

LIFESTAGE MILESTONES

Celebrating the Big Moments

KRISTEN IVY



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Authors: Kristen Ivy
Editorial Team: Autumn Ward, Karen Wilson, Laurin Greco
Cover Picture: Sarah Joiner
Art Direction: Ryan Boon

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KRISTEN IVY

Every Friday in Atlanta, a local radio station plays “The Best of the ‘80s and ‘90s.” Sometimes I forget what Friday means when I get in the car. On those days, something like “Hey Leonardo” by Blessed Union of Souls comes playing across the speakers, and in an instant I feel like I’m driving my 1994 Ford Thunderbird right into my old high school parking lot.

It doesn’t take much to trigger a memory. It can sneak up unexpectedly from some of the strangest places. Sometimes it’s the smell of a particular food cooking in the kitchen. Sometimes it’s just the feel of the weather when the seasons change. Sometimes, like in my case, it’s when the radio plays an unexpected top-40 song from years ago that played on repeat in the background of my life.

Our lives are a series of memories. There are the day-to-day kinds of memories that fade away and seem forgotten until something triggers them and they jump into our conscious mind from who knows where they were hiding. And then there are more significant memories. These are the days we document and celebrate and have framed on the walls of our homes, memorialized in scrapbooks or recorded with keepsakes put away in a drawer or in box in the attic. These memories don’t need a trigger to bring them back into our conscious mind. We remember them more frequently, and we retell the stories as defining moments.

The day you were born.
The day you trusted Jesus.
The day you got your first job.

**Everyday moments create the rhythm of our lives.
They leave behind subtle memories that give us history.**

**Significant moments change the direction of our lives.
They leave behind impactful memories that highlight the course of our story.**

If everyday moments are the pages of our lives,
lifestage milestones are like the turning points in the story.

Kids and teenagers are forming the memories they’ll carry with them for the rest of their lives. They’re living everyday moments that will become their history—like turning on the radio and jamming out to “Uptown Funk.” But there are a few select times during childhood and adolescence when kids will experience a significant turning point, a big moment, a day you plan for and celebrate with a little more intentionality.

There are many names for these big moments. We call them “lifestage milestones” as a way to distinguish them from other celebrations.

Lifestage milestones mark and celebrate a significant moment or change in a person’s story.

If you want to know if something is a lifestage milestone, consider these criteria:

They happen only once in a person’s lifetime.

They are celebrated with more vibrato than the average birthday.

They happen on an individual timetable, not a group calendar.

One of the most important things to remember about lifestage milestones is this: There aren’t many of them.

As part of the Phase Initiative, we want to help leaders and parents celebrate lifestage milestones so kids at every phase will pause and reflect on who they are becoming. But one really important thing we’ve discovered is that one of the easiest ways to *miss it*—especially when it comes to milestones—is to overdo them.

If you celebrate too soon or too often, you risk making the big moments smaller.

When you make every moment a big moment to celebrate, you risk not making any moment big enough. When you celebrate too frequently, you lose the excitement behind the anticipation, and you experience a diminishing return.

So don’t miss it.

Don’t create too many milestones.

In fact, we think there are just six that happen from birth through graduation. Three typically happen in the home, and three typically happen in a larger faith community. But as a church leader you can influence what happens at all six lifestage milestones. You can resource parents and leaders so they can make these moments more intentional.

The way you influence each lifestage milestone will look different, but before we get to what makes each milestone unique, let’s talk about three things that make all milestones the same.



MILESTONES ARE
ALWAYS CELEBRATED
IN COMMUNITY AND
**CONNECTED TO A
BIGGER STORY.**

#GOWEELY

1. LIFESTAGE MILESTONES ARE ALWAYS CELEBRATED IN COMMUNITY.

Maybe this is just because . . .
karaoke is less fun without an audience,
potluck dinner alone is a really small meal,
and nothing endears an acquaintance's heart like a chance for some cake.

But whatever the reason, celebrations tend to happen with other people. In every lifestage milestone, you have an opportunity to leverage the community who naturally shows up to celebrate. *Your job is to help the relationships that are already in place go deeper in these moments so their relationships can matter more in the moments to come.*

2. LIFESTAGE MILESTONES CONNECT PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

Every milestone is an opportunity . . .
to celebrate history,
to clarify the present,
and imagine the future.

A lifestage milestone is an event, but it isn't an isolated event. It's connected to what has come before and it will impact what comes after. So it's important to think about the before and the after anytime you think about celebrating a lifestage milestone. *Your job is to connect the celebration moment to all the moments leading up to and coming after that moment so the celebration can have a more lasting impact.*

3. LIFESTAGE MILESTONES REMIND US OF A BIGGER STORY.

The personal narrative aspect of a lifestage milestone also has faith implications. When it comes to faith, every lifestage milestone is an opportunity to remember God's faithfulness, celebrate God's presence and anticipate the future fulfillment of God's promises. *Your job is to tell an individual's story in light of God's story so they will remember they are a part of something bigger.*

Each of these six milestones has the potential to deepen existing relationships, solidify personal identity and connect to a bigger story. As kids encounter the milestones from birth to graduation, the way you practically make these three things happen will look different. Let's talk about each one of the six more specifically:



THE BEGINNING
BABY DEDICATION

CELEBRATE THE FIRST
CHAPTER OF LIFE.

