



CHAPTER FIVE

Nurturing the Faith of Young People through the Family

Jolene Roehlkepartain

• • • • Fostering faith development would be easier if young people stayed the same, but children, teenagers, and young adults are always growing and changing. Understanding child, adolescent, and young adult development, particularly in how it impacts transmitting faith, is key to making faith stick for young people.

Five Major Age Groups

The way you transmit faith to a three-year-old varies greatly from the way you transmit faith to a twelve-year-old or a twenty-year-old. Understanding the way young people think and assimilate information and values at each stage is critical for their faith formation.

The following five parts of this chapter explore five major age groups:

- Young children from birth to age 5
- Older children from ages 6–10
- Young adolescents from ages 11–14

- Older adolescents from ages 15–18
- Young adults from ages 19–29

Most churches work with these age groups through different people and different ministries. Some have Christian education for children. Some have youth groups. Some have confirmation. Some have young adult ministries. Very few churches have one adult (or a group of adults) who work with all five of these age groups. Because of this, transmitting the faith can become uneven and not strategic, particularly if some ministries emphasize certain philosophies (such as having fun instead of education or keeping young children occupied instead of transmitting faith).

The Gesell Institute of Human Development has conducted research that shows that young people don't grow up in a smooth way. In fact, young people tend to go through cycles. As a society, we're familiar with the terrible twos, the trying teens, and the quiet years in between, but child and adolescent development is more than that.

The Gesell Institute has found that young people go through six cycles that repeat (but expand and show up in different ways). Here is what these six cycles look like for typical young people between the ages of two and fifteen (Ilg, Bates Ames, and Baker, 12–46). See Display 5.1.

These cycles explain why some age groups seem easier to work with (such as 3-year-olds, 6 ½-year-olds, and 12-year-olds), why other age groups can be more challenging (such as 2 ½-year-olds, 5 ½-year-olds, and 11-year-olds), and why some groups tend to be more reflective (such as 3 ½-year-olds, 7-year-olds, and 13-year-olds). Of course, a child's personality also impacts this as well (along with the behaviors that the child is learning from his or her family), but child development reveals a lot of information that's helpful for parents and church leaders for passing along the faith.

DISPLAY 5.1

**Cycles of behavior for young people
between two and fifteen**

Smooth and consolidated	2 years	5 years	10 years
Breaking-up behavior	2 ½ years	5 ½ to 6 years	11 years
Rounded and balanced	3 years	6 ½ years	12 years
Inward behavior	3 ½ years	7 years	13 years
Vigorous, expansive behavior	4 years	8 years	14 years
Conflicted behavior	4 ½ years	9 years	15 years

The Ten Faith Factors

Each of the five parts of this chapter examines how every age group views and integrates various aspects of faith formation. Each part explores these ten faith factors:

1. Feeling valued and accepted
2. Developing caring relationships
3. Engaging in learning
4. Celebrating milestones
5. Praying and meditating
6. Serving, volunteering, and helping
7. Attending worship services
8. Finding meaning and purpose
9. Examining a personal religion and spirituality
10. Developing an integrative faith

Although each of these faith factors is important, the way young people experience, explore, and integrate each factor varies depending on their age, their personality, and their circumstance. Understanding the child and adolescent development of how each age group explores (or resists) certain aspects of each faith factor makes a big difference in their faith journey. The chart “The Ten Faith Factors Shaping Each Stage of Life from Birth to Age 29” highlights the developmental progression for each of these faith factors for these five major age groups (see Display 5.2 on page 108).

Each of the five parts of this chapter not only gives information about the developmental tasks of each age group, they each also give concrete ways to transmit the faith to a particular age group. In essence, these five parts provide a foundation of child and adolescent development while also giving practical tips on faith formation.

The Seven Stages of Parents of Faith

Adults and parents greatly impact the way faith is transmitted to children and teens. Not only are young people going through stages, but so are parents. “Understanding parental growth does not circumvent it,” writes Ellen Galinsky, the author of *Between Generations: The Six Stages of Parenthood*. “However, it does help parents manage their confusions so that instead of being entrapped or swept along, we can see where we have been, where we are, and make more deliberate and careful choices about where we want to go” (12).

Examining how parents grow and change through a faith lens adds another dimension to their journey. The following stages show the progression that parents go through as their children grow up. Some stages are easier for parents, but others

create a great deal of conflict and uncertainty. The more parents understand what's happening to them and around them, the more effective they can be in passing along faith to their children.

The more we understand what young people are going through developmentally and what parents face, the more we can help families transmit the faith, the values, and the traditions they cherish most to future generations while keeping their families at the center of their lives.

Stage 1: Wondering and Imagining

During the waiting process (of adoption or pregnancy), adults wonder what it will be like to be parents and to have a child join them. It's the Advent time of parenting. Many parents see this as a sacred experience, spending time in wonder and prayer (prebirth).

Stage 2: Caring and Nurturing

During the first two years of a child's life, parents meet the child's needs and provide great care and nurture, which lays the foundation for spiritual formation. By giving young children a lot of faith experiences at home and away from home, children develop the critical foundation they need for their faith journey (birth to 2 years).

Stage 3: Testing and Treasuring

When children begin to resist and explore limits, parents become tested themselves. How will they respond to these displays of power while treasuring their child from a faith perspective? Parents can talk with children about God, pray with them, take them to worship services, introduce children to people of faith, and love their children deeply while setting clear boundaries, all what children need for their faith journey (2 to 5 years).

Stage 4: Supporting and Strengthening

During the elementary-school years, parents support their child's spiritual and overall development, strengthening ties to other people and to important institutions, such as church and school. When parents pray, eat together as a family, attend worship services, and have conversations about faith, they help strengthen their child's faith journey (6 to 10 years).

Stage 5: Experimenting and Encouraging

While young adolescents experiment with different identities, parents discover that they, too, need to experiment with new ways to interact with their young adolescent while encouraging him or her to develop a personal faith. Parents continue to model their faith by attending worship services regularly, doing service projects, praying, reading scripture, and talking about faith (11 to 14 years).

Stage 6: Guiding and Questioning

High school-age young people need parents who help them make sense of their world and their future. While older teenagers question various aspects of faith, parents need to question how they can continue to model and talk about faith issues that bring them closer to their teenager rather than drive them apart. Parents need to continue showing that their faith matters to them by talking about it, attending worship services, and doing other faith practices, such as prayer and meditation (15 to 18 years).

Stage 7: Launching and Fostering

As young adults leave home and find their way in the world, they need parents who remain connected to them while letting them go. Parents continue to serve as faith models for their young adults, providing a safe place for young adults to grapple with faith issues. When parents have a strong religious commitment (meaning they attend worship services regularly and talk about the importance of their faith), the more likely young adults will find a religious grounding (19 to 29 years).

