

# Teaching and Ministering to Tweens

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Practical Resources for Churches



## **Tweens are...**

So what do we mean by the term “tweens”? Generally these are children ages 9 to 12, although some definitions include children who are as young as 8 or as old as 14. Tweens may also be known by the terms “preteens” and “preadolescents.”

Generally, tweens are in 5th and 6th grade although the term is sometimes used for children in 4th or 7th grade.

The term “tweens” is used because this age group is in-between children and teens. Tweens share some characteristics of children and some characteristics of teens, but they don’t truly belong to either group. It is sometimes said of tween girls that they are “too old for toys, too young for boys.”

## **Cognitive development**

Although there is considerable variation between individuals, in general tweens are in a period of cognitive development called the concrete operational stage. They are developing the ability to organize their thought processes and use deductive reasoning to anticipate consequences. They are beginning to have logical or operational thought, but can only apply logic to physical objects. They are not able to think abstractly yet which involves generalizing and understanding that a concept can have multiple meanings.

Tweens are becoming more aware that their thoughts and feelings are unique and may not be shared by others. Their attention spans are usually getting longer and may be as long as 30-45 minutes. Most tweens enjoys mental and physical challenges. Tweens begin to have the ability to form their own opinions based on evidence and are also more skilled at presenting their beliefs to others.

## **Psychological/emotional development**

Often tweens deal with anxiety. Instead of the fantasy fears of childhood, such as the monster under the bed, they now have real fears of violence or kidnapping.

Tweens are also developing delayed gratification and the realization that what they do has consequences for the future.

They are beginning to have a sense of their own identity and are developing independence. This may involve a desire to separate themselves from their parents. Tweens are beginning to develop their own moral values, either by accepting the values they have been taught or trying out different value systems.

Group identity is important to tweens. They are strongly linked to their peers and there is a need to be accepted by their own age group, so thinking or acting like the group becomes important. The needs of others may be considered more important than an individual's needs.

Finally, tweens may experience what can be called "puppy love," an infatuation on crush on someone.

## Physical development



Of course when we talk about the physical development of tweens, we have to talk about puberty. Girls usually start puberty between the ages of 10 and 14 and for boys it's usually between the ages of 12 and 16, so a group of tweens can include those who still look like young children and those who look more like adults. These physical changes can create a lot of anxiety for tweens who may be concerned with whether the changes are "normal" or not. This is especially true for

those who develop earlier or later than their peers. Fluctuating hormone levels can contribute to increased moodiness.

Tweens are also becoming more coordinated as gross motor skills, such as strength, endurance, and speed, are being refined and approaching adult levels. Focus, tracking, depth perception, and other aspects of vision continue to be refined.

## Tween challenges

Tweens face a number of challenges in their lives, such as puberty which we've already discussed. The transition from elementary school to middle school can be a difficult and frightening one. Tweens also face increased responsibilities and increasing amounts of homework. They are exposed to dangerous behaviors by their peers such as drugs and sex. Peer pressure may lead tweens to make wrong choices.

According to an [article on the About Parenting website](#):

...bullying is on the rise, fueled by technology and often times by a culture that permits or ignores it altogether. In fact, 48 percent of children say they've been the victim of bullying at one time or another. Bullying during the middle school years is especially common as children attempt to establish their place and their social circle among others. Unfortunately, that may mean singling out another child, a behavior sometimes referred to as Relational Aggression.

These challenges and others may lead some tweens to develop low self-esteem, shyness, and moodiness.

## Tween ministry challenges

All the challenges that tweens face are also challenges in tween ministry, but there are others we face when dealing with tweens. Some consider tweens and teens the most difficult groups to get to attend Sunday school and Sunday morning worship.

As we all know, tweens are overbooked with sports and other activities and, increasingly, some of these are scheduled on Sunday mornings. Tweens are also spending more time on homework so they (and their parents) may look at Sunday mornings as a time to rest and catch up on sleep.



Tweens are developing critical thinking and analytical skills. If Sunday school or other ministry settings don't address this and continue to teach tweens without letting them ask questions about their faith, then tweens will be less motivated to attend.

Parents are usually less forceful about making tweens go to church than they were when their children were younger. This may be because the tween is giving them a hard time about going and parents either don't want to fight about it or are giving their child more freedom in making his or her own decisions.

