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# children's ministry

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the  
**10/13**  
window

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The author of *Me to We* explains why all preteens are perfectly suited to become tomorrow's leaders—today

# the 10/13 window

Sometimes I tell people that I could beat the world's fastest runner in a race. They look at me and curiously wonder what I'm getting at, as they quietly stare at my middle-aged physique. I say, "I could beat the fastest person in the world—as long as I had a big enough head start."

Imagine if we gave all kids—our future pastors, entrepreneurs, teachers, doctors, stay-at-home moms and dads—a 15- to 25-year head start by training them how to be effective, ethical leaders as preteens. The future of the church and society depends on encouraging all kids to develop ethical leadership skills while they're still pliable.

After 25 years of pastoral ministry, including over 15 years of training leaders and writing books and articles on the topic, I've come to a conclusion about leadership: The best hope for developing ethical, effective leaders is to train them during their preteen years.

I didn't always believe this. I, like many, believed that leadership is a role reserved for adults. You hear it in comments to kids: "Someday you're going to be quite a leader!" You see it in how we develop influencers: Most formal leadership training doesn't begin until ages 25 to 35, when corporations provide staff with assessments, coaching, and training. You notice it in the research on leadership: Nearly all of it has to do with adults.

Over the last few years, though, I've focused on learning about kids in regard to leadership. And I've discovered that preteens have an incredible ability to grasp leadership concepts and demonstrate their leadership skills. In fact, this is the most neglected area of leadership potential in the church today. Despite many misconceptions, kids really are capable of true leadership. Focusing on youth, specifically preteens, is the most effective way to raise ethical leaders—so what better place to start than in your children's ministry?

## Capture the Moment

There are four fertile years when kids are exceptionally teachable and moldable as leaders: ages 10 to 13. I call this the 10/13 Window, and I believe these are the most critical years for influencing our future leaders. That's because this period is when kids' cognitive and moral development is growing and being shaped.

- **Cognitive Development**—Kids' cognitive development is becoming increasingly complex during the 10/13 Window. Their ability to understand abstract concepts and reason abstractly is in high gear. Leadership involves organizing people toward a common goal to accomplish something together that they couldn't achieve as individuals. This ability requires a relatively sophisticated capacity to understand and manage a variety of factors. By age 10, most kids are developmentally ready to handle this complex thinking and problem-solving, and they have the emotional intelligence required to read others and know how to effectively relate to them.
- **Moral Development**—By age 14, our moral development tapers off significantly; in other words, our "hard-wired" ethics are fairly well-established. Kids with strong character grounding in their formative years are far more likely to make good ethical choices into adulthood. These years are the prime time to instill the Christian values you want your young leaders to have.



by Alan Nelson



The 10/13 window is a unique period when a child's cognition is sufficiently developed to learn sophisticated social skills such as leading and his or her character is still pliable enough to be shaped. The goal in this window is to teach character in the context of leadership—in other words, to teach leadership that's ethical and Christ-centered.

## Develop Kids' Leadership Skills

Here are step-by-step guidelines you can use to develop faith-focused leadership skills in your kids.

• **Look for the leader in all kids.** If you want to intentionally grow leaders in your ministry, start with kids who naturally exude social influence behaviors. Social influencers are typically the most motivated and quickest to pick up leadership skills because in reality, they're already leading. But these kids aren't always who you think they are. Social influencers aren't always the "good" kids or the most committed. Sometimes they're the challenging kids who seem to rope the rest of your class into misbehavior. Sometimes they're the nonconforming fringe kids others emulate and look up to. These kids by their very nature will

encourage other kids to try their hand at leadership opportunities when they arise. (Check out the "Leader Like" sidebar for more signs of social influencers.)

• **Use experiential learning.** Preteens learn leadership skills best by experiencing leadership situations. In your ministry's programming, experiences, and lessons, create mock projects where teams strive to accomplish goals, and let individuals take turns leading their groups. Think "mini-Apprentice," where kids accomplish mental, micro, or macro skill challenges under limitations. Debrief these experiences in positive and constructive ways so everyone benefits and all kids are encouraged to use their leadership abilities.

• **Introduce kids to leaders.** Have your kids meet leaders in your church and community. Recruit adults in your church who lead at work or elsewhere and who like kids. Most leaders are honored to be interviewed or asked to come in and talk to kids about what they do—and how they keep Jesus at the center of their decisions and sensibilities. You may even arrange for a field trip to a leader's workplace to let kids experience how leaders think, talk, and act.

• **Create leadership opportunities in your ministry and church.** Find places where your kids can truly lead. Give kids tasks that require solving problems with others. Allow them freedom—within reason—to figure out how they can accomplish the task on their own. Then provide constructive feedback. Allow them to fail, to a degree, because people often learn best from failure. Put kids in charge of planning an event, coordinating the greeter team, or supervising the various roles in children's church.

• **Develop community leadership projects.** Challenge your kids to take on projects that go beyond the walls of your church. For example, one group of kids got together to plan a simple community service project. They decided to sell food and drinks in a city park, with proceeds going to a child advocacy agency. They coordinated the marketing, supplies, sales, and even the adults needed for transportation. As a result, they presented a \$75 check to the directors of the agency.

Projects like this communicate to adults that kids have the capacity to lead and succeed. They also get kids beyond the walls of your church, modeling ministry to others—and in the end, growing the leaders for today's and tomorrow's church. **cm**

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For more tips on developing kids' leadership skills, go to Web Exclusives at [childrensministry.com](http://childrensministry.com).

## leaderlike

Seek out the social influencers in your ministry and help these kids hone their leadership skills. Here are 10 sure signs of a social influencer.

1. Other kids seek out the child's opinion; they ask what the child wants to do—and then do it.
2. Peers listen when the child talks.
3. The child initiates projects, has goals and ambitions, and challenges the status quo.
4. The child has been accused of being bossy, strong-willed, or opinionated.
5. The child is selected as class monitor, team captain, or group leader by adults.
6. The child has been disciplined for being a distraction in class or on a team.
7. The child negotiates well with peers and other adults.
8. The child is good at organizing younger children in activities or play.
9. The child isn't prone to peer pressure but rather stands up for his or her values.
10. The child is well-liked by others.