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DISPLAY 5.2

The ten faith factors shaping each stage of life from birth to age 29

Note: These factors are rooted in child development, adolescent development, adult development, and faith development.

Young children (ages 0 to 5)	Older children (ages 6 to 10)	Young adolescents (ages 11 to 14)	Older adolescents (ages 15 to 18)	Young adults (ages 19 to 29)
1. Feels valued and accepted	1. Connects to safe and stimulating adults and peers	1. Yearns to be part of a group that matters	1. Discovers a balance between acceptance and independence	1. Finds a unique place in the world with value and acceptance
2. Develops caring relationships	2. Thrives with consistent support and care	2. Craves support and fights it	2. Redefines meaningful support	2. Discovers an adult support system
3. Follows a curiosity for learning	3. Engages in learning and discovery	3. Feels conflicted about learning	3. Yearns to learn and succeed in meaningful ways	3. Explores curiosities and masters deeper learning
4. Celebrates milestones	4. Enjoys milestones	4. Celebrates milestones while resisting them	4. Enjoys meaningful milestones	4. Redefines and celebrates milestones
5. Tries meditation and prayer	5. Explores meditation and prayer	5. Wonders about meditation and prayer	5. Meditates and prays with questions	5. Meditates and prays
6. Serves and helps others	6. Develops fairness, justice, and compassion	6. Balks at some service; deepens on others	6. Creates a commitment to service	6. Becomes more compassionate
7. Attends worship services	7. Participates in worship services	7. Attends worship services with resistance	7. Participates in worship in ways that reflect a personal faith journey	7. Worships in ways that fit a personal value system
8. Observes adults who have purpose and meaning	8. Mimics adults who have purpose and meaning	8. Longs for meaning while wondering about it	8. Explores meaning and purpose	8. Searches for deeper purpose and meaning
9. Experiments with a personal spirituality	9. Becomes exposed to more religious and spiritual experiences	9. Desires religious and spiritual belonging	9. Questions religious and spiritual beliefs	9. Tinkers and challenges religion and spirituality
10. Explores how faith and life interact	10. Discovers how faith and life interact	10. Experiments with ways to integrate faith into life	10. Deepens faith integration while continuing to question	10. Develops an integrative faith independent of others

Part 5A. Nurturing the Faith of Young Children: Birth to Age 5

Helping young children grow spiritually entails surrounding them with rich religious experiences. The trick, however, is that so much happens under the radar during early childhood that it can be difficult to see results. “Religious development is like the building of a college,” writes R. S. Lee, author of *Your Growing Child and Religion*. “There is a long period when the foundations are being laid, when what is going on does not look at all like the finished product” (13).

This foundational time is critical. “This is the most important period in the whole of a person’s life in determining his later religious attitudes,” Lee writes (14). “The greater the building that has to be erected, the greater the need that the foundation be good. Religion is the most inclusive and most far-reaching aspect of life, and requires adequate foundations” (15).

A strong religious foundation cannot be erected without building the overall healthy development of a young child. A plethora of information exists on helping young children develop well, and this information focuses on the religious, spiritual, physical, cognitive, social, moral, and emotional development of young children. All of these aspects of development interact with each other (Leffert, Benson, and Roehlkepartain, 15). You cannot build one without the other.

Young children encompass an age range of birth to age five. Some experts define this group into newborns (birth to age four weeks), infants (four weeks to one year), toddlers (one to two years), and preschoolers (starting at age two) (Kail, xxi). The American Academy of Pediatrics defines young children as children from birth to age five (ii).

Through the rich literature on the healthy development of young children, ten broad faith factors arise as critical aspects of development. These ten factors attempt to synthesize a large body of critical developmental information, abundant in insight.

Ten Faith Factors of Young Children

Factor 1: Feels valued and accepted

Young children need to feel valued and accepted for who they are. Each child is a child of God, and every child should not only hear that but also experience that perspective as well (Fowler, 121).

“Nurturing young children certainly requires giving them special attention, warmth, and closeness,” says Karen VenderVen, who developed the Early Childhood Developmental Asset Framework. “It also means supporting their strivings toward independent personhood and providing a secure base as they move out in the world” (29).

This deep sense of value and acceptance goes beyond a warm, fuzzy feeling. It’s essential to a child’s well being and to a child’s faith development. “What the

brain, and therefore the body, needs for survival is attuned attention, engagements, smiling, holding, rocking, and singing—all behaviors that say, ‘You are loved’” (Senter, 143).

This factor of feeling valued and accepted lays the foundation for children to feel secure in their unique personhood—and also in their faith. Children need adults they can count on and who value them so that they feel safe and secure (Scales, Sesma, and Bolstrom, 61). This emotional security helps children see the world around them as a safe place to explore, rather than a scary place to avoid or fight back against. It provides them a grounding to begin their faith journey and to grow and develop spiritually over time.

Factor 2: Develops caring relationships

One of the essential processes of forming faith is developing caring relationships. Young children thrive as children—and later as teenagers and adults—when they have a strong attachment to their parents and caregivers from a young age. “The ‘recipe’ for secure attachments includes caregivers who are generally sensitive and responsive to the baby’s needs,” writes Terri Smith of the Center for Early Education and Development. “When a baby cries, a responsive caregiver tries to discover what the baby needs—to be fed, held, or to have a diaper changed. These babies see the world as predictable and sensible” (5).

Not only does a secure bonding and attachment help young children grow up well, these aspects of development give young children an important foundation in their faith life as well (Yust, 2004, 11). Children may be more likely to attach to a faith tradition that reminds them of the attachment they have to their parents. The more positive the attachment to parents, the more stronger the likelihood that a child will have a positive attachment to faith and religion.

Young children need the experience of trust from trustworthy adults. James W. Fowler, the author of *Stages of Faith*, says basic trust is a key element in developing a secure faith. Fowler highlights two faith stages for young children: Pre-stage: Undifferentiated Faith and Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (119–34).

Fowler’s Pre-stage: Undifferentiated Faith shows that children from infancy to twenty-three months need to trust their environment and the people around them. The biggest threat to children at this age is a perceived (or actual) threat of abandonment. Infants and toddlers also don’t thrive when they experience inconsistencies, such as changing rules, changing expectations of parents and caregivers, and changing environments (119–21).

“We all begin the pilgrimage of faith as infants,” Fowler says. “At birth, we are thrust into a new environment for which we have potential but not yet fully viable abilities” (119–20). When parents, caregivers, and other caring adults create a deep, predictable sense of trust for a young child, that young child receives the seeds to grow up well and to embark on a lifelong faith journey.

