

To Be or Not To Be!

6th Graders in Student Ministry

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There are certain questions that seem to be “age old” questions that we constantly ask ourselves and ponder: “Will we recognize friends and family in heaven?” “Why do bad things happen to good people?” and “How can chocolate be so bad if it tastes so good?”. All of these puzzling questions seem to continually find their way back to the forefront of our minds, but they never have an answer that satisfies our curiosity. So the question continues to eat at us?

In student ministry, there is a question that continues to surface each year with rising potential students and families that are anxious to have their children involved in a vital student ministry, “Can my 6th grader come to the student events?” Unlike the prior questions, this one does have a legitimate answer.

Across the state of Georgia the 6th grade is considered Middle School age, however some schools have the 6th grade on campus with the 7th and 8th grade while others may not. In most scenarios this is due to a space issue. At one time, the Effingham County 6th grade was segregated from the Elementary and Middle Schools and was held in a location of its own for a few years due to space. In the mid 1990s the Effingham County 6th grade was integrated with the 7th and 8th grade onto the Middle School campuses. Now all Effingham County Middle School campuses include 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. Since that integration of 6th grade to the Middle School campus there has been an ongoing debate in the church as to whether or not to allow 6th graders to participate in student ministry activities. At First Baptist Springfield we have held to the position that 6th graders are not allowed in the student ministry. There are some very definitive reasons why we have chosen to do so.

- 1. Most of our Student Ministry programs and events are all inclusive: Middle and High School.** We feel that 6th Graders do not belong in large group settings with High School students. With the exception of Sunday School and Sunday night small groups, Middle School students (7th & 8th grade) are included in all student events with High School students. We feel this would be too much for the 6th grader to process. Until recently we have not had the adult volunteer leadership to staff two separate ministries: Middle and High School. Therefore most of the events have been held with both age groups involved. Most 6th graders are not prepared mentally nor socially to enter into an environment where there are 16-18 year old students. We are just now trying to develop a specific Middle School ministry that would be separate from the High School ministry. If this were to come about, then we may consider allowing the 6th grade to attend the Middle School events in January of their 6th grade year, but this would depend on the Middle School ministry being a stand alone ministry and it would also require a lot of adult and student involvement.
- 2. Beginning 6th grade is a huge adjustment for most 6th graders.** If you are a parent of a 6th grader you know how stressful it was for your student to prepare themselves to go onto that Middle School campus. It may have been more stressful for you. Beginning Middle School for a 6th grader is equivalent to a senior graduating and leaving home to enter the college campus. Though the 6th grader is still at home, the pressure is still the same. New environment, new influences, increased peer pressure, increase in extra-curricular school events, and a higher level of academic expectation is a lot for a student to process in a year. There is much more of an adjustment to make between Elementary and Middle School than there is between Middle School and High School. We do not feel that we should add to that pressure of adjusting to a new school environment by asking the 6th grade student to adjust to a new environment at church as well. Giving them a year to acclimate themselves to the new school environment before they are forced to acclimate themselves to the new church environment, which includes High School students, makes for a much easier transition for the student.

3. **6th graders are not mature enough to be involved in a student ministry that is all inclusive.** There is a huge maturity level difference between a Middle School student and a High School student. But there is also a huge maturity level difference between a 6th grader and an 8th grader on the Middle School campus. You will see a greater diversity of maturity levels on a Middle School campus than you will on a High School campus. By the time a student has reached High School they have made many strides in their process of “coming of age”. Yet on a Middle school campus you may find one little boy who still has his toys scattered all over his room while at the other end of the spectrum you will find a young man beginning to find interest in the opposite sex. At the same time you may find a little girl on campus who wants to talk about her “American Girl” doll collection while there are other girls that are talking about the latest fashions and the “cutest” boy on campus. The 6th grader is not mature enough for all inclusive student ministry trips, more advanced Bible study discussions, and the social scene of the student ministry.
4. **Having 6th graders involved in the student ministry negatively affects the level of involvement from the High School and older Middle School students.** Imagine a 6th grader on a church van with a junior or senior in high school. High School students have a certain level of discomfort in having younger Middle School students participate with them in student ministry activities. This sometimes hinders the participation of High School students because they feel their student ministry has become more of a children’s ministry. Having the 6th grade involved in the student ministry also makes it difficult for the adult leaders to address issues such as sex, dating, and relationships on a level that is relevant to the High School student as well as the older Middle School student.

The other question that often follows this question of whether or not to allow 6th graders into the student ministry is “If 6th graders can’t be involved in the student ministry, can we have something special for them?” The 6th grade is a tough age group to keep involved in the church. It is a concern that is felt in most of our churches across the country. The 6th grader feels too old for the children’s ministry, yet they are a little too young for the student ministry. Often this leaves them feeling left out. We would love to have a ministry specifically for 6th graders. We do have a ministry that is specifically for 5th & 6th graders called FUSION. Wendy Porter is the leader of this very important ministry and we have had a lot of participation. FUSION meets in the sanctuary for worship, bible study, and activities every 1st Wednesday of the month. We have seen 30-40 kids attend this worship time. In addition to these meeting times, the FUSION ministry has taken special trips that included: Ice Skating, Football games, etc. Wendy is doing a great job and it is helping to get these 5th & 6th graders ready for the environment of the student ministry. Adult involvement is still very much needed.

So as a parent of a 6th grader, what do I do in the mean time. If you are a parent or guardian of a 6th grader, try to assure them that it is best that they wait until 7th grade to get involved in the student ministry and assure them that it will be worth the wait. Be understanding of their frustration during this transition time and help them to make the necessary transitions to prepare them for the coming year when they will be able to participate in student ministry activities. Try not to be in a hurry to move your child into the student ministry. In reality, you are only looking at a few months before your child will be in the throws of the full student ministry, there is no need to rush them. Also, talk with the church staff, particularly the youth pastor, or the youth ministry volunteers to see how you can be more involved in developing a Middle School ministry that is separate from the High School ministry. But most importantly realize that you are the primary spiritual influence over your child. Your 6th grader can learn more from you than he or she can ever learn from a pastor or other adult volunteer in the student ministry. Pray with them and for them, encourage them, love them, study the Bible with them and you will see that the 6 months to a year that your child waits to get involved in the student ministry may be the most precious time you have with your child before they become even more independent.