

IMPLEMENTING
**MIDDLE SCHOOL
YOUTH FORMATION**



THE DIOCESE OF
HOUMA  THIBODAUX

Office of Parish Support

MIDDLE SCHOOL FORMATION | WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

While there are many similarities in the approach to high school formation, there are a few particular things to note about middle school:

- Middle school students have a great capacity for fun *and* depth. They can be playful and silly, but they are also able to enter into deep conversation and prayer. It is necessary for us to provide space for both. Because of this, it is important to have mentors on the team who are willing and able to be playful *and* who are able to usher young people into depth.
- Connection and belonging are important in middle school. If we are able to provide an environment and hospitality that feels loving and welcoming, it will go a long way in making our young people feel like they belong. Ongoing, intentional time and space to connect is going to be important for this group. For the middle school youth, these are some of the things that are going to allow them to trust and open up to the depth of relationship.
- Don't be afraid of movement! Middle school boys, especially, are going to do well with something kinetic. Something simple like tossing a ball back and forth as you talk can help them relax and engage in conversation.
- Recruiting is going to be key. Middle school formation requires a team that is intentional and diverse. Diversity in the team is going to help the young people relate and connect. In a time in their lives when they are figuring out who they are and where they belong, it is important that they have someone on the team that they can relate to in some way. When it comes to building a middle school there are a few things that are important to look for:
 - Adults who love God and have a heart for leading young people to Christ
 - Adults who are open to their own formation and accompaniment
 - Adults who are authentic, living witnesses of the faith
 - Adults who are willing to be silly and engage with middle schoolers in the fun stuff
 - Adults who have the capacity to enter into intentional conversations and prayer with the young people

MIDDLE SCHOOL FORMATION | WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

The structure for middle school formation is very similar to that of high school, with some age appropriate adjustments. As you begin planning for middle school formation, consider the following components:

THE LITURGY

The Mass is central to all youth formation... everything we do should flow in and out of the Eucharist. If your formation times are able to come either before or after the Mass, that is ideal.

MENTOR FORMATION

Recruiting and forming middle school mentors is a necessary step in the process and is fundamental to the new model of youth formation. It is essential that the adult mentors are part of a community of disciples. If we hope to accompany young people through a discipleship process, we must first allow ourselves to be accompanied. While the team formation should incorporate some practical elements (how to lead in small groups, etc), this time is largely focused on the spiritual formation of the team as well as growing in community.

When planning your calendar, consider setting aside significant time for team formation *before* engaging the young people. Once you begin regularly meeting with the middle schoolers, don't forget to schedule ongoing opportunities for continued formation of the team. Consider one week a month where the young people are off and the team is able to meet.

CONSIDER A KICK-OFF NIGHT

Connection is important for all of your people, but even more so in middle school. This group, while craving connection, may struggle to connect naturally. A kick-off night can be a fun way to welcome the young people and provide a space for relational ministry. The goal of a kick-off night is to have fun and build community. Planning a night of fun and games to start the year will help build excitement for the youth and get them interested in the new year of formation.

LARGE GROUP NIGHTS

Large group nights include all middle school students, grades 6-8. (In some parishes, this group may not be large in number. The role of the large group night is less about the number of people and more about the structure of the night. If your "large group" is still a small group in number, that's OK!) We recommend using the Life Teen format of gather, proclaim, break, and send.