Factor 3: Follows a curiosity for learning

So much about faith formation involves learning, such as discovering the liturgical seasons, reading the Bible, and learning Christian traditions. Children are naturally born curious. They want to explore. This sense of curiosity is a foundation for a lifetime of learning about faith. Unfortunately, young children tend to receive a lot of negative reactions to exploration (“don’t do that” or “you’ll get hurt”) that many disengage from their sense of wonder and curiosity.

Adults can do a lot to create safe, stimulating environments where children can explore and learn about faith. Parents can do this at home. Churches can do this through church nurseries and other safe and educational spaces for children.

Activity-rich homes, child-care centers, churches, and preschools give young children ample time to explore a variety of activities, such as physical activity, creative activity, intellectual activity, reading, the arts, outdoor activities, indoor activities, solitary activities, interactive activities, and field trips. Adults who parent and work with young children also know the importance of pacing. Young children need quiet times, nap times, snack times, and transitional times.

A key way young children learn is through play. Unfortunately, many adults don’t value the power of play. When children play, they’re exploring their world, they’re discovering what it’s like to interact with other people, they’re using their imaginations, and they’re learning. “Rather than detracting from academic learning, play appears to support the abilities that underlie such learning and thus to promote school success,” says the National Association for the Education of Young Children (15).

Young children explore the world through their imagination. “The gift or emergent strength of this stage is the birth of imagination, the ability to unify and grasp the experience-world in powerful images,” writes James Fowler in *Stages of Faith* (134). Children’s imagination and curiosity can fool adults into thinking that young children grasp theological concepts and religious symbols more than they do. When young children ask questions about God and church, they need loving, caring adults who answer with care. If a child “finds that his questioning is taken seriously and with respect, it helps him to overcome the fears that too readily attach to the image he has formed of God, and he is encouraged to go on seeking an objective approach to God instead of the subjective one that marks the period” (Lee, 163).

Factor 4: Celebrates milestones

Growing in faith and discipleship by celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones provides a way to experience God’s love through significant moments in one’s life journey and faith journey. Young children master milestone after milestone during early childhood, from the first smile to the first steps to the first words (Leffert, Benson, and Roehlkepartain, 80). Churches celebrate milestones of young children such as infant dedication, baptism, a child’s first Bible, a child’s first religious education class, and many more.

Celebrating milestones helps nurture children in their personal development (giving them a sense of pride in their accomplishments) and also grounds them in faith. Marking milestones helps young children see progress along their spiritual journey. For young children, what's evident is their dependence "on their adult caregivers and their religious community to supply the religious vocabulary and rituals necessary for articulating and enacting their God-given spiritual nature" (Yust, 2015, 171).

Factor 5: Tries meditation and prayer

A key aspect of faith formation is helping young children learn how to pray and meditate. Although part of prayer involves talking to God, it's also about teaching young children how to sit in silence (Yust, 2014, 93). That's why a number of parents, adults, and church leaders not only teach prayers for children to recite, such as table prayers and bedtime prayers (93), but also teach and model meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 198–200).

Young children have short attention spans. They easily become bored, and they tell you (often loudly) about their boredom. That's why it's essential to teach prayer and meditation in small doses and to adapt to children's moods and shifts in energy (Kabat-Zinn, 198), allowing young children different ways to try meditation and prayer.

Karen-Marie Yust, an expert on children and spirituality, provides guidance on teaching silence to young children and different forms of prayer. In her book, she gives step-by-step advice on how to teach centering prayer, meditative prayer, guided meditation, and the seven biblical forms of prayer: lament, praise, confession, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and discipleship (Yust, 2004, 93–120).

Factor 6: Serves and helps others

Helping and serving others in need is another way to build the faith formation of young children. By doing simple acts of service and helping, young children discover that what they do and how they interact with others makes a difference (Roehlkepartain, 2000, 10).

Children learn about serving when they receive opportunities to serve in different aspects of their lives: at home with their families, at church in their Christian education classes, in preschool or childcare, and in community family volunteering projects (Friedman and Roehlkepartain, vii-x).

What type of service projects work well with young children? Short, one-time projects that allow children to help without overloading them with too much responsibility. One book lists volunteer projects that are appropriate for three-year-olds, four-year-olds, and five-year-olds, all under the guidance of caring adults (Friedman and Roehlkepartain, 224).

Factor 7: Attends worship services

For young children to grow up in the faith, attending worship services is an important component of their faith journey. "A congregation that is committed to children's

full belonging in the community of faith works conscientiously to create intergenerational worship and learning opportunities, reinforcing the idea that adults and children sojourn together in the spiritual life,” says Karen-Marie Yust (2004, 166).

Worship helps young children grow spiritually by giving them a sense of ritual. Most worship services have a predictable order of worship with a welcome, songs, a message, sacraments, and times for congregants to connect with each other. Although young children can become antsy and noisy, learning how to worship with others teaches them another dynamic of faith formation.

Too many churches now segregate people by age, creating children’s church and children’s education experiences away from the adult worship experience. “This may seem like a comfortable way to meet everyone’s needs for peer interaction,” says Karen-Marie Yust, “yet it also reinforces implicit rules about who belongs where and whose norms shape particular aspects of community life” (2004, 166).

Factor 8: Observes adults who have purpose and meaning

One of the key tenets of faith for all individuals is to find purpose and meaning (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 21). Young children begin the process of finding purpose and meaning by observing adults around them who have purpose and meaning. Young children can quickly discern when adults feel lost and rudderless—or depressed. They also can sense when adults have a passion for purpose and live a life of meaning and faith (Leffert, Benson, and Roehlkepartain, 82–83).

Although young children begin the process of finding purpose and meaning by observing the adults around them, they also engage in purpose and meaning by playing. “Play is a child’s work,” says Maria Montessori, a leader in early childhood education (Shrier, 1). One study found that 98 percent of children said play was their favorite activity (Hendrick and Weissman, 50–54).

Play is a fundamental way that children process what’s happening in their faith journey. “Play is the child’s symbolic language of self-expression and can reveal (a) what the child has experienced; (b) reaction to what was experienced; (c) feelings about what was experienced; (d) what the child wishes, wants, or needs; and (e) the child’s perception of self” (Landreth, 17). By observing and playing with young children we can learn a great deal about how they are processing their faith journey.

Factor 9: Experiments with a personal spirituality

For young children to grow up as people of faith, they need religious and spiritual care from the time they’re born. Children in cultures outside of the United States tend to receive more spiritual and religious care as infants (Gottlieb, 122–35), but a number of American faith traditions place a great emphasis on the religious and spiritual care of young children through caring church nurseries, encouraging families to bring infants and other young children to worship together, offering religious education classes to young children, and reinforcing and reassuring families that the way they spiritually nurture their young children at home matters.