#GOWEEKLY

BEGINNING

CELEBRATING THE FIRST CHAPTER OF LIFE

(This celebration happens at church.)

Some traditions call it a baby dedication. It's a moment in time when parents publicly commit to parenting with the future faith of their child in mind. It usually happens sometime in the first two years—on a day when parents have had more sleep than normal or grandparents force them to take a minute to celebrate.

The relationship that matters most for the baby at this lifestage milestone is their relationship with their parents. This makes parents the most central people for the baby dedication celebration. If you want to make this milestone matter for a baby, it needs to matter for the parents. So, here are two things you can do for parents when their child reaches this lifestage milestone:

1. Support the parent(s). Help them identify their personal community. Remind them that in this season when it feels like they exist simply to meet the ever-demanding needs of this new life, they still have to take care of themselves for the sake of their child. Let them know you have a place for them to find community, and retell the story of God's love for us. God loves every parent as they love their child, and He has promised to never leave and never give up on us. These can be encouraging promises for a new parent.

2. Help the parent(s) imagine the end. Give parents an opportunity to reflect on their personal story. What have they learned in the past that they hope will shape the future for their child? How do they want to raise this child? This is the stage when parents tend to be optimistic and enthusiastic. Lean into that optimism and help parents set a few goals for themselves. Encourage parents to write down their goals so they can come back to them in the future.

A great resource for celebrating the Beginning with families in your church is [Baby D](#). You'll get all the tools, videos, and materials you'll need to host a seamless event.



WISDOM
FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

CELEBRATE THE POTENTIAL
TO DISCOVER AND LEARN.

#GOWEEKLY

WISDOM

CELEBRATING THE POTENTIAL TO DISCOVER AND LEARN

(This celebration happens in the home.)

This milestone happens the first day of Kindergarten. We're about to celebrate this with my son this fall, so I've been thinking a lot lately about this particular celebration. I have to remind myself that this moment is about more than making sure he gets the best teacher—although, as his mom I will naturally care a lot about things like what to pack for his lunch, whether or not he's old enough to ride the bus, and whether he'll find good friends and feel challenged by the curriculum.

At this milestone, adults still have more influence than peers. So the best relationships to leverage are adult relationships. As you help parents pause to celebrate this lifestage milestone with their child, here are two options to consider:

1. Identify adults who have witnessed the accomplishments of toddlerhood. (e.g., first steps, potty training and learning to share) If you have leaders in your church who have watched the child grow, have them write down or record a video of ways they've seen this child discover and learn in the first five years of life. Share that video with the parents. Encourage parents to invite other adults from their community to celebrate this milestone with their child.

2. Communicate hopes for the child's elementary years. As you promote children into your elementary environments, over-emphasize this transition. Tell parents how you want to support them in the upcoming years. Encourage parents to imagine the end just like they did when their baby was new and make a list of their goals for parenting in the elementary years. Help parents communicate those hopes to their child at the beginning of this new journey.



FAITH
SALVATION OR BAPTISM

CELEBRATE THE DECISION
TO FOLLOW CHRIST.

#GOWEELY

FAITH

CELEBRATING THE DECISION TO FOLLOW CHRIST

(The party to celebrate typically happens at church.)

Baptism celebrates a public profession of faith. There's no way to celebrate this day too much. If there's ever a time to "go big" it's this one . . . okay, without breaking the bank. But don't under-commemorate this milestone. Just remember that even though the celebration typically happens at church, it's not all about the church. There are many relationships involved and there's incredible potential when you leverage this milestone well.

1. Include parents, adult leaders and peers. Unlike the other lifestage milestones, this milestone may happen at many different ages. That means there could be any number of primary relationships at the point when a person first puts their trust in Jesus. The important thing is to include them all. Include adult leaders who have been and will continue to be a consistent influence in the kid's life. Include peers, both inside your church and outside the church. And include parents—even if they don't go to your church, even if they aren't believers, even if they go to your church and they've challenged your ministry style. Make this moment about the kid who has made a profession of faith. Include anyone and everyone who will come and celebrate this significant moment with them.

2. Establish four spiritual habits. Beyond just a celebration, there's an opportunity to talk about what happens next. Faith isn't just a one-time decision—it's the beginning of a lifelong journey. One of the ways you can prepare a child or student for future faith is to leverage this celebration to help them begin some habits that will continue to grow their faith. Find an adult who will commit to helping them discover what it means to . . .

