

FAITH

through THE
phases

BY DAN SCOTT
AND ELLE CAMPBELL



helping
PARENTS
& SGLS
NAVIGATE
FAITH AT every
LIFE STAGE

FAITH THROUGH THE PHASES
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FAITH THROUGH THE PHASES

Helping Parents & SGLs Navigate Faith at Every Life Stage

DAN SCOTT AND ELLE CAMPBELL

created in partnership with



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If you're reading this right now, we probably have a few things in common.

You're probably an adult.

You probably like kids and teenagers.

You definitely care about influencing the faith of those kids and teenagers.

And you probably agree that the best way to influence a kid's faith is to influence the people who influence them most—like their parents and their small group leaders.

If you've been in ministry for more than a few months, then you probably understand something else too—that kids change. And they change *fast*. They're only preschoolers for a moment. They're only in elementary school for a season. They're only middle schoolers or high schoolers for a handful of years and then—well, pretty soon they've moved on to whatever comes next.

As church leaders, we understand the time we have to influence a kid in our ministry is limited. So how do we make the most of our time with kids during the crucial years of childhood and adolescence? And how do we help parents and small group leaders do the same? Well, we have an answer that sounds pretty simple, but isn't necessarily easy:

If we want kids and teenagers to know God, then we need to know kids and teenagers.

For the last several years, our team here at Orange has been involved with a project called *It's Just a Phase*. It's a big initiative dedicated to knowing kids and teenagers better by understanding how they're changing in every unique phase of their lives. When we say "phase," we simply mean **a timeframe in a kid's life when you can leverage distinctive opportunities to influence their future**—and their faith, too.

As a children's pastor, I (Dan) would tell you the preschool and elementary phases are the best phases with the most potential to influence a kid's future. They're my favorite phases. Elle likes hanging out with teenagers though, so as a student pastor she would probably disagree with me. But she would be wrong.

I (Elle) do disagree, and I'm definitely not wrong. Teenagers are clearly the best. And they're potty trained. Usually.

So which phase is the best and most important phase? Well, it depends on who you ask. The truth is, we could all argue amongst ourselves about which is the best or the most important phase in a child's life. Of course we think our favorite phase is the best and most important phase. But we also need to remember that . . . well, it's not. *Every* phase matters. **Every phase is uniquely important for a kid's future and faith.**

In the preschool phase, we're laying a foundation that's essential to helping them understand God's love.

In the elementary phase, we have the opportunity to inspire kids with stories that reveal God's love and character.

In the middle school phase, we help kids take ownership over their faith in new ways for the very first time.

And in the high school phase, we get to challenge teenagers to live out their faith in ways that change them and the world around them.

Every phase is unique. Every phase matters.

Believing this is a crucial part of an integrated family ministry strategy. And it's why your children's ministry and student ministry leaders may want to read this e-book and have this conversation together. Because, when you do, **you'll do a better job of knowing kids in every phase so that kids in every phase can know God.**

But when it comes to knowing kids in every phase, there's kind of a lot to know.

As church leaders, we have to be aware of the changes that are taking place in the kids and teenagers we influence because *they* need trusted adults to help them navigate these changes, and *we* need to leverage those changes in a way that helps us better influence their faith. Now, as church leaders, sometimes we're the ones helping kids navigate those changes. But more often than not, we need to be equipping parents and small group leaders to help kids navigate those changes. But we can't help if we don't know what those changes are! So in the next few pages, we're going to give you a crash course in some of the changes taking place in each unique phase of a kid's life.

Because every phase has present realities you need to understand.

But understanding them isn't quite enough. If we want to effectively influence a kid's faith and future, we've got to actually do something about it. So once we've covered the changes taking place in each phase of a kid's life, we're going to talk about what our role is, as an adult, during each of those phases.

Because every phase has distinctive opportunities you need to leverage.

Ready?

Good. Let's get started.

→ IF WE
WANT **KIDS** AND

TEENAGERS

THEN *to know God,*
WE NEED TO
KNOW

KIDS AND TEENAGERS.

#GOWEELY

EVERY PHASE HAS PRESENT REALITIES YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND.

Every kid, in every phase, is changing in six ways. They're changing . . .
physically.
mentally.
culturally.
relationally.
emotionally.
morally.

We can't talk about all of those changes in this short little e-book, but we do want to talk about a few of them.

Let's start with some of the obvious changes.

PHYSICAL CHANGES

As kids grow, some changes are easier to see than others. Like . . .
when you see that preschooler take a step for the first time.
when you could swear that elementary-aged kid grew a foot since last week.
when you think it might be time for that middle schooler to try deodorant.
when you realize that high schooler is growing a full beard.

Most of the time, a kid's physical changes are pretty easy to observe.

But kids are changing in other ways, too—ways that we can't always see, or hear, or . . . smell.