Tweens don't easily fit in either children or youth ministry so, if you don't have a separate program for them, they may feel uncomfortable. This can be difficult if you have a small Sunday school which may have all the younger children in one group and the youth in another. Consider using flexible groupings without school grade names and let the tweens decide which class they want to be in if this is appropriate in your ministry setting. Tweens may feel most comfortable with the younger children if you consider them as helpers or teaching assistants rather than students

## Ministry to tweens



Relationships are important in tween ministry. Since tweens are typically beginning the process of separating from their parents, they need a place where they can connect with other adults. Some experts recommend having one adult leader for every five tweens and emphasize that having the same leaders each week is important to provide consistency.

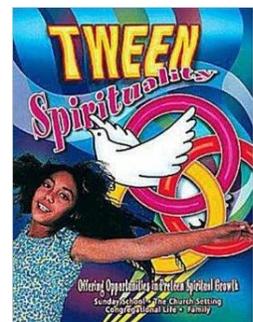
Breaking into small groups gives tweens the opportunity to be heard and for their opinions to be valued. Tween leaders need to create an atmosphere where tweens feel it's safe to be themselves and be honest about what they think and believe. Since tweens are changing at different rates the best way to guide them spiritually is to meet them each where they are as individuals. Tweens will also learn from each other.

Tween leaders should help their kids make the faith their own. This means that a leader serves more as a facilitator than an expert who tells the kids what is "right" or what they are supposed to believe. Tweens should never be criticized or ridiculed but should be encouraged and challenged to explore what God wants of them and to own their beliefs. They also need to understand how the stories of the Bible relate to their own situations and problems.

We can't force tweens to accept our beliefs. Our job is to create an environment where they can connect with God and experience God themselves. When we expose them to a variety of spiritual practices, we're helping tweens encounter God in ways that are meaningful to them. When they realize the awesomeness of having God in their lives it can result in life-changing experiences.

Tween leaders should also try to connect with the families of the kids they minister to and encourage spirituality in the home. Studies show that families have the biggest impact on a child's future faith formation, so we need to partner with parents as part of our job as tween leaders.

A wonderful resource is the book [\*Tween Spirituality\*](#). It includes "articles on spirituality and specific activities to nourish spiritual habits in preteens through Sunday school, worship, and other church settings." There are also reproducible resources for leaders to use with parents to help them understand what is appropriate in the spiritual realm for their preteens.



Tweens need to begin to think of the church as not just their parents' church, but as their church. This means they need to be connected with the life of the church and see that there is more to the church than children and youth ministry. Youth leaders are beginning to rethink how they do youth ministry and there is much discussion about the negative effects of separating the youth from the rest of the church. This relates to the growing interest in intergenerational faith formation.

There are many ways to connect tweens with other age groups in the church. You might consider initiating a mentor program, where tweens are paired with adults who meet with them on a regular basis or attend church and other events together. Of course, you will have any mentors approved through your safe church policy. Intergenerational events provide another opportunity for tweens to connect with other age groups.

Tweens should also be encouraged to become leaders in the church. Worship will become more meaningful to them when they are active participants rather than observers. As is the case with adults, not every tween will have the ability or desire to read scripture or participate in musical groups, but there are many ways that tweens can be a part of the worship service. They can serve as usher or greeters along with adults, can write prayers to be used in the service, or create a drawing for the bulletin cover. Tweens can lead in other areas as well. They can help out with younger children, contribute to the church newsletter, or have specific responsibilities such as straightening up the sanctuary after worship.

Being involved in mission and service opportunities can also connect tweens to the life of the church, especially when these are church-wide opportunities and not just for children or youth. Studies show that getting kids out of the church building and into the real world can impact their spiritual growth, so consider offering mission trips as well as camp and retreat experiences.



## Tween curriculum

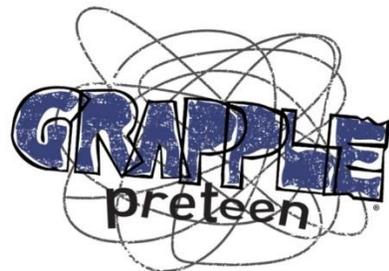
Many Sunday school curriculums include tweens as one of their age groups but there are also some curriculums specifically for tweens or tween materials that can be used in Sunday school.



