

CONTROLLED *chaos*

Making Sense of Junior High Ministry

By Kurt Johnston
with commentary by Justin Herman

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Publisher: Mark Oestreicher
Managing Editor: Rob Cunningham
Cover Design: Adam McLane
Cover and Interior Artwork: Ashley Donahue
Layout: Marilee R. Pankratz
Creative Director: Kevin Arnold

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ISBN-10: 1-942145-39-X
ISBN-13: 978-1-942145-39-4

The Youth Cartel, LLC
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Born in San Diego
Printed in the U.S.A.

DEDICATIONS

From Kurt:

Dedicated to Katie Edwards, who has served junior highers, parents, and volunteers at Saddleback Church since before I arrived. I'm a better leader, pastor, friend, spouse, and father because of her influence on my life.

From Justin:

Dedicated to my mom, Gayle Herman (1954-2017)—a wife turned single mom, a stay-at-home mom turned trade school graduate. She sacrificed more than anyone will ever know to provide a life full of opportunities for me. She taught me to work hard, share success, and own failures—and above all to follow Jesus. You will be remembered, and you are missed.

THANK YOU

Thank you to the men and women who paved the way in junior high ministry, helping it attain a place of value and legitimacy. The two of us, and thousands of others, are standing on your shoulders.

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FOREWORD



I first met Kurt Johnston back in 1997 when he was interviewing to join our team at Saddleback Church, and I noticed something right away: He was leaking. You see, when people are passionate about something, it leaks out of them. You hear it in the way they talk, you see it in how they spend their time, you feel it rub off on you when you get close to them. After spending just a few minutes with Kurt, it was obvious that he was a young man who was passionate about junior high ministry—it was leaking out of him.

What I like most about the book you are holding in your hands is that it isn't a textbook but a manual—a practical, easy-to-read book full of easy-to-implement ideas that will help you build a healthy junior high ministry.

Traditionally, youth ministry is where young church leaders cut their teeth in preparation for “more important” ministry roles. That being said, junior high ministry is usually where young leaders go before they even have any teeth to cut! Junior high ministry is often the very first of many stepping-stones along the way. Not so with Kurt.

What I admire most in Kurt is his dedication to this incredibly important age group. He continues to leak junior high ministry even though he's now our NextGen Pastor and oversees the children and youth ministry teams on all of our campuses, he serves on our senior leadership team, and he is one of our adult teaching pastors! Because

Kurt's heart for this incredibly important age group has remained so strong for so many years, our church is full of adults who were ministered to by Kurt and his team (my own children included) when they were in junior high—and they're still walking with Jesus today.

Not everything in *Controlled Chaos* is transferable to your ministry setting. Don't try to create a cookie-cutter ministry that looks just like Saddleback's. I know enough about our junior high ministry to recognize that some of the things he discusses on these pages are working very well while other areas have room for growth. But I promise you this: If you read this book with an open mind and an open ear to learn from Kurt's years of experience, and if you are daring enough to put some of what you read into practice in your ministry setting, your junior high ministry will be better for it.

I love Kurt, and I'm thrilled that he is willing to share what he's learned with the rest of the junior high ministry world. I pray his passion, his experience, and his insight will leak from these pages onto you. Even though we haven't met, I love you, too, and I'm proud of you for investing your time into the lives of junior highers. It matters, and you are making a difference.

Rick Warren
Senior Pastor, Saddleback Church



**INTRODUCTION:
The Part Nobody Reads but Should**



Hey there! Before you read the rest of this intro, I just want to thank you for picking up this book. I first wrote *Controlled Chaos* way back in 2001, and I'm stoked that The Youth Cartel asked if they could re-release it! (As a surfer, I'm legally obligated to use the word "stoked" at least three times in any book I write.)

