

BRINGING FAITH TO LIFE FOR



BY STEVEN ELLAIR

Have you ever had the experience of revealing to others that you teach young adolescents only to have them say, "That's nice!" when their faces seem to say, "Why would you do that?" Even other teachers and catechists often state that only a truly special person can teach the middle school grades and that they, themselves, could never do it.

THESE reactions likely result from an experience and understanding of the middle school years as a time of tremendous change and development. This is true. But these years can also be some of the most exciting and impactful for learners, and some of the most rewarding for teachers.

In terms of faith, the middle school years have been shown to be critical in determining a person's long-term identification as Catholic, so our attention and care for these children does need to be truly special. Let's explore some key elements that can help support a successful teaching ministry with young adolescents.

By focusing on and attending to these elements, be it virtually or face-to-face, we can experience enlivened class experiences, engaged learners, and the knowledge that we are taking positive steps to help bring faith to life for middle schoolers!

1

GET TO KNOW THEM

Whether we have been working with middle schoolers for some time or are brand new to the role, we must understand the various characteristics that help define young adolescents at this age. We must get to know the scope of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual characteristics that identify middle schoolers. Doing so can help us more specifically structure our classes and tailor our approach in a way that honors them wherever they are in their development. We must also strive to know something about their individual lives and interests in order to best connect faith to life.

2

KEEP CREATIVITY AND ENGAGEMENT HIGH

If we truly understand the developmental characteristics of middle schoolers, we know that now is the time to make our classes as creative and engaging as ever. With all the changes young adolescents are experiencing, they are easily distracted. Our classes must be well-planned, creative, and full of engaging learning activities, and we must employ various methods to explore core faith topics. Engaging debates and conversations, out-of-the-seat learning activities, opportunities for artistic expression and reflection, and skits and role-plays are just a few examples of ways to enliven and spark learning.

3

MAKE CONTENT MEANINGFUL

Faith in the abstract is much more difficult to grasp for young people than faith applied to their lived experience. It is crucial to demonstrate how learning about faith can impact us and the world in profound ways. Young adolescents are filtering information through the lens of “What difference does this make?” It’s our role to show them, in real terms, how faith can make a difference and how it can enrich their lives and help guide them in real-life situations and experiences.

4

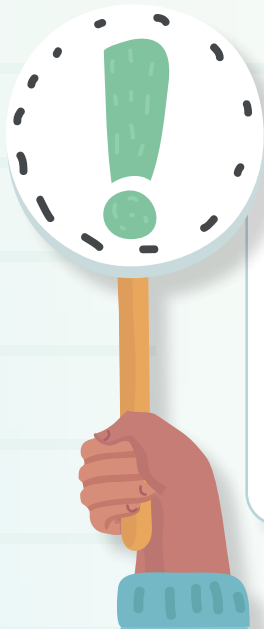
WELCOME QUESTIONING

Although young adolescents are influenced by the thoughts and beliefs of peers, family, and community, they still have a strong need to belong. They are also developing critical thinking and communication skills and are likely beginning to move away from religious imagery, beliefs, and practices of childhood. This can create a desire to explore faith through questioning, challenging, and expressing doubts or disagreements. It is essential that we create an environment where questions are welcomed and encouraged. Helping middle schoolers explore their questions and express their thoughts is one of the greatest gifts we can offer, as this process can ultimately lead to owned faith.

5

BE PRESENT

One of the spiritual characteristics of middle schoolers is that they commonly seek adult role models who live faith authentically. Young adolescents are looking for examples of what it really means to live faith and how that affects a person's decisions and actions. Simply put, they are watching everything we do and say, often evaluating faith in terms of the impact they see it having on our lives. Many people can name a specific person as one of the key reasons they chose to practice their faith. The importance of this cannot be underestimated. In fact, our role as a model of faith might be one of the most important elements in helping faith come to life for middle schoolers.



Our attention to and care for the individuals who make up our learning environments is a core part of our role as Catholic educators. By truly understanding those who are in front of us, providing engaging lessons with meaningful content, allowing and encouraging the exploration of honest questions, and being the best role model of faith in action we can be, we will nurture faith and help it to come to life for middle schoolers.