MENTAL CHANGES

While it may not be a surprise that a kid or teenager is changing physically, sometimes we're taken by surprise when a kid or teenager changes mentally. Maybe we're a little shocked when, suddenly . . .
a preschooler starts speaking in full sentences.
an elementary-aged kid begins to understand sarcasm.
a middle schooler's attention span seems to have been cut in half.
a high schooler asks you a question you aren't quite prepared to answer.

Maybe it's because we can't actually see a kid's brain changing, or maybe it's because their mental changes don't always seem in sync with their physical changes—but whatever the reason, this much is true: sometimes we forget just how quickly kids and teenagers are changing mentally.

In every phase of a kid's life, the ways they think, learn, and see the world are unique. We know this intuitively, of course. It's why we don't talk to a preschooler about the Bible in the same way we talk to a middle schooler about the Bible. It's why we don't teach our first graders apologetics and why we don't make our high schoolers do crafts about Noah's ark. But while you probably already understand this, sometimes we all need to be reminded of exactly how kids and teenagers think. As adults, we're pretty familiar with the ways we think and learn and see the world, but if we're not careful, we might miss out on the unique ways that kids and teenagers learn in each phase. So here's a quick summary.

Preschoolers think like artists. Artists experience the world through activities that stimulate their five senses. Preschoolers blend reality with imagination, and learn through participation. A baby's brain has more neurons than at any other time in life, and those neurons are forming two million synapses every second. In this phase, they're mildly aware of everything in their environment, and they take it all in at an unfathomable pace. Preschoolers learn experientially, through their senses, from someone who responds to them. In their world, there is no real distinction between what's real and what's imaginary. Like artists, they learn best when they can make it with their hands. This is why movement, music, and art are critical for learning in this phase.

Elementary-age kids think like scientists. Scientists understand the world through concrete evidence they can test repeatedly. Elementary-age kids discover how things work through repetition and clear application. Brain research suggests that during the elementary years (ages 4-10 or 11), kids learn information quickly and easily. But just because kids in this phase are eager learners doesn't mean they learn like adults. They're still mostly concrete thinkers. They need repetition and clear application. Like a scientist, they learn best when they can observe something in their present environment. The more frequently a new concept can be connected to their everyday experience, the better.

Middle schoolers think like engineers. Engineers solve problems by connecting concepts so they work together. Middle schoolers personalize abstract concepts by connecting ideas. Like their physical bodies, there is a "growth spurt" in the brain of a middle schooler. The brain overproduces neurons and synapses similar to the growing brain of a toddler. This period of rapid growth accounts for a middle schooler's ability to think more abstractly, to understand multiple perspectives, and to think critically about themselves and others. It also means that instructions need to be simple and clear if you hope to be heard. Like an engineer, they learn best when they personalize an idea by connecting pieces of information. That's why puzzles, patterns, and codes can be helpful for learning in this phase.

High schoolers think like philosophers. Philosophers seek to understand what's unseen and what can't be measured. High schoolers want to discover meaning and learn best by processing out loud. A high schooler loses approximately one percent of the grey matter of their brain every year through a process called "pruning." Pruning allows the brain to prioritize information to become flexible and efficient. With this new efficiency comes an increase in analytical thinking. But, the limbic system (the system that measures risk-taking) is developing at a faster rate than the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that regulates behavior). So risk and personal experience still govern behavior. Like a philosopher, they learn best through open debate, multiple perspectives, and applied reasoning. That's why self-expression and community are essential for learning in this phase.

Even over the course of eighteen years, that's a lot of change for one body and brain to handle! But these physical and mental changes aren't the only way kids and teenagers are changing.

CULTURAL CHANGES

On top of all the changes happening inside a kid's body and brain, the world around them is changing in some pretty big ways too.

Every
PHASE ^{HAS}
present
: REALITIES
YOU NEED TO
understand.

#GOWEELY

Zayn left One Direction.
Kanye and Taylor are feuding.
Harry Potter is now a play.

But the cultural changes a kid is experiencing are bigger than just pop culture, of course. In every phase, kids and teenagers experience some pretty unique changes that alter their world in significant ways.

They're born.
They learn to walk.
They get potty-trained.
They go to kindergarten.
They hit puberty.
They go to their first dance.
They go through their first breakup.
They get a driver's license.
They graduate.

These changes in a kid's world are good! They're important. They're necessary. But they're also stressful. As change usually does, these cultural changes create tension. And when you combine the stress of these cultural changes with the stress of their mounting physical and mental changes, you get a crisis.

A CRISIS

In every phase, there is a collision between the many ways kids are changing. That collision creates a crisis. Now, when we say "crisis," we don't mean a trauma or a tragedy (although potty training and puberty can certainly feel that way). We mean a developmental crisis.

