 1997...

Have never licked a postage stamp. Expect unbridled access to broadband Internet and WiFi. Grew up with Harry Potter.
Use Google as a verb.  
Watch television on flat-screen TVs.  
Don’t remember 9/11 but will learn about it in history class.

In 2018, preteens were born between 2006 and 2008.  
Thomas Friedman, in his book *Thank You for Being Late*,  
talks about the Age of Acceleration that started in 2007.  
The technological advances that marked that year have changed the way we interact with the world.

In 2007 . . .

The iPhone put a supercomputer in the palm of our hands.  
Cloud computing allowed 24/7 access to information.  
Apache Hadoop launched the age of Big Data.  
We landed technology on Mars.

As a result . . .

Preteens grew up with their childhood shared across social media platforms.  
Our homes—not just our phones—are smart and allow us access to the world from our kitchen table.

Since the 2018 preteens were born, the world has been changing with unprecedented acceleration. Thomas Friedman calls this dislocation. “Dislocation” is “when the whole environment is being altered so quickly that everyone starts to feel they can’t keep up.”

When it comes to understanding and surviving in the world at large, Friedman continues, “There is a mismatch between the pace of change and our ability to develop the learning systems, training systems, management systems, social safety nets, and government regulations that would enable citizens to get the most out of the accelerations and cushion their worst impacts.”
Basically, the world is having trouble keeping up with the world. And, let’s be honest, sometimes the church struggles with change as well.

We have a reputation for doing things the same way for decades, and in some cases, centuries. We continue to use old solutions for new problems and wonder why nothing seems to work.

Occasionally when someone causes a disruption in the market, we pay attention long enough to see that what we’ve been doing is now obsolete. But, then sometimes the very word “market” sounds offensive and un-spiritual, and so we continue to masquerade generational preference as tradition or theology.

Every generation is unique. As leaders, we have to realize that what worked to reach one generation may not work for the next. And with the rate of accelerated change in today’s world, what worked for your grandparents definitely won’t work for the preteens in your ministry today. Of course there are timeless methods for investing in the faith of the next generation. Bible study, prayer, and worship at their core will stand the test of time, but in practice they may look slightly different for a generation who has never asked a question that couldn’t be answered without a physical book.

WHAT’S CHANGING RELATIONALLY
The way a preteen values friendships may be one of the greatest transitions of this phase. By around second or third grade, kids begin to notice they don’t like everyone in their class equally. Some kids will wonder if that’s okay or if they should force themselves to hang out with everyone. By the preteen years, social pressure can feel daunting as most kids will do whatever it takes to fit in with as many people as possible.

Friendships are tricky.
Consider Valentine’s Day as an example. In early elementary school, every kid gives a valentine to every other kid in the class. That’s just how it is. No one questions it. In fifth grade, if the school celebrates Valentine’s Day, every kid gives a valentine to every kid because it’s required. But fifth graders see through the every-kid rule. They know who’s giving them a card because it’s required.

By sixth and seventh grade, no one is giving required valentines. Some club might have a fundraiser where kids can buy candy grams or flowers for each other. So some kids will receive five bouquets of flowers, and others will leave the day empty handed. No doubt about it, that would hurt anyone—but it’s especially poignant for preteens who aren’t that sure of themselves to begin with.

Most preteens are constantly asking three things:

Do I have friends?
Who likes me?
Who am I?

And don’t forget, compounding each of these questions is the primary crisis many kids face throughout the preteen years: puberty. (That’s a lot of hormones to add to the equation.)

Most of us should be more thankful that God allows us to have selective memory when it comes to the awkward moments during our preteen years. They can be the worst. If we think about it long enough, we can all remember what it felt like to feel as if everyone was staring at that one tiny blackhead we just discovered behind our right ear. (Oh yeah, preteens can be a little self-absorbed.) Yet as adults, we sometimes forget. We create environments that put mortified preteens on the spot and seem to shine a spotlight on their awkwardness. Think about all the games or activities that call kids up on stage at will. We forget that for some of these kids getting on stage is
equal to having a parent affectionately call them “Schmoopy” as they step off the school bus.

As strange and tumultuous as the preteen years can be, you have a unique opportunity to speak truth into their lives and help preteens navigate the changes. Now more than ever, you have an opportunity to make them feel welcome no matter what. Now more than ever, you have an opportunity to help them develop friendships in a faith community.

**WHAT’S CHANGING EMOTIONALLY AND MORALLY**
Mental and physical changes are fairly linear.
Relational and cultural changes are somewhat predictable.
Emotional and moral changes are neither linear nor predictable.

Think about the best kid in your fifth-grade Small Group. You know the one. The one who sings worship songs at the top of his lungs and asks all the deep questions? That one. Well, he’s the perfect kid . . . until he meets the not-so-perfect kid in middle school and BAM! Everything changes and he becomes almost the complete opposite of the sweet child you knew would be a pastor someday.

Emotional and moral changes are based on our circumstances as much as what we’re learning about our faith and how to love others as God loves us. For some kids, the preteen years are when faith starts to unravel as what they’re experiencing conflicts with what they’ve learned.

For example, many kids learn Philippians 4:4 in preschool. It says:

“Always be joyful because you belong to the Lord.
I will say it again. Be Joyful!”

Preschoolers love this verse. Be JOYFUL?! Who wouldn’t want
to be joyful?

Yet, as kids get older they start to realize they don’t always feel like being joyful. When they’re facing a difficult situation, joy is the last thing on their minds. But that could change when a Small Group Leader explains that Paul wrote that verse while he was in prison. And now, preteens can start to connect the dots that joy has nothing to do with circumstances, but in how we trust God in those circumstances.

Throughout this unique phase of life, we can help preteens discover a few things about God that will lead them to discover more about themselves. The best way to do this is in the context of a faith community. These are the people who will be a shoulder to cry on and a companion to laugh with while helping them work through their faith questions. A preteen’s faith community will be foundational for how they experience church for the rest of their lives and hopefully help them to escape some of the downfalls that can happen along the way.
Preteens hold unprecedented influence, more than any other time in history. Yet, anyone who has spent time in children’s or middle school ministry has stories of preteens who sit against the back wall, roll their eyes at what’s said on stage, and barely tolerate the hour. Or of some who just don’t show up at all.

Today’s preteens are getting lost in transition as they shift from childhood to adolescence, a unique and challenging time when they are not quite one thing and not quite the other.

In Caucus In Between, Dan Scott draws from his experiences in both the education and church worlds, adds in the latest research findings, sums up conversations every ministry leader is having, and crafts a comprehensive plan to engage your preteens to ensure they have what they need to build an authentic faith.