- Start with the GATHER. The gather provides a space for us to intentionally welcome the middle schoolers. It often includes a game or activity that is designed to help the young people get comfortable, to begin to engage, and to introduce the topic of the night. Most importantly, it is an opportunity for the mentors to engage the youth and to make them feel like they belong.
- Move into the PROCLAIM. The proclaim is the portion of the night in which we aim to share the Gospel message within teen culture. For middle school, the ideal time for a proclaim is about 10 minutes. The message that is shared in the proclaim will be what the youth are invited to process and internalize more deeply during the break.
- The BREAK provides the space for the youth to process the information from the proclaim. It also allows for the strengthening of relationships and helps foster openness to prayer. While there are several different options for the break, small group discussion is the most common. The goal of the break is for the youth to be able internalize and make applicable the proclamation they just heard.
- The SEND allows the youth to bring the discussion that occurs in the break to prayer. It is meant to provide an intentional time for prayer to bring those things to God and then to be sent out on mission. This can be an opportunity to expose the youth to the diversity of prayers within the Catholic Church. Remember that middle schoolers are going to do well when they can experience prayer...Don't be afraid of depth or the diversity of prayer in the send!

In the first year of transition, consider this format for most, if not all, of your middle school gatherings. As we ease our middle schoolers into something new, it may be most fruitful to have these types of opportunities more regularly. It will be the first taste of small groups and can pave the way for more substantial small group time to be added in the future.

SMALL GROUPS

Small groups provide a place to really build trust and accompany the young people. As we move forward with middle school formation in the large group setting, we should be assessing and discerning when it might be appropriate to introduce regular small groups. Keep an eye on how are they doing with the small group time (break) within the large group night. Are they growing more comfortable with sharing? Are they desiring more small group time?

MIDDLE SCHOOL FORMATION | STEP BY STEP

STEP 1: ASSESS READINESS & DISCERN PRIORITIES

The first step in the middle school transition is discerning and identifying the right time to transition. The timeline for implementation is unique to each particular parish. The first step is taking time to assess where you are with current youth formation priorities and what particular areas God might be asking you to focus on.

STEP 2: BUILD YOUR MENTOR TEAM

Do we have the right volunteers? You'll want to start by assessing your current volunteers and assist them in discerning if they feel called to transition to the new middle school model. Some may decide to move elsewhere and others will want to be involved in the new mentorship model.

You will also likely need to consider new people to recruit. God knows who they are, we just have to ask Him. Once you've prayed and identified some names, invite these people to learn more about the vision for formation and allow space for them to discern if God is calling them to participate.

OPS is ready to support you in the process of discerning, recruiting, and vision casting for volunteers. Your liaison is available to provide more detailed support and to walk with you in the process.

STEP 3: COMMUNICATION AND VISION CASTING TO PARENTS

Good communication is essential with parents... especially if we are looking to implement change. We owe it to the parents to communicate clearly and efficiently. Just like we committed time to clearly communicate the vision to the volunteers and possible new mentors, the same is true for our parents.

OPS can help with some resources on communicating the vision to parents.

STEP 4: FOCUS ON MENTOR FORMATION

It's time to start building the calendar. Start by identifying your plan for the formation of your team. When planning your calendar, consider setting aside significant time for team formation *before* engaging the young people. Once you begin regularly meeting with the middle schoolers, don't forget to schedule ongoing opportunities for continued formation of the team. Consider one week a month where the young people are off and the team is able to meet for their ongoing formation.

STEP 5: ADD IN LARGE GROUP NIGHTS [+ KICK OFF NIGHT]

Once you've identified some time for mentor formation, begin working in your large group gatherings. Perhaps start with a kick-off night or something fun to get everyone excited about being there.

In the first year of transition, consider this format (gather, proclaim, break, send) for most, if not all, of your middle school gatherings. As we ease our middle schoolers into something new, it may be most fruitful to have these types of opportunities more regularly. Determine how often you will meet based on your discerned priorities.

STEP 6: ADD IN SMALL GROUP NIGHTS

Small groups provide a place to really build trust and accompany the young people. As we move forward with middle school formation in the large group setting, we should be assessing and discerning when it might be appropriate to introduce regular small groups.

STEP 7: DISCERN OTHER EXPERIENCES

Consider when and where you can add in other opportunities such as conferences and events, discipleship groups, bible studies, etc. It is important to be assessing where the youth are and discerning when and where particular opportunities may be incorporated to best serve them.