HEAR from God and remember His words.

PRAY to God consistently.

TALK about God with others.

LIVE a life of worship.

Family Birthday Celebration is an excellent resource to help your church throw a memorable party for families to celebrate a child's decision to follow Christ.



IDENTITY
COMING OF AGE

CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY
TOWARD ADULTHOOD.

#GOWEELY

IDENTITY

CELEBRATING THE JOURNEY TOWARD ADULTHOOD

(This celebration happens in the home.)

You probably know it as puberty. And no, it's not always a celebration, and it doesn't actually happen in a moment. But there is a moment. And there can be a moment. Don't think about that too hard. It's just that so often we feel intimidated by what's awkward, and we miss out on what can be significant. Between the ages of nine and twelve something begins to shift. Kids know things are changing. And they need adults to recognize that something is changing in them and about them.

Just in case you were confused about this, kids don't want to celebrate this milestone with their peers. So that's not the primary relationship to leverage for the Identity milestone. But there can be a significant moment with family and other adult leaders to celebrate the beginning of an individual's journey toward adulthood. Here are two ways you can support this significant milestone:

1. Give parents a way to acknowledge it. A coming-of-age celebration can bring dignity and intentionality to what might otherwise be an awkward life transition. The most essential element of this milestone is that someone acknowledges it. As a kid begins puberty and starts to move out of childhood, they need to feel seen and known. They need adults who will say, "You're becoming one of us now." You might put an event on your calendar when fathers can take their sons camping, and create a specific off-site opportunity for this event to happen. Or you can resource parents with ideas on how to leverage a particular birthday in a more significant way. However you choose to do it, look for a way to help parents acknowledge the changes taking place in their son or daughter.

2. Elevate the importance of other adult influences. In the years to come, a parent's influence will diminish. That's true for every parent—regardless of how involved or spiritual they may be. This lifestage milestone is a perfect opportunity to identify key adults who already have influence in a kid's life and deepen those relationships. A coming-of-age celebration is a moment when adults can share the secrets of living an adult life with faith and character. So support parents by giving them other adults who will commit to being present consistently in the life of their child. Encourage parents to find other adults who can share life lessons and future hopes as they move toward adulthood.



FREEDOM
DRIVER'S LICENSE

CELEBRATE A
STEP TOWARDS
INDEPENDENCE.

#GOWEEKLY

FREEDOM

CELEBRATE A SIGNIFICANT STEP TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

(This celebration happens in the home.)

This milestone happens the day a teenager gets his or her driver's license. In a line up with baptism and puberty, it may seem like getting a driver's license is a small thing to turn into a milestone, but you remember it, don't you? There's something that changes forever in a teenager's world when they're no longer dependent on someone else for transportation. Chances are you can still recall the feeling of your first full tank of gas, out on the road, the world at your fingertips. If you live in a walking community or an area where getting a driver's license is less common, there is a similar experience when a teenager receives their first paycheck. Whenever the moment occurs, it's a significant step toward autonomy and independence.

The primary relationships during this phase of life are typically peers. That doesn't mean that the milestone is celebrated by peers. Actually, it's celebrated by parents who understand what this will mean for peer relationships . . . and dating relationships. (It's potentially one of the most terrifying milestones in parenting.)

As church leaders we typically have very little influence on this milestone, except that we celebrate privately no longer needing to provide transportation to events and worry inwardly if students will continue to show up now that they have more freedom to choose. But what if there was a way to lean into this lifestage milestone in a more direct way? Here are two ideas on making the most of this milestone:

- 1. Support the parent(s).** Remember how parents needed support in those early years when their baby was new? This may be the next-most-desperate phase of parenting. A driver's license typically hits during the phase of heightened tension between parents and teenagers who are trying to navigate fluctuating hormones, differing agendas and opinions, and the great tension of letting go and holding on. Parents in this phase need the support of other parents who have been through this phase and survived. Use this lifestage milestone to connect parents with other parents who can give them the encouragement and help they need.



GRADUATION

CELEBRATE THE TRANSITION
TOWARD VOCATION
AND CAREER.

#GOWEELY

2. Communicate expectations. You have a weekly audience with teenagers who are experiencing this significant milestone. That means you have an opportunity relationally to lean in and say a few things that any loving parent would say. What do you hope will be true regarding a teenager's future choices and continued freedom? Encourage parents to think about what they'll say as their kid encounters this lifestage milestone. When the tension is low, when they go out to a celebratory lunch, what will they communicate in that moment to help set boundaries and goals? Provide parents with resources that can help them make the most of this significant moment.

GRADUATION

CELEBRATING THE TRANSITION TOWARD VOCATION AND CAREER

(This celebration happens in the home and at church.)