I've been told that *Controlled Chaos* is one of the best-selling junior high ministry books of all time, which is fascinating because (a) only three junior high ministry books have ever been written and (b) my royalty checks tell a very different story. What you are holding in your hands is an updated and expanded version of the book that has, in its own small way, helped shape the landscape of junior high ministry. I hope you are encouraged by what you read, and I pray that God will continue to bless your ministry to young teens.

I probably don't know much about your church or its ministry to young teenagers, but I know this: Your junior high ministry is working. I know this to be true because in my experience junior high ministry can really be boiled down to this simple formula:

PARENTS + CARING ADULT FOLLOWER OF JESUS
+ JUNIOR HIGHER = GOOD STUFF

Is it really that simple? Yes. I know because I'm the product of that formula. When I was in junior high I attended a tiny little church with a junior high group of three kids led by a guy named John Miller. John was a caring Christ-follower who simply showed up in my life during the crucial junior high years. The result: good stuff.

This book is my attempt to help what you are doing work a little bit better. Whether you're a full-time, part-time, or volunteer youth worker, I applaud you. You are neck-deep in waters that few people understand and even fewer dare to enter. You *are* doing real ministry, and you *are* making a real difference.

Here are a handful of insights to help you get the most out of this book.

First, I'm not an expert. I've been working with junior highers since 1988 when my best friend, Chris Schmaltz, and I convinced our church that we could be trusted to run a ten-week summer camp for the junior highers in our community. (Yikes!) But I don't have all the answers, and neither will this book. What I do have are experience, insight, and a desire to provide a little bit of hope and help to other junior high youth workers.

Second, it's okay to disagree. If you agree with everything in this book, you're letting me do your thinking for you, which is a dangerous thing. As you read you will most certainly question some of what I share. That's okay—in fact, that's good. And it's not only good, it's biblical.

Third, be encouraged. Some books make me feel as if I'm the only one out there who doesn't have it all together. Please understand that Saddleback Church's ministry to junior highers has just as many holes in it as yours. We aren't doing everything I write about in these pages as well as we should be. It's also important to remember that all of us are at different stages in our ministry. Some of you are in large churches, but most aren't. Some have lots of help, but most don't. Some get paid, but most of you volunteer. Some of you have a budget, but for most of us the terms "junior high ministry" and "budget" just don't go together. Here's the bottom line: Read this book through the

filter of where your ministry is now and through the faith of where you want it to be.

Fourth, you'll notice that I use the terms "middle school ministry" and "junior high ministry" interchangeably. In our setting we allow our various campuses to decide whether or not to include sixth-graders. Some do, and some don't, but we call it junior high ministry nonetheless. But I realize there are tons of ministries out there that identify themselves by the middle school brand. In fact, this may now be the more commonly used term—so I'll jump between the two phrases throughout the book.

Next, do something with what you read. My bookshelves are full of four types of books: books for looks (you know—commentaries, lexicons, book studies, and so on), books I mean to read but haven't gotten around to, books I read but have forgotten about, and books that I read and have actually implemented. I want you to read this book, but more importantly, I hope you will actually take bits and pieces of it and apply it to your ministry setting. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a section titled CHEW ON THIS. Work through the questions there as they apply to your ministry. I've found that forcing myself to think about some of the stuff I've just read is a great way to get the most out of a book, and this section will help you do the same.

Finally, meet my friends! Throughout each chapter you will see sidebars with the heading "JUSTIN." I've asked my buddy Justin Herman, a youth pastor who specializes in junior high ministry, to offer some insights here and there to what I've written. Sometimes he'll add an amen, and sometimes he'll disagree and share a totally different perspective. Speaking of different perspectives: They are important. And because I've served in the same church for so long, my perspective is limited, so I've asked different junior high ministry friends to add their perspectives at the end of the chapters. Each chapter response provides a unique twist on the subject matter. My

JUSTIN:

So far, Kurt seems like a super-duper smart guy. Eventually, I'll have something to add, but right now I'm simply in awe of his brilliance. (And by "brilliance," I mean it's brilliant that a guy his age can still articulate his thoughts so well.)