This religious and spiritual care lays the essential foundation that young children need to develop a personal spirituality. This foundation helps young children focus on discovering themselves, their family, and the world. “By fulfilling this task [young children] acquire the means necessary to go on to the further discovery, that of God” (Lee, 15).

What trips up many families is when young children begin to resist and test the limits. “The aggression of children can unleash powerful aggressive feelings in adults,” writes Ellen Galinsky, the author of *Between Generations: The Six Stages of Parenthood* (123). “Parents confront the issue of ‘power’ in a way that they have probably never experienced before,” Galinsky writes. “The child will probably test any strictures to see how steadfast they are, if they’ll sway. The child wants and needs to know what the real ground rules are and how his or her parents react to pressure” (120).

Child development experts suggest that parents and adults help young children integrate their healthy responses of aggression, not by eliminating aggression or suppressing it but by expressing it appropriately (Lee, 112). “The problem of handling aggression is of extreme importance for religion,” writes Lee (106). “The young child’s need of parents whose love is unshaken and to whom he can turn for help in overcoming his sense of unlovableness is repeated in the adult’s need for a God whose love is unfailing” (111).

How do young children view God? For a child three years old and younger, “God is a real person who lives in a place called heaven or at one’s house of worship,” says Karen-Marie Yust. “God provides comfort (like a blankie) and cares for one like a parent” (2004, 125).

Factor 10: Explores how faith and life interact

Young children thrive when adults teach them about Christian traditions and how to apply them to life. Adults who create predictable routines where young children explore different, stimulating activities in the presence and interaction of caring adults (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 16, 20–21) give young children a sense of grounding that helps them integrate faith into their lives over time.

For young children, faith is action. It’s more than sitting and learning about faith, it’s experiencing it. Churches that encourage children to move around and make their faith active often create a culture where children (and their parents) want them to come back for more (2008, i).

Young children need to know how to act and how not to act, how to talk to others and how not to talk to others, how to treat themselves and how not to treat themselves. They need consistent messages about right and wrong from their parents and the other adults they interact with at church, preschool, and in their extended families (Leffert, Benson, and Roehlkepartain, 43). This process of moral development is a key aspect of integrating faith into life (Kelcourse, 78).

Nurturing, Caring Parents

“Fortunate are the parents with a strong religious faith,” writes Dr. Benjamin Spock in his classic book *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care*. “They are supported by a sense of conviction and serenity in all their activities. Usually they can pass on their faith to at least a majority of their children” (13).

Parents are “the most influential adults in children’s lives” (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 226). Parents have the power to influence their children’s faith formation. They can tap into the many resources around them, many of which are underutilized. In essence, parents have more power than they think (Scales, Benson, Mannes, et. al., 17–19).

Becoming and being a parent of a young child can tax any adult. “There is little preparation, an abrupt transition, and a need for substantial change and skill,” writes Ellen Galinsky. “In our society most jobs have clear expectations—parenthood doesn’t” (118). When you add in the essential role that parents have in developing the faith formation of their children, we need to give parents helpful guidance and feedback.

Parents of young children rapidly move through three stages of being parents of faith. This begins with Stage 1: Wondering and Waiting, which happens during the adoption or pregnancy process. Once the child is born (or joins the family through adoption), parents enter Stage 2: Caring and Nurturing, which lays the foundation for spiritual formation. Around age two, parents enter Stage 3: Testing and Treasuring. How will parents respond to the child’s displays of power while treasuring their child from a faith perspective?

The way an adult parents greatly affects a child’s faith. Researcher Diana Baumrind identified three major parenting styles: the Permissive style (where a parent is nonpunitive, accepting, and affirming, which gives the child too much power), the Authoritarian style (where a parent controls and punishes a child, which gives the parent too much power), and the Authoritative style (where a parent sets boundaries but encourages more of a give-and-take approach to set and enforce boundaries). The best approach, the Authoritative style, emphasizes the power of both the parent and the child (Baumrind 43–88). When a parent adopts the authoritative parenting style, children feel valued. They develop a loving relationship with their parents, and they develop a strong attachment and trust, all which young children need to grow up well in their faith. These aspects of faith, which we don’t talk about often enough, are core pillars that keep the foundation of faith strong and secure.

Parents are the key providers of the ten faith factors discussed in the preceding pages. By giving young children a lot of positive faith experiences at home and away from home, children develop the critical foundation they need for their faith journey (Lee, 13–15). Parents can talk with children about God, pray with them, take them to worship services, introduce children to people of faith, and love their children deeply, a key foundation that young children need to start their faith

journey (Fowler, 119–121). Churches can offer a lot to support parents—and to partner with parents—so that parents see churches as allies and resources.

Nurturing, Caring Grandparents

More than three out of four older adults in the United States are grandparents (Lyon, 286). “Studies show that grandparents continue to serve important symbolic and socializing roles for younger generations,” says K. Brynolf Lyon (286).

Grandparents are important people to help young children develop their spirituality and to expose young children to religious rituals. Grandparents have a different relationship with young children compared to the parents of the young children, and this role is vital for the healthy development of young children. Grandparents have a way of cherishing and valuing children that helps children to see they’re worthwhile people.

The way parents and grandparents interact greatly affects how adults model and teach faith practices to young children. “Grandparents can hasten or retard this process,” writes Ellen Galinsky. “If the grandparents are complimentary, this usually gives the new parents sustenance, it seems to fill them up with an emotional nourishment. If, on the other hand, grandparents are critical, displeased, it can be difficult, an added source of tension for the new parents” (104).

Grandparents are key adults in the life of a young child. “Grandparents will have an increasing influence on religious transmission, support, and socialization in the twenty-first century,” writes John Roberto. “Grandparents provide religious influence by replacing or substituting for parents’ religious socialization—the ‘skipped generation’ effect, and by reinforcing or accentuating parents’ religious socialization.”

Nurturing, Caring Extended Family Members

The way other extended family members interact with young children (aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, and other extended family members) also helps young children grow up in the faith. Although each relationship may vary, a special aunt, a special uncle, or another extended family member who takes interest in a child and builds a relationship with that child can greatly impact the child’s faith journey—and the whole family’s faith journey. Too often, we overlook these other important relationships because of the importance of parents and grandparents, but these relationships also matter.

The same is true for other adults outside the family. Sometimes a neighbor, a colleague at work, a childcare provider, a babysitter, or an adult friend of the family plays a significant role in the nurturing of a child’s faith development. So much of our society places a great deal of stress and pressure on parents, and parents cannot parent children well alone (Roehlkepartain, Scales, Roehlkepartain, et. al., 2–3).