This is the end of an era. It will be celebrated in the home, at school, in club sports-leagues . . . and at church. This milestone is easily the most highly anticipated of any of the six. From the time a child is born, parents know roughly when it might occur. For twelve years, kids listen to teachers warn against anything that might prevent this day from happening. For months leading up to this day, students try to figure out how to answer questions about "what's next?" when most of the time they have no idea.

There are a number of mistakes we often make as church leaders during this milestone. Often we acknowledge where a kid is going, and we forget about where they've been. Often we do a better job of promoting them out of student ministry than we do of welcoming them into a larger church community. Often we make this about an isolated Sunday without having a plan for what happens next. There are many ways to make graduation a more significant milestone for the life and faith of a teenager. Here are two:

1. Retell their story. Graduation is a moment in time to re-tell the stories of the many phases of a teenager's life. Celebrate the many ways you've watched this individual grow through the years. How have they navigated failure, demonstrated grit and perseverance? How have they shown generosity? What have they shown you about following God in faithfulness? Even if you aren't the one telling these stories, you can resource those who know them best with simple suggestions to help them tell the story. Every kid has a story to celebrate. Using this opportunity to look back will help solidify their foundation as they move ahead.

2. Give them someone. If there was one goal for graduation, it should be this: Every kid who graduates will have one phone number they know they can call—no matter what. To expand on that, every kid has one adult, besides their parent, who knows them and who is committed to stay with them for the next year or two as they transition to what's next. This is an adult who cares about their faith and their future, and who will check in on occasion to see how both are going. As leaders, what if the best graduation gift we could give every senior wasn't a Bible? What if it was an adult who saw their graduation not as the end of something, but as the beginning? What if it was someone who could make sure—no matter what happens in the months to come—they always know they have a place to belong?

Every week you create environments that will influence the day-to-day activities of a kid's life. You re-energize their week. You create a rhythm by giving them what they need most over time to give them history.

But remember, some weeks are different than the rest. Every once in a while a day comes along that matters a little more.

Each one of these six lifestage milestones has unique potential to help kids and parents both feel celebrated, supported and connected to a bigger story.

So . . .

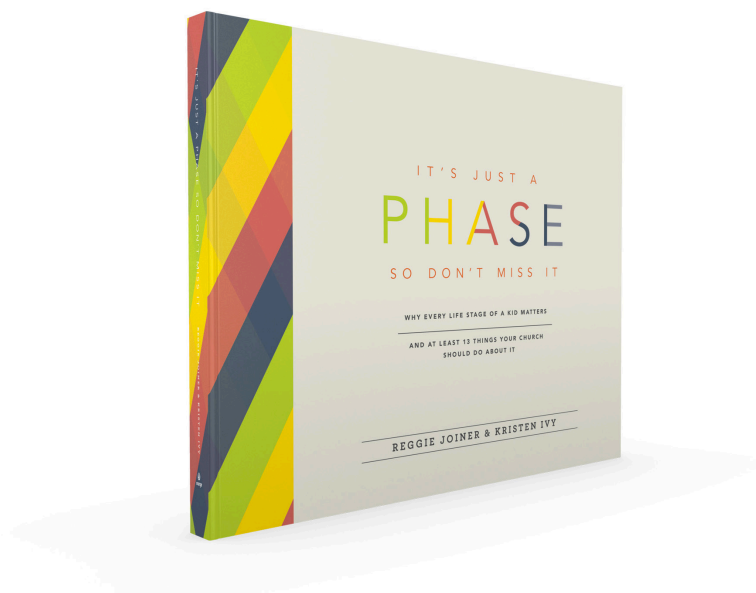
Look for ways to leverage every milestone to deepen the connection between kids and the adults who know them best.
Discover new ways to tell the story to help kids connect their past to the present in a way that will shape their future.
Use every milestone as an opportunity to remember God's faithfulness and celebrate His future promises.

Remember, the way you celebrate these significant days will impact the direction of kids' and teenagers' lives.

So don't miss it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **What milestones does our church currently celebrate or resource families to celebrate?**
2. **Are there milestones we would like to begin to celebrate that we aren't celebrating?** Are there milestones we are currently celebrating that may get in the way of or distract from the larger milestones in a kid's life?
3. **How do parents find out about the milestone events that we provide and how are we helping families understand the potential of these moments?**
4. **How are we preparing parents before milestone events so they can personalize the moment and leverage it relationally?**
5. **Do our milestone celebrations connect families to our larger family ministry strategy?** Does every milestone celebration have a clear "next step" for the family?



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

A NEW BOOK BY REGGIE JOINER & KRISTEN IVY

Every church knows that kids matter. Does your church act like every kid matters at every phase?

A phase is a timeframe in a kid's life when you can leverage distinctive opportunities to influence their future.

"It's Just A Phase" is a challenge for churches to treat every kid who breathes like they are made in the image of God.

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