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hunch is these little additions may end up being your favorite part of the book.

Junior high ministry is a wild ride—I'm glad we are on it together!

Kurt Johnston
Saddleback Church



**One:
Time Machine? Yes, Please!**



“ Well, there was no question now, we were entering uncharted territory. Junior high school was a whole new ball of wax. ”
Kevin Arnold, *The Wonder Years*

How long has it been for you? Five, ten, fifteen years? It's been over forty years since I strutted my stuff in the halls of Granada Middle School in La Mirada, California. A whole lot has changed since then. Jimmy Carter is no longer president, Starsky and Hutch have quit chasing bad guys, and girls' lockers are no longer covered in pictures of Shaun Cassidy. (Congrats if you have heard of all the people I mentioned in that last sentence!)

One of the keys to being an effective junior high youth worker is the willingness to journey back to your own early adolescence. It's natural that the older we get, the less we remember about our youth, which is why it's important for junior high workers to regularly "revisit" the past.

WHATEVER YOU REMEMBER ABOUT JUNIOR HIGH, IT'S IMPORTANT THAT
YOU DO JUST THAT: REMEMBER JUNIOR HIGH!

I absolutely loved junior high! Some of my fondest memories and funniest experiences happened during my three years at Granada. When I revisit my junior high years, I end up with a smile on my face. You may feel differently. Your junior high memories may be less

pleasant. But whatever you remember, it's crucial that you do just that: Remember junior high.

Take these two steps to put yourself into the shoes of a junior higher.

Step One: Recognize that the times, they are a-changin'

Like I said, I graduated from eighth grade a long time ago. This pains me, but here's a brief snapshot of what my world was like back then:

Kurt's Junior High World Circa 1980

- I had never seen a personal computer
- The rich kids were the ones with an Atari game system
- Ronald Reagan was elected president that fall
- The Iran hostage crisis was in full swing
- John Lennon was assassinated
- Best Picture at the Academy Awards went to *Kramer vs. Kramer* (which, despite its name, has absolutely nothing to do with *Seinfeld*)
- The top-rated TV shows were *Dallas*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *60 Minutes*, *M.A.S.H.*, and *The Love Boat*
- My favorite band was Devo
- Every phone my family owned was connected to a cord

JUSTIN:

Let teenagers laugh with you (or at you). Of course your junior high years will be funny to them. Cell phones weren't common devices when I was in junior high—think about that. How did I get anywhere? How did people reach me? When you share moments from your junior high years, it gives teenagers a window into your life in a funny, relatable way.

Needless to say, times have changed! The world is a different place today than it was when you and I were in junior high. (You, too, can take a stroll down memory lane by visiting infoplease.com—the website can give you tons of historical tidbits about any given year.)

You may be asking, “Why take the time to look back at my junior high experience? What’s that got to do with my ministry to teenagers today?” Those are good questions. I don’t have a truly clinical answer, but empathy is an important trait for those of us who work with middle schoolers, and

going back in time and putting ourselves back in our younger-self shoes helps us put ourselves in the shoes of the young teenagers in our ministry. In short, remembering what life was like for us helps us appreciate what life is like for today's junior highers.

Let's take a brief look at what the world of a junior higher looks like now. This isn't an exhaustive study, but simply an exercise to help us appreciate what life is like for them today.¹

Today's Junior Higher

- Has grown up with the internet and uses it as a primary source of information and entertainment.
- Was born after 9/11.
- Probably owns his or her own smartphone and is "connected" around the clock; however, this phone is RARELY used to make a phone call.
- Has likely never watched a movie on DVD.
- The vast majority of music, video, and other entertainment is streamed on demand; they can binge as much as they want whenever and wherever they want.
- Is already thinking about college and what it will take to get into the "right" one.
- Is bombarded with a wide variety of sexual images and messages.
- Probably attends a school that preaches tolerance but shuts down religious expression of any type.
- Is very interested in the spiritual realm.
- Michael Jordan—who's that? Just some old-timer.
- Sees people without tattoos as the odd ones.
- Has witnessed our country's first African-American president *and* watched a businessman/reality star with zero political experience rise to the highest office in the land. The lesson taught in both instances: *"I really can become anything I want to become."*