Parents need the support of other adults, adults in their extended family, adults in their neighborhoods and community, adults in their churches, adults in their workplaces. By working together, we can all bring out the best in young children so that they begin an enriching faith journey—not only during early childhood—but through the rest of their lives.

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Part 5B. Nurturing the Faith of Older Children: Ages 6 to 10

Nurturing the spiritual growth of older children (ages 6 to 10) tends to be an easier time of faith development compared to other ages of development. Children are growing rapidly at this age, and they're often enthusiastic and full of wonder. They've developed a number of skills that younger children don't have (such as sitting still for longer periods of time and following directions better), and they haven't entered the stage of early adolescence where young people begin to resist and question things.

Older children who have been given the firm faith foundation in early childhood often seem like sponges—soaking up everything they come into contact with. Lead them in prayer, and they jump in. Bring them to worship, and they participate. Ask them to read a scripture aloud, and they'll start reading.

“Spiritual development usually begins to find individual expression at 6 years of age,” write Vivian Thompson and Jacqueline Braeger. “Until age 5 ½ to 8, the child has accepted the mores and values of his or her parents. During the years of 8 to 11, he or she begins to examine this parental belief system” (196). The examination during childhood, however, tends not to rock the boat too much, which is why churches often find it easier to recruit volunteers to work with this age group and why parents often enjoy spending more time with their children during this age range.

Yet we may be overly complacent about the faith journey of this age group. Usually we worry more about teenagers than older children, but major changes are happening for this age group. The danger to watch out for is boredom. During this age, children often are expected to do much more at school and much less at church, and this dichotomy often leads children to disconnect from church, even though they're often present within the walls of the church. When faith leaders keep older children curious and engaged, children are more likely to see that faith is relevant.

Transmitting faith and values to children cannot happen without also emphasizing the healthy development of each child's physical, cognitive, social, moral, and emotional development. All parts of development interact with each other (Leffert, Benson, Roehlkepartain, 15). That's why it's critical to nurture all aspects of child development.

Ten broad faith factors emerge as important aspects of childhood development. These ten factors attempt to bring together a large body of research.

Ten Faith Factors of Older Children

Factor 1: Connects to safe and stimulating adults and peers

Older children need to feel valued and accepted by connecting to safe and stimulating adults and peers. While young children spend most of their time with parents and primary caregivers, older children go to school, church, clubs, and homes of their friends. They get to know other children and adults outside of the family.

After-school clubs, extracurricular groups, and church activities become important for this age group in order to connect with safe and stimulating adults and peers (Thompson and Braeger, 192).

When children feel ostracized or isolated, it's critical to intervene immediately. Parents and adults can teach older children the important social skills they need to connect with their peers and other adults. A child who feels alone will often turn away from the church. "The peer group, in addition to family and community values, is a significant influence in the child's moral development" (Thompson and Braeger, 196).

Jean Grasso Fitzpatrick, the author of *Something More: Nurturing Your Child's Spiritual Growth*, contends that religious education and religious groups can greatly help children when adults are warm and loving toward children and when children have a friend in the class or group (100–01). All these vital connections help older children develop a strong, secure faith.

Factor 2: Thrives with consistent support and care

Older children need supportive, caring relationships to grow in their faith. For older children, these relationships expand as they step out more into the world. They need supportive, caring relationships at home, at school, at church, and every place they go.

"Becoming Christian is a lifelong process," writes Karen-Marie Yust. "At every age and stage of childhood, girls and boys need adults in their lives who will encourage them to notice and respond to God's presence and activity in the world" (2007, 8–9).

Older children thrive when they encounter adults and peers who support and care for them. When they're at church, they notice when they're valued and nurtured, when they're supported and cared for. Churches that make a big deal out of welcoming children, noticing them when they're absent, and reaching out to them, make a strong impact in a child's faith journey. Children are drawn to people and places that care about them.

Factor 3: Engages in learning and discovery

A lot of faith formation involves learning, such as reading the Bible, learning Christian traditions, and celebrating the liturgical seasons. Younger elementary-age children have an egocentric view of the world that "has tremendous power to shape their interpretations of the gospel and Christian living" writes Karen-Marie Yust. "They are developing the critical thinking skills necessary to genuinely question ideas, comprehend the logic of religious practices, and investigate the implications of being faithful for all of their actions" (2007, 6).

Children between the ages of seven and ten tend to be in Stage 2 of Faith Development (called Mythic-Literal faith) of James W. Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (135–50). The key ways children at this age think tends to be concrete and literal, and children at this age are concerned about fairness and justice (135–50).

How does this thinking affect a child's faith? "Stage 2 Mythic-Literal faith is the stage in which the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community," Fowler writes. "Story becomes the major way of giving unity and value to experience. This is the faith stage of the school child" (149).

What's the best way to teach children about religion at this age? "It needs to be factual and concerned with action as much as possible, with the aim of teaching the child the contents of the Bible, the history of its formation, what the Church believes by the way of doctrine, what the various services of the Church means," writes R. S. Lee, author of *Your Growing Child and Religion*. "All this needs to be graduated to what the child can understand" (204).

Factor 4: Enjoys milestones

Celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones helps children grow in faith and experience God's love and the care of a Christian community. Depending on the church and its theology, older children tend to have a rich experience in church rituals—or find them lacking.

For older children, the Christian faith is experiential. When they're handed their first Bible or take a sacrament (although some churches wait until children are older for their first communion), it's vital for children to be included in milestones, rituals, and sacraments. One church that didn't allow children to take communion until they were confirmed as teenagers decided that they wanted children to still feel included in communion, so they gave children grapes and crackers to symbolize how everyone is invited to the table.

Parents mark milestones when children achieve new reading levels, new athletic levels, or earn certain grades. Every milestone matters—even when it's small. Parents often feel stumped, however, about marking religious milestones for this age group. This is where the church can step in and provide easy ways for parents to incorporate religious milestones at home. Some examples include having an older child lead a mealtime prayer, reading a Bible passage aloud, collecting coins to give to a special offering, and participating in a service project that helps others.

Factor 5: Explores meditation and prayer

Children develop a richer faith when they pray and meditate. Some prayers involve talking to God, but others can be about sitting in silence and meditating (Yust, 2014, 93).

Younger elementary-age children often benefit by thinking of centering prayer as a way of taking a spiritual timeout (Yust, 2007, 6). "Younger elementary-age children appreciate the simple structure of this ancient prayer practice. They are capable of selecting a simple word or phrase as a centering device and repeating that word or phrase slowly over and over again as they let their bodies relax" writes Karen-Marie Yust, an expert on children and spirituality (6).