Like any crisis, these developmental crises can be scary. But, as adults, it's not our job to eliminate the crisis when it occurs. These crises are good! They're important! They're necessary! They're even predictable! Navigating these crises can be challenging, but they can't be avoided. They're absolutely essential for a kid's development.

Now here's where you come in.

During these crises, kids and teenagers need adults to help them navigate the stress and tension of the changes they're facing. Their bodies are changing. Their brains are changing. Their worlds are changing. In every phase, their reality is being turned upside down in a brand new way. During those times, they need adults like you, their parents, and their small group leaders to . . .
show up.
remind them they're safe.
answer their big questions.
love them.

But how do you, their parents, and small group leaders do that practically? Well, let's talk about it. Because, remember, it's not enough that we simply understand the many phases of kids and teenagers. We've got to leverage each of those phases in ways that influence their faith and their future.

EVERY PHASE HAS DISTINCTIVE OPPORTUNITIES YOU NEED TO LEVERAGE.

So how do we make the most of our limited time with kids and teenagers? It starts with understanding kids and teenagers, but it also requires us to understand our unique roles in every phase of their lives. As kids change, the role of their parent, small group leader, or pastor should change too.

To determine what, exactly, that role should be in each phase, there are a few things we need to consider about the kid or teenager we're influencing:

1. Their phase.
2. Their crisis.
3. Their question.

When we understand a kid's unique phase, crisis, and questions, we can better understand what a kid or teenager needs from the adults in their lives. So let's break it down, one phase at a time.

(Now, keep in mind, every kid is different and there are a number of factors that will determine exactly when a kid hits each phase and each crisis. But generally speaking, most kids will hit the same crises at roughly the same time.)

PRESCHOOL

First, let's talk about preschool. In preschool, when kids think like artists and are experiencing countless "firsts," preschoolers are asking "Am I?" questions that lay the foundation for how they see themselves in the world.

ZERO TO ONE

In the first year of life, the crisis a kid faces is . . . well, birth, which would probably be grounds for PTSD for anyone if they could remember it. If babies could ask questions, they would be asking, "Am I safe?" That's why the role of every adult in that baby's life should be to **consistently respond to a baby's needs** so that baby can **establish trust**.

ONE AND TWO

In the one and two phase, the crisis kids are facing revolves around the fact that everything they want to do requires a new skill. They're asking, "Am I able?" So it's the role of every adult in this phase to **patiently allow them to try new things** so that toddler can **develop confidence**.

THREE AND FOUR

In the three and four phase, the crisis for a preschooler has to do with discovering rules and expectations, their abilities, and their limits. They're wondering, "Am I okay?" In this phase, it's an adult's job to **set boundaries and discipline them with love** to help them **cultivate self-control**.

In the preschool phase, you could sum up the role of an adult with one word: **It's to consistently embrace them and their physical needs**. Because here's what's amazing: When an adult consistently embraces a preschooler, they're giving that preschooler a first impression of their heavenly Father who first embraced them.

every
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DISTINCTIVE
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#GOWEELY

ELEMENTARY

Now let's talk about the elementary phase. In elementary, kids are asking "Do I have?" questions as they develop skills and competencies that equip their future.

KINDERGARTEN AND FIRST

In kindergarten and first grade, the crisis is school. Heading to school for the very first time is, of course, a big culture shift. That's why kids in this phase are asking, "Do I have your attention?" During this time of upheaval, kids are craving adult attention and approval, so it's the role of every adult to **demonstrate interest in their progress** so kids can **improve their abilities**.

SECOND AND THIRD

In second and third grade, the crisis kids face has a lot to do with their changing mental abilities. In this phase, they begin to notice differences between themselves and others, which leaves them asking, "Do I have what it takes?" In this phase, it's the job of every adult to **praise a kid's persistence and efforts** so they can **broaden their competence** and discover who God created them to be.

THIRD AND FOURTH

And finally, in fourth and fifth grade, kids begin to prioritize friends in a new way, which creates a crisis. In this phase, as kids begin to place a greater emphasis on peer approval, they're asking, "Do I have friends?" So it's the role of every adult to **make introductions and include their peers** so kids **develop friendships**.

In the elementary phase, you could say the role of an adult **is to primarily engage them and their interests**. Because when an adult consistently engages an elementary-aged kid, it's a picture of the God who first engaged them as a Teacher, Leader, and Friend.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Now let's head into the middle school phase. In middle school, kids continue looking to their peers for affirmation, and they begin to think more critically about themselves and others. So in middle school, kids are asking lots of "Who?" questions.

SIXTH

In sixth grade, puberty is the crisis—it's the time in a kid's life when their brains and bodies are changing more quickly than they have since they were infants. It's a pretty scary and uncertain time, which is why sixth graders are looking for acceptance by asking, "Who do I like? And who likes me?" In this tumultuous phase, it's an adult's job to **accept** a sixth grader so they **gain stability**.