JUSTIN:

For some of us, looking back is fun but can also be painful. If you need to talk to someone as you process it, that's okay. If we want our teens to talk to us, we have to be willing to talk to someone, too.

¹ Because culture shifts so quickly, it's likely that the list is already outdated by the time you read this book, but you get the point.

You're probably not as far removed from the junior high years as I am, but it's easy to see just how quickly things change. I'd bet that even if you're in your late teens or early twenties, you can pinpoint numerous examples of how things have changed since junior high. Take a few moments to think about how the world has changed since you were in eighth grade. Go ahead, put this book down, and travel back in time—in your mind, at least.

TAKE A FEW MOMENTS TO THINK ABOUT HOW THE WORLD HAS
CHANGED SINCE YOU WERE IN EIGHTH GRADE.

Now that you feel really old, let me congratulate you. You have accomplished the first step in putting yourself in the shoes of a junior higher. Hope that didn't hurt too much.

Step Two: Recognize that some things never change

“I was never like that,” you mutter to yourself as a certain teenager pushes your button. Guess what? Yes, you were! Chances are you were exactly like that. Although the world of a junior higher changes often, *who* a junior higher is has remained pretty much the same.

JUSTIN:

Here's an idea: Memorize two or three back-pocket facts you can recall when talking to parents or volunteers. You'll sound like an expert to any adults who are just beginning to understand junior higher. And the more you reach for the back pocket, the more facts you'll have.

The second step to putting yourself into the shoes of a junior higher is to recognize the various changes they are going through and remember that you went through them, too.

Here's a brief look at the key areas of change or development that begin in early adolescence. In recent years our understanding of brain science and

adolescent development has increased so rapidly that I hesitate to delve deeply into the topic, but some aspects of the adolescent development process have remained fairly consistent over the years.

Physical development:

- onset of puberty

- growth spurts
- onset of acne
- more conscientious of physical appearance
- increased muscle development
- increased attraction to opposite sex and awareness of sexuality
- increased physical coordination

Social development:

- greater importance of friendships
- willingness to “try out” new friendship circles
- stronger desire to be “popular”
- increased influence of peers
- desire to become more independent

Intellectual development:

- transition from concrete to abstract thinking
- ability to question what they’ve been taught
- idealistic view of the world
- problem-solving skills are developing

Emotional development:

- more expressive
- experiences lots of emotional “ups and downs”
- emotions may be more extreme
- struggles with self-esteem

Spiritual development:

- begins to question faith of their childhood
- no longer accepts “because the Bible says so” as a valid answer
- can begin to apply spiritual principles to daily life
- looking for ways to “experience” what they’ve been taught

Take another look at each of the areas of development, and put yourself back into your junior high shoes. (Don’t put the book down because you’ll probably need to glance at it a few times.) This time around may be a little more uncomfortable.

JUSTIN:

We each can think of that junior higher who reminds us of ourselves when we were that age. Write that person’s name here:

How was it? Did some memories pop into your head? They did for me. Actually, this exercise is a little bit like going to the dentist: I don't like the process, but it's always beneficial.

Here's the bottom line: The more you understand about the world today's junior highers live in, and the more you intentionally recall about yourself at that age, the better youth worker you'll be. I encounter a lot of insecure, selfish, easily influenced but well-intentioned junior highers, and remembering that I used to be one, too, helps me more effectively minister to them.