Yust provides a helpful, four-part movement to teaching children a centering prayer. These include: 1) Preparing: Choose a word or phrase to welcome God's presence, 2) Centering: Repeat the word or phrase to focus on God, 3) Dealing with distraction: Move back to your word or phrase when you get distracted, and 4) Returning: Slowly finish the prayer and open your eyes to return to the world around you (2004, 99).

Factor 6: Develops fairness, justice, and compassion

Older children grow in faith by serving others and developing a sense of fairness, justice, and compassion. "Those in Stage 2 [of faith development] compose a world based on reciprocal fairness and an immanent justice based on reciprocity," writes James W. Fowler (149). That's why it's critical that adults emphasize the reciprocity of fairness and justice so that these attributes cement and harden in children.

Children learn about fairness, justice, and compassion by serving and helping others in the different places where they spend time: at home with their families, at church in their Christian education classes, at school, and in community family volunteering projects (Friedman and Roehlkepartain, vii-x).

Older children benefit by getting involved in service projects that are short, easy, and help them make a difference. One resource, *Doing Good Together*, gives concrete, easy volunteer projects that are appropriate for six-year-olds, seven-year-olds, eight-year-olds, nine-year-olds, and ten-year-olds that children can do with their parents or with church or school groups (Friedman and Roehlkepartain, 224).

Factor 7: Participates in worship services

Attending worship services is a key component of older children's faith journey. Churches that work hard to incorporate children into worship and make it an interesting experience for children help children grow in faith.

Unfortunately, too many children experience worship as something less than desirable. "The greatest danger to the child is boredom," writes R. S. Lee. "Church services may be too long, too obscure, and too lacking in action for children, so that attendance at them is little short of torture. In that case, churchgoing comes to be regarded as a most unpleasant occupation" (207).

Some congregations create worship bags for children to explore during worship services. Others create a children's bulletin that simplifies the adult bulletin so that children can follow along. Families can also make worship interesting by helping children sing during hymns or songs, participate in responsive prayers, and do a quiet activity (such as drawing a picture) during the longer message. The older children become, the more they can participate in a worship service. What's key is to make worship an activity that interests children and helps them feel included and part of the community.

Factor 8: Mimics adults who have purpose and meaning

Finding purpose and meaning is an important part of a person's faith journey (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 21). Older children not only observe the adults around them for meaning and purpose, but they also find meaning and purpose by mimicking those around them (Leffert, Benson, Roehlkepartain, 82–3).

Part of what children mimic is the passion and excitement people have toward purpose and meaning. Adults don't need to be overly enthusiastic, but children notice when adults are engaged in their faith and when they're involved in a sense of purpose. They take note when adults enjoy leading religious education—or whether they dread it and are just putting in their time.

For older children, finding purpose and meaning not only is about finding activities they enjoy but also finding friends and adults they like to spend time with. “Participation, not isolation, fuels successful negotiation of the life cycle,” writes Edward P. Wimberly (124). Children find meaning in their faith when they connect with others around faith issues, whether that's at home or church.

Factor 9: Becomes exposed to more religious and spiritual experiences

As children grow, they deepen in their faith when they're given more religious and spiritual experiences. Introduce them to new forms of prayer. Invite them to explore other parts of the Bible. Create new religious rituals that they find fascinating.

“Children can be natural philosophers,” writes Tobin Hart psychology professor at the State University of West Georgia. “Much to our amazement, they often ponder big questions. They ask about life and meaning, knowing and knowledge, truth, and justice, reality and death. For many the spiritual quest is focused and explored through pondering, puzzling over, and playing with such questions” (168).

We need a faith development that grows with children as they age and grow. “That perhaps is the first point we should emphasize about the religious training of children in this period,” writes R. S. Lee. “They are more likely to be given too little than too much information” (203–04).

This is particularly true for older children at the upper end of this age range. “The mind of the ten-year-old is an amazing instrument,” Fowler writes. “It can virtually memorize the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It can guide a pair of hands to victory in a game of chess, sometimes over more experienced adult competitors. It can take an hour and a half to tell, in vastly inclusive detail, what the movie *Star Wars* is about” (135). How are we tapping into this vast knowledge and interest of older children in their faith journey?

Factor 10: Discovers how faith and life interact

When older children learn how to apply Christian traditions and teachings into their own life, they're more likely to develop the necessary steps for creating a life-long faith. This is about integrating all parts of their development at their age level by teaching kids important aspects of faith, showing them how faith affects their relationships, and also how faith is about action.

Children learn best when they can experience what they learn, rather than merely sit around and try to soak it in. Churches and families that engage older children in service, in movement, and in using their hands to create things help children see that faith is relevant to every aspect of their lives (Roehlkepartain, i)

When children have useful roles in Christian rituals, they see that they matter and that their participation matters. These rituals are more than the ones that encompass the liturgical season and holidays. They're also about the daily rituals we provide for children, such as asking them to read scripture aloud, having them lead a simple prayer, and giving ideas on how to serve others.

Supportive, Faithful Parents

"Parents are the real forming agents of their children. No matter how well we may do in religious education with that third-grade child, if he or she goes home where the faith is not cherished or understood, our best efforts can't produce formation that will last a lifetime," writes Bill Huebsch, director of the online Pastoral & Continuing Education Center. "The parents—by their actions, words, and household habits—form their children for life, either with faith or without it" (46).

Not only do parents affect a child's faith but they're also key in helping a child grow up well. Researcher Diana Baumrind says the way an adult parent makes a big difference. A parent who is warm and caring while also setting firm boundaries and expectations is the type of parent who parents well (43-88). This style of parenting has big implications for teaching faith practices. When parents listen to their children, are warm and supportive, and also set clear expectations about which faith practices children and their families do, the better it is for the child.

During the elementary-school years, parents are immersed in Stage 4 of being parents of faith: Supporting and Strengthening. At this stage, parents support their child's spiritual and overall development, strengthening ties to other people and to important institutions, such as church and school. "The major task . . . is for parents to decide how they are going to interpret their children's existence to them; what facts they want to share, what behavior and manners they want to teach, and what values they want to impart," writes Ellen Galinsky in her parenting book (199).

Parents are key people in helping older children develop the ten faith factors listed in this chapter. "Parents praying, families eating together, conversations focusing on what is proper and improper, and sacred artifacts are all important

ways in which family space is sacralized,” says Robert Wuthnow, author of *Growing Up Religious*. “They come together, forming an almost imperceptible mirage of experience” (8).

Supportive, Faithful Grandparents

Active grandparents play a key role in the faith formation of older children, particularly if they have frequent contact with their grandchildren. “Grandparents and great-grandparents are precious treasures in the life of the church for they are the repository of stories, customs and practices that today’s children, youth, and parents need to hear, hear about, and experience” (Forming Faith, 3).