[Connect](#) for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grader students comes from Sparkhouse, the ecumenical branch of the Lutheran ELCA publisher. It includes a “witty” video, Bible exploration, and hands-on projects.



[Tweens -- On the Go](#) is the tweens component of Cokesbury’s Grow, Proclaim, Serve curriculum. It’s a one year Bible survey.



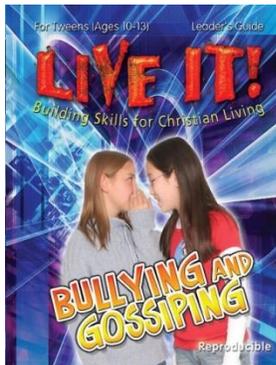
[Grapple](#) comes from Group Publishing. It’s a two year curriculum for 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders and uses Bible stories to deal with topics of interest to tweens.



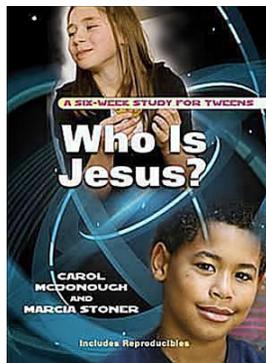
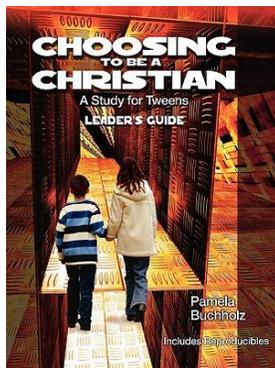
Lifeway, the publisher for Southern Baptist churches, offers [Flyte](#) which includes DVD segments and music videos. Teacher helps, fellowship ideas, and a kickoff event are included on a CD-ROM.

## Additional tween resources

There are some resources that aren't strictly curriculum but can be used for that purpose.

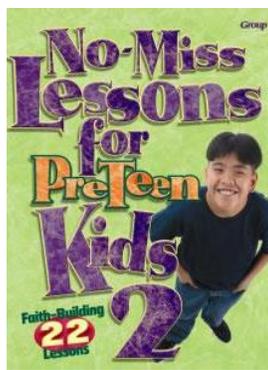
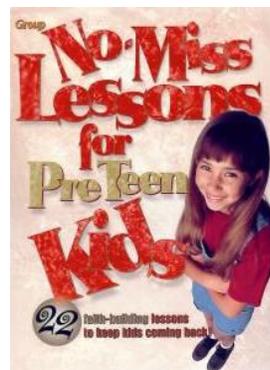


Abingdon Press published a series of books with six sessions for tweens on various topics called [Live It!](#) The series “teaches Christian faith skills such as prayer and Bible reading as ways to help tweens face today’s issues.” Each book also has an optional lesson for tweens and parents to do together. Some of these may still be available in printed form from sellers like Amazon; Cokesbury sells four of them in digital form: *Bullying and Gossiping*, *Dealing with Anger*, *Making Good Decisions*, and *Living Positively in a Media Age*.



[Choosing to Be a Christian](#) and [Who Is Jesus?](#) are two six session studies with reproducible handouts which are also available from Cokesbury. *Choosing to Be a Christian* helps tweens understand that following Jesus is a choice that must be made by each person and it bridges the step from acceptance of parents’ faith to developing a faith of their own. *Who Is Jesus?* helps tweens learn more about Jesus and his teachings. It is recommended especially for

tweens who know very little about Jesus and includes tips for teachers on how to deal with questions tweens may have.



Group Publishing offers two books called [No-Miss Lessons for PreTeen Kids](#) which include 20-25 complete lessons which use hands-on games and activities as well as easy to plan field trips. There are also ideas for service projects. Some of the topics covered are the internet and media, how to get along with family and friends, forgiving friends, and sibling rivalry.



Tweens are in transition spiritually. They're ready for something deeper than they had as children but aren't ready for some of the tough topics that are covered in youth ministry. They may not be satisfied with the basics of the Christian faith but aren't ready yet for mature faith. They need teachers who'll help them connect the Bible stories they learned as children with their lives and help them realize that God is there for them when they're going through tough times.

Finally, tweens need to find their place in the church, to become part of the congregation and seek areas where they can minister to others. A good tween program should include opportunities for them to actively participate in worship as well as interact with those both younger and older than themselves.

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