Ideas to stay in touch with your junior high world:

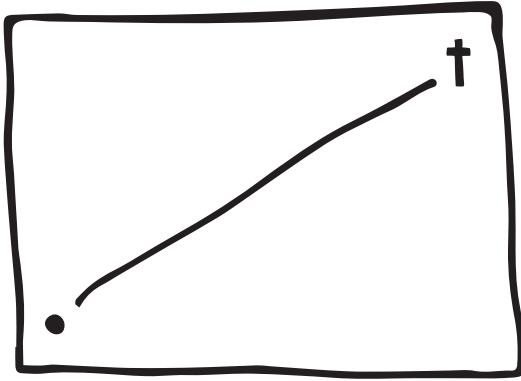
- If you still have them, read your old junior high yearbooks.
- Drive through your old neighborhood.
- Walk the halls of your junior high school.
- Dig through your box of old trophies, awards, and other memorabilia.
- Ask your parents to share their memories of your junior high years.

Ideas to stay in touch with today's junior high world:

- Watch the TV shows and movies junior highers are talking about.
- Stroll through a local mall and window-shop at stores aimed at teens.
- Volunteer at lunchtime at a local junior high.
- Spend fifteen minutes a day in their social media and digital world. Visit websites and various apps they frequent.

I talk to dozens of junior high workers each month. My experience says that those who are struggling or frustrated in their ministry have typically failed to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of this age group. Instead of embracing and valuing the changes junior highers are going through, they are often frustrated. As adults, they have forgotten what it's like to be in junior high. Often, their frustration can be traced to a simple misunderstanding of early adolescent development and the discipleship process of a young teen.

Many junior high youth workers assume that if they are good enough at their job, and if teenagers are taking Jesus seriously, their spiritual journey will look like this:

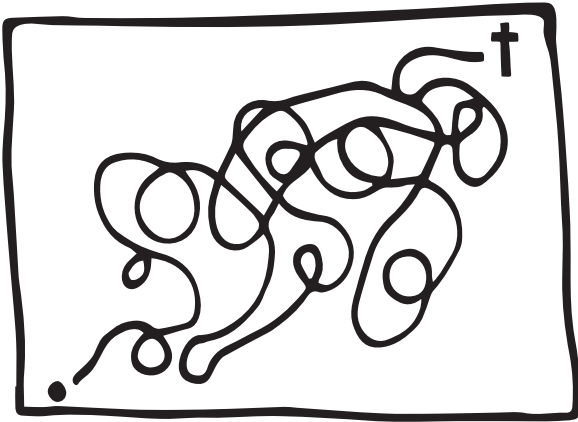


But we all instinctively know that picture doesn't reflect reality. We know that the spiritual journey of a Christ-follower isn't that clean—we have highs and lows, peaks and valleys, good days and bad. In some way, we've been taught it looks like the stock market: a long-term investment that yields results over time. It may look something like this:



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What I've learned over the years is the spiritual journey of a middle schooler looks just a bit different—maybe more like this:



That squiggly mess might be the perfect litmus test for folks interested in serving in the junior high ministry at your church. If they can understand, appreciate, and embrace the squiggle, they may have what it takes to mentor and minister to a young teenager. Today's junior highers don't need adults in their lives who are determined to straighten them out. Instead, they need to be surrounded by adults who love Jesus, want to embrace the squiggle, and are willing to walk alongside them and help them navigate two or three of the most challenging years of their lives.

My hunch is that because you're reading this book, you get it—you embrace the squiggle. You don't just love junior highers; you actually *like* them! You are serving right where you belong. You are having fun, and your ministry is bearing fruit.

Or maybe you aren't there quite yet. You like the idea of junior high ministry but find yourself frustrated. I hope this chapter has encouraged you.

Or you may even be in junior high ministry for the wrong reason. Maybe the youth pastor asked for your help and in a moment of weakness you said yes. Perhaps you've made it your life mission to "straighten out this generation." You may love junior highers because you're a Christian but can't think of a reason to like them. If this is you, there are two choices: You can quit reading now and return your book (since this is only the first chapter, it should still look new), or you can prayerfully read on. Be warned, however, that the more you read, the more you will fall in "like" with junior highers.