SEVENTH AND EIGHTH

In seventh and eighth grades, the crisis is an increased sense of self-awareness (and maybe insecurity) as they ask the question, "Who am I?" In this phase, the role of every adult is to **acknowledge their positive qualities and strengths** so they can **discover their uniqueness**.

In the middle school phase, you could summarize the role of an adult like this: **It's to affirm them and their personal journey**. When an adult consistently affirms a middle schooler, they help that middle schooler believe there's a God who affirms them as their Redeemer and Savior.

HIGH SCHOOL

And finally, let's talk high school. In high school, teenagers are asking "Where? Why? How? and What?" questions as they prepare for independence and adulthood.

NINTH

In ninth grade, the crisis for a teenager is entering high school. In this phase, teenagers are asking, "Where do I belong?" and looking for a new tribe, which is why every adult should **connect them with teenagers with similar interests** so that ninth graders learn to **value community**.

TENTH

In tenth grade, the year most kids will get their driver's license, the crisis every teenager faces is deciding what to do with their new freedom. In this phase, they tend to challenge the process as they ask, "Why can't I?" So it's an adult's job to **listen carefully and respond with questions** to help them **clarify their values**.

ELEVENTH

In eleventh grade, with exams, jobs, and graduation on their minds, the crisis for a teenager is pressure. They're asking, "How can I matter?" which is why it's every adult's role to **provide consistent opportunities to lead and serve** so they can **refine their skills**.

TWELFTH

And finally, in twelfth grade, the crisis is graduation. In the last 52 weeks of high school, teenagers are asking, "What will I do?" So in this phase, it's absolutely essential that adults **encourage experiences and simplify options** for twelfth graders so they can **create vision for their future**.

In this phase, **the role of an adult is to mobilize their potential**. Because (check this out) when an adult consistently mobilizes a high schooler, it's a reminder of the way God mobilizes them as a resurrected Christ who gave them His Spirit.

Wow. That's a lot of change for one kid or teenager to handle. But there's a lot of potential there, too.

Here's what we hope you noticed. While the crises and questions kids are facing in each of these phases can be frightening and difficult to navigate at times, kids aren't meant to navigate them alone. That's why adults like you, and their parents, and their small group leaders, are so important. Because when we can all get on the same page, for the sake of the kids we all love, we'll have a much better chance at influencing their faith and their future.

Together, we can . . .

Embrace a preschooler so they have a better shot at believing in the God who embraces them.

Engage an elementary-aged kid so they have a better shot at trusting in the God who engaged with them first.

Affirm a middle schooler so they are more likely to follow the God who likes and affirms them just the way they are.

BECAUSE WHEN ↘

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FAITH & FUTURE

#GOWEEKLY

Mobilize a high schooler so they can know the God who wants to mobilize them in the world with a mission and a purpose.

But if we want to do this well . . .
If we want parents to do this well . . .
If we want small group leaders to do this well . . .

Then we need to **understand** a kid's present realities, **leverage** the distinctive opportunities of each phase, and then **help parents and small group leaders** do the same.

But before we wrap up here, we need to ask you something.

Be honest.

If you work with preschoolers or elementary-aged kids, did you skip over the sections of this book about teenagers? If you work with middle schoolers or high schoolers, did you ignore the parts about preschoolers and elementary-age kids? Did you only read the parts about your favorite phase and ignore the rest?

If that's you, then before you put this e-book away, we want to challenge you to rethink that approach.

What do you think would happen if we decided to impose a new rule on ourselves as leaders? What if we chose to no longer *only* prioritize our favorite phases but, instead, decided to care about kids in *every* phase? What if we decided to not only be *specialists*, but *generalists*, too? What if we decided to direct eighty percent of our time, energy, and focus toward becoming specialists in the age group that we work with, while directing the remaining twenty percent of our time, energy, and focus toward becoming generalists who care about *every* phase?

What do you think would happen?

Maybe we'd be more aligned with the other ministry leaders in our churches. Maybe we'd have more empathy and respect for each other. Maybe we'd develop a more holistic view of what it means to partner with parents and serve families. Maybe we'd make a bigger impact.

So here's our challenge to you this month.

Pay attention to what's happening in the lives of the kids and teenagers you influence.
Pay attention to the ways they're changing.
Pay attention to the crises that they're facing.

Get to know the uniquenesses of each individual phase so you can better understand how to leverage those uniquenesses to influence a kid's faith and future.

And then equip parents and small group leaders to do the same.

Because the point, remember, is this: **If we want kids and teenagers to know God, then we need to know kids and teenagers.**

The goal of the Phase Project is to summarize and simplify an overwhelming amount of research related to child development so the average leader and parent can understand kids better.

IT'S JUST A
PHASE
SO DON'T MISS IT

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