When grandparents and grandchildren have a strong relationship, they greatly influence each other and their faith journey. Grandparents have a faith wisdom of years that they can transmit to their grandchildren, and grandchildren often reintroduce grandparents to wonder and new perspectives.

While parents need to take a disciplinary role (in addition to many other roles), grandparents can often create a space for grandchildren to ask questions they don’t want to ask their parents and to explore other aspects of faith. Grandparents who are open to this inquiry can help older children grow deeper in their faith.

Supportive, Faithful Extended Family Members

Siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other family members greatly influence the lives and faith of older children. The way they interact with children matters, as do the conversations they have with them and the way they model their faith.

We often place too much stress only on parents and overlook the power and support of other extended family members. Where do parents turn to for help, advice, or support? The number one place is their immediate or extended family (Roehlkepartain, Scales, Roehlkepartain, et. al., 2–3). Extended family members provide an anchor for parents and also their children, and they can be vital people to help children grow in faith.

We need to enlarge families, not shrink them. When we embrace all aspects of family, such as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, and more, we can provide a strong network of support in helping children grow up in faith—and to grow deeper in the faith.

When families are fragmented or separated by geography, we can create extended networks around families that fill this role. All children need not only supportive, faithful parents and grandparents, but other supportive, faithful people in their lives. By modeling, talking about faith, and helping children make sense of their faith (and act on their faith), we can help older children discover faith practices and a theology that allows them to flourish.

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Part 5C. Nurturing the Faith of Young Adolescents: Ages 11 to 14

For parents and adults who aren't familiar with young adolescents, this stage of spiritual development may feel like walking off a cliff that they didn't know existed. Many wonder where their beloved child went and who this unfamiliar young adolescent is that replaced him or her.

"The faith of a teenager is a 'journey in search.' It is a journey that questions those childlike assumptions," writes Stephen D. Jones in *Faith Shaping: Youth and Experience*. "Adolescence is the important moment of the life span to shape a personal faith because it is typically the first time to encounter fully life's ambiguities" (14, 20).

This journey in search is essential in forming a strong faith. "Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements," says James W. Fowler, the author of *Stages of Faith*. "Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook" (172).

Unfortunately, we tend to view young adolescents in two contrasting ways: "One depicting them as dreamy-eyed, moody, gangling, easily led away by unrealistic enthusiasms," writes R. S. Lee, author of *Your Growing Child and Religion*, "and the other making them appear as lawless, rebellious, uncontrollable, almost (if not quite) delinquents" (220). When we see young adolescents in these ways, we hurt their faith journey because we either become dismissive of it—or afraid of it.

Yet early adolescence is a rich time for young people to grow in faith. "The aim of religious training at this stage should be to foster this growth toward maturity and the integration of these two trends," Lee says (221). We can tap into the idealistic aspects of young people and also their doubts and questions, and when we do so, a deeper faith takes root.

The research on the healthy development of young adolescents reveals ten faith factors that emerge as critical aspects of development. These ten factors pull together a large body of developmental information.

Ten Faith Factors of Young Adolescents

Factor 1: Yearns to be part of a group that matters

Young adolescents crave acceptance, and they want to be part of a group that cares about them. "Having friends becomes a priority," write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales, "and listening to them—going along with the peer crowd—becomes a powerful tug" (214). Most adults view this tug as negative, as negative peer pressure. But peers also exert a lot of positive influence as well, and when we recognize those powerful, positive relationships as part of a young person's faith journey, we help them grow spiritually.

Stephen D. Jones, the author of *Faith Shaping* says that the typical pattern of faith development for young adolescents is through affiliation (54). Key aspects include “living with the tension of taking the first step beyond a cultural or parental faith bias, accompanied by the most intense desire to affiliate with that bias” Jones writes (54).

Fickleness defines relationships for this age group (Steinberg, 154), and young adolescents sometimes find a group that they stick with while others switch around. Young adolescents are acutely aware of how they fit in (or don’t fit in) with a group at church, or school, or wherever they are.

That’s why group activities matter to this age group, and why many churches emphasize camps, mission trips, and other group outings for young adolescents. Being part of a group matters a lot to young adolescents, and the more we can support their yearning to be part of a group that matters, the more we will help them in their faith formation. Yet mission trips and service projects alone don’t make a difference in a young person’s faith formation over time (Smith and Snell, 218). What matters is what happens during these trips. Teenagers who have a “powerful spiritual experience” are more likely to be religious by the emerging adult years (218).

Factor 2: Craves support and fights it

Forming a deep faith involves developing caring relationships. While young adolescents thrive on acceptance and feeling supportive, they also give mixed messages. They want closeness and distance—often at the same time.

These mixed messages often cause parents and other adults to pull back from young adolescents, which is exactly what they don’t need. “Young adolescents not only need quality time with their parents, but they also yearn for time,” write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales. “The lack of spending time with a young teenager means to the teenager, for good or for ill, that, at worst, ‘My parents do not love me,’ and, at best, ‘I am not a priority for my parents’ ” (213).

That’s why the spiritual development for a young teenager may often feel uncomfortable and taxing on parents and other adults. As adults try to figure out a healthy balance of being involved and giving young teenagers space to grow, they often lose their balance, going too far in one direction one moment and then going too far in another direction in another moment. “Studies show that most teenagers would like to spend more, not less, time with their parents than they do now,” writes Laurence Steinberg, an expert in adolescent development (Steinberg, 14).

Factor 3: Feels conflicted about learning

Young teenagers think differently than older children. They begin to think abstractly, going through Piaget’s “formal operational thinking” that allows them to not only think abstractly but also to begin thinking about their thinking (Piaget). On one hand, this new type of thinking opens up new worlds to young teenagers, but it also shakes everything up in their world. Many young people who were good students sometimes go through a period of feeling conflicted about

learning. Parents often think that their young teenagers have “lost their brains” and “lost their way.”

This shift in a young person’s thinking greatly impacts their faith journey. That’s why young teenagers often come across as overly idealistic or overly critical and harsh (Fowler, 152). These extremes emerge from their new way of thinking. When adults welcome young people’s idealism and their doubts, we help them make sense of their thinking and their faith.

This is why it’s also critical for parents to express clear expectations about learning for this age group. If parents want young people to remain engaged in learning, they need to say so and make it a priority. Often parents need to help young teenagers figure out new ways to study, how to complete homework, and even how to remember to bring home the homework. One parent drove her young teenage son to school every day after school to pick up the homework he forgot—as a way to emphasize that homework mattered and needed to be done every day.