I hope you'll take that chance.

Oh, by the way, at the end of each chapter you'll notice a couple of pages provided for some reflection. (I mentioned this in the introduction, but since nobody reads the introductions of books, I feel the need to say it again!) One of the pages has questions I've written that may help you process some of the things you've read and how they may play out in your middle school ministry. The other page is blank, but I hope it won't stay that way. Because middle school ministry can be so fast-paced, it's easy to let our own walk with God suffer. The key to a healthy ministry is a healthy leader, so I want to provide a place for you to journal, reflect, pray, and ponder on your own—not ministry stuff, but *personal* stuff. I'd encourage you to take a few minutes from time to time as you read, and allow God to speak directly to your soul. As he does, use those blank pages to record what he's saying.

Or if that sounds way too deep, feel free to draw silly stick figures and doodles instead.

CHEW ON THIS

What are some issues facing today's junior highers that you didn't face at that age?

Choose five words to describe yourself as a junior higher.

Can you name any of the bands, songs, movies, or TV shows that your middle schoolers like?

List three things you plan to do to keep up to date on the world of today's junior higher.

On a scale of one to ten, how well do you "like" junior highers?

THOUGHTS & NOTES & DOODLES

“

CHAPTER ONE RESPONSE
Kenny Campbell

That first chapter is such a timely and encouraging reminder that as ministers to junior highers (and to people in general), we need to continually and intentionally put ourselves in others' shoes. When we preach, are we using illustrations from TV shows and movies we personally watch or that we know junior highers watch? When we play

games, are we playing games that we personally like or that they like? And when we craft small group questions, are we putting ourselves in a seventh-grader's shoes or trying to get them to talk about things that aren't interesting to them?

Do you remember life as a middle schooler? I sure do, and I can promise you I didn't care at all about what my parents were into. The challenge that spoke to me in this chapter was to get more intentional about learning what our teenagers are into: watching the shows they watch (which means spending more time on YouTube), researching the trends they're into, and actually talking to them outside of small group time.

What I also appreciate about Kurt so much is his willingness to understand the middle schooler's spiritual journey. The squiggly line illustration was an incredible reminder that sometimes we might feel like we aren't making an impact in the lives of our teenagers because to us, it looks like they're all over the place and can't possibly be paying attention to what we're teaching. But when we understand that their journey is a squiggly line, we can stop beating ourselves up and doubting our impact, and we can actually embrace the chaos that is a middle school life.

It really does put everything into context. That small group time that felt like a complete waste of thirty minutes really did communicate something to your junior highers: You're there for them. That powerful message you preached that got interrupted multiple times by teenagers talking, giggling, and fidgeting really did reach them—it

just doesn't look the same as it does with an adult. Sometimes all of our efforts can seem worthless when all we see are squiggly lines. But that's the beauty of the time machine in this chapter. We each used to be a squiggly line, too. Those teachers and mentors in our lives when we were in middle school felt the same exact way as we do today. We used to giggle when some adult was trying to teach us an important lesson. We used to talk and pass notes behind our teacher's back. And the encouraging thing to me is when I look back at those adults, mentors, and teachers, I can remember the impact they had on me. Without them I'd be a completely different person than I am today, and most of them probably felt like what they were doing wasn't sticking.

Hopefully, this chapter was as encouraging to you as it was for me. Not only did I get to take a time machine back to the mid-1990s, but I was challenged to see the world through my teenagers' eyes, and I found a new hope that what I'm doing/saying/living is actually making a bigger impact than I can tell in the midst of all these squiggles running around me on Wednesday nights.

Kenny Campbell is the Co-Founder of Stuff You Can Use and Grow Curriculum.

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