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The Gospel According to Crazy Bandz

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At the risk of appearing behind the curve on tween trends, I'd like to tell a story.

Recently we welcomed a new batch of sixth graders into our middle school ministry. This is an annual June ritual, one we anticipate and get excited about each year. While we are sad to see eighth graders move up, the energy and enthusiasm the new class brings is a real pick-me-up. Unlike the eighth graders, who are hungry for high school, the newbies *want* to be there. Watching their eyes is a thrill.

One of our new girls' names is Hannah. She's a really sweet kid, and on the first day she talked to me, I noticed some colorful, elastic bands on her wrist. I asked about them, and she told me they were called Crazy Bandz then took one off and showed me that this was no ordinary bracelet. The one she showed me was shaped like a cat. Then she put it back on her wrist. Then she took it off again. Still a cat! I was impressed. So I asked questions.

"Do they make different kinds?"

Do they ever! You can get giraffes, baseballs, high heels, and surfers in the middle of a pipeline. It's pretty incredible. Moreover, there are numerous companies marketing these silicone wonders. There are Crazy Bandz (which claim to be the original), Silly Bandz (which claim to be the original), Zanybandz (which make no claims on originality but seem to

specialize in animals) and even Faith Bands (insert Christian marketing joke here). So yes, there are different kinds.

The differences between the brands are slight. Some glow in the dark, some do not. Crazy Bandz claim to be “Bigger. Thicker. Stronger.” And perhaps they are. What is more interesting is to watch kids interact with them.

I inquired further. “So what’s the big deal with them?”

This is a question many parents and other fuddy-duddies are asking. I observed that they are our students’ generational equivalent of slap bracelets, the hot commodity when I was in middle school. (What could be better than a piece of jewelry you were *supposed* to beat each other with! It’s a pre-pubescent boy’s dream!) But the confusion over slap bracelets is no different from the current trend. Weren’t they just as puzzling in their intent, design and function?

But the key to the crazy/silly/zany bands is not what they are made of or what their shapes are or how much they cost. The most interesting side of this phenomenon is *how kids interact with them*.

If you work with middle schoolers, you’ve probably seen it already. I wonder if your observations are the same as mine.

1. The Point is Connectivity

On that first day of her middle school life, Hannah gave me a crazy band. We instantly bonded. Later that week, I traded with a high school student for one of hers. The next Sunday, I traded with Hannah for another one. To this day, Hannah and I are connected to each other by this tiny piece of plastic...or whatever it is. I give her updates on how my knowledge of the product has progressed. She laughs and talks about the ones she has added to her collection. She gives me permission to be a big dork, and I get to learn about her in ways I might not otherwise.

The same ritual is repeated by kids all over the place. They swap with friends, go out in groups to buy more and share their new finds with each other. In the same way that young men orbited around baseball cards in the ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s, young people today—boys and girls alike—connect with each other through Crazy Bandz.

It prompts one of the companies to implore, “wear ‘em, *share* ‘em, collect ‘em all.” The point is connectivity.

2. They Can Be Personalized

These silly trinkets also help define individuals. Are you a jock? Wear the sports set. Do you fancy yourself a little princess? Slip on some silicone silhouettes of stiletto heels. Perhaps you long to be a hunter in the wilderness of Africa. Well, you get my point.

Like the clothes they wear, the music they listen to and the websites they visit, these wristbands provide an outlet for kids to say something

about themselves. Most mainstream kids will wear one or two. Early adapters probably have a sleeve full. The rebels aren't wearing them yet and refuse to. Quirky kids are going to find ways to put a different spin on them—connecting them to a necklace somehow, wearing them on their ankles or who knows what. It's all about the individual. There are even certain companies that make them custom—whatever shape you want.

My five-year-old has caught on to their existence and insists on only wearing a pink one. She loves pink. Some kids will wear gender-specific shapes. Other kids try to collect the most they can. It's whatever they want to do. They're fun. They're easy to wear and use.

It's up to you what you want to do with them.

3. They Are Constant

You don't have to agree with me, but the simplest truth of these silly wristbands is that you can wear them, wash them and otherwise maim them, and they always snap back into shape. Once a baseball, always a baseball. Once a two-humped camel, always a two-humped camel. These things don't budge; they don't break (the cheaper rip-offs do); and they always stay the same.

I think kids love this about them. Try as they might, these bracelets don't change.

Everything in the life of a middle school student is changing—their voices, their grades, their knowledge, the amount of hair they have in their armpits; more seriously, their families, their churches, their friendships. Things are getting complex, things are getting messy, things are getting harder.

What better to speak to a kid at this stage of life than a simple, clean-cut, never-changing piece of rubber jewelry? It's innocent, it's inexpensive, it's always down there on your wrist. And better yet, if you take it off, it's the same shape it was when you put it on. It doesn't change.

The Gospel?

Can we as youth workers really learn something about our ministries and our students from a silly piece of silicone? I think so.

- How interactive is your ministry?
- In what ways do you successfully connect students?
- How much individual, personal attention do you give each student?
- Do you celebrate individual kids (even if they're weird) and allow them the freedom to do their thing?
- Do you try to make every kid look the same, talk the same and have the same attitude?
- How stable is your ministry? What does that stability communicate about God?

- Are you and other adults in their lives? What does this say about the gospel?
- How often do you talk about an unchanging God? How can you help kids apply this truth in the unstable environments they live in?

I was talking to Hannah's mom the other day. She was wandering our halls while our middle schoolers were in their worship service. I asked her how Hannah was doing so far, being a new sixth grader.

"She loves it," she said. "She doesn't want to miss."

She went on to say that they live 30 minutes away but that every time they bring up not driving in for church, Hannah balks at the notion. She wants to be with her friends, she wants to be at church, she wants to worship and hear sermons and enjoy everything we have going on. I'm not saying it's all because of these silly bands, but I *am* suggesting that the same things that attract her to the bracelets attract her to our ministry: friendships, individual attention and an uncompromising love of a gospel that stars a God who never wavers.

Next time your group gets together, look around the room. You may be inclined to ignore what's wrapped around their arms. Instead, take notice of the fad and learn something from it. I sure have.