“Religious ideas can be taught, but the truth of religion can only be discovered; and it is far more important to foster the spirit of discovery—which is the response to the challenge to adventure—than to persuade adolescents to accept without question what their teachers tell them,” Lee writes. “We should in many cases go so far as to encourage an active distrust, or at least a questioning, of the accepted religious beliefs” (223).

Factor 4: Celebrates milestones while resisting them

Celebrating rituals, sacraments, and milestones help young teenagers experience God’s love and deepen their faith journey. Churches celebrate milestones of young teenagers through confirmation, first communion (depending on the religious tradition), giving teenagers a teenage or an adult Bible, and by giving young teenagers opportunities to attend camps and mission trips.

Adults often misinterpret young teenagers lack of enthusiasm or interest in milestones as a signal to stop doing milestones. Don’t make that mistake. Milestones, rituals, and sacraments have power through their traditions, and it’s often important to withstand the discomfort that young teenagers have and continue milestones. That doesn’t mean to dismiss young teenagers perspectives. In fact, explore their resistance. Sometimes young teenagers feel left out. Or they have ideas on how to make a milestone more meaningful (Roehlkepartain, 1).

Factor 5: Wonders about meditation and prayer

Prayer and meditation help young teenagers on their faith journey. Yet parents and their young teenagers often differ in the importance of prayer and how to pray (Schwadel, 126).

Young teenagers wonder about meditation and prayer, and often their questions have to do with how effective meditation and prayer are and if there are other ways to try meditation and prayer. In many ways, young people are exploring new ways to connect with God, and they’re looking for ways that fit them well.

When we emphasize how young teenagers yearn to be part of a group and also to find their true selves, we can steer prayer practices to emphasize these points. “The adolescent’s religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply,” writes Fowler about this third stage of faith, the Synthetic-Conventional Faith that explains faith development for teenagers (153).

We can help young teenagers pray to God with the images that they have of God at this stage, “qualities of companionship, guidance, support, and of knowing and loving” them (Fowler, 156). Young teenagers pray to a God that comes from their belief of what they’ve been taught about God—but also what they feel about God and what they feel about certain situations (156).

Factor 6: Balks at some service; deepens others

Young teenagers, when they feel idealistic, love to help and serve others, and this act of service is another way to build their faith. When service-minded teenagers are asked when they first volunteered, most admit they started by age fourteen. Almost half started by age twelve (Hodgkinson, 23, 25).

Even if young teenagers balk or resist doing service, find opportunities for them to do so. Service projects help young teenagers put their faith into action. This is one of the reasons why many churches offer mission trips and service-project trips for young teenagers. These trips transform lives and deepen the faith of young teenagers.

What type of service projects work well with young teenagers? Ones that give them hands on, meaningful experiences without overwhelming them or boring them. One book, *Doing Good Together*, lists volunteer projects that are appropriate for eleven-year-olds, twelve-year-olds, and thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds, all with the help of caring adults (Friedman and Roehlkepartain, 224).

When young teenagers find ways to serve and help others, their idealism and enthusiasm often deepens their commitment to service. This, in turn, deepens their faith journey as well.

Factor 7: Attends worship services with resistance

Attending worship services is an important component of a young person’s faith journey. Yet parents often struggle to get their young teenagers to go to church, and many give up. Anne Lamott, who writes about faith issues, wrote an essay “Why I Make Sam Go to Church” about why she makes her teenage son go to church.

Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church—who is made to go to church two or three times a month. He rarely wants to go. This is not exactly true: the truth is he never wants to go,” Lamott writes. “The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality (99–100).

When young teenagers resist attending worship services, get creative. Encourage them to bring a friend. If they want to sit on the other side of the sanctuary, let them. But be clear about your expectations: You want them to attend, and you want them to pay attention. Some families debrief the worship service over a meal, giving young adolescents time to talk.

Worship helps young teenagers in their faith journey by giving them a sense of ritual. When families, youth groups, and churches articulate the importance of worship and help young teenagers wrestle with the concept, we can help young teenagers grow spiritually.

Factor 8: Longs for Meaning While Wondering about It

A key aspect of faith for young teenagers is to find purpose and meaning (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 21). “Early adolescents are spiritually pressed to find meaning in their lives,” write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales. “Young teenagers do possess spirituality and are in fact spiritual people” (227).

Many adults think young adolescents gain purpose and meaning through making a personal decision about their faith, such as through confirmation or a believer’s baptism. Experts warn that pressuring young people to make a faith decision can backfire if it’s not done well. For example, “it runs two grave risks of jeopardizing full religious development—the risk of forced growth, and the risk of arrested growth” writes Lee (215).

That doesn’t mean confirmation and other programs for early adolescents are harmful. They can be helpful and help young people grow spiritually—if they’re done thoughtfully and with care. The best programs link young teenagers with mentors of faith, and the best programs also emphasize how young teenagers are on a faith journey and that a commitment of faith doesn’t mean they graduate and are finished. A faith commitment is about taking the journey to discover more and grow deeper in faith.

Factor 9: Desires religious and spiritual belonging

Not only do young teenagers want to belong with a meaningful peer group and a meaningful family, they also desire to belong to a religious group—if that group is something that draws them in. “This question for relational identity affects the faith of early adolescents at its root, that is, in the way they experience and image God,” writes John S. Nelson. “Early adolescents experience and image God as warm more than cold, as close more than distant, as friend and confident more than as lord and lawgiver” (40).

A key aspect of this is to help young teenagers find adult faith mentors. “He or she needs the eyes and ears of a few trusted others in which to see the image of personality emerging and to get a hearing for the new feelings, insights, anxieties, and commitments that are forming and seeking expression,” writes James Fowler. “Each gives the other the gift of being known and accepted. And more, each gives

the other a mirror with which to help focus the new explosiveness and many-ness of his or her inner life” (151).

What trips up many adults, however, is young teenagers’ emerging sexuality. “The young adolescent is more susceptible to guilt feelings than he was in the intermediate childhood period, and this guilt is likely to be associated with the new feelings of sex now developing within in,” writes Lee. “If he is subjected to strong teaching about sin and judgment, the action of his superego will be reinforced, and any decision he makes about committing himself to religion is likely to be of the negative, forbidding type” (218). Instead, adults need to be honest about sexuality while putting appropriate expectations on it in the context of faith so that young adolescents can grow up well, rather than restrained.

Factor 10: Experiments with ways to integrate faith into life

When young teenagers learn about Christian traditions and how to apply them to life, they grow in their faith. Young adolescents tend to experience six patterns of faith that help them to integrate it into their lives. These include:

1. Experienced faith—This pattern of faith begins in childhood within the family. It continues throughout adolescence, and it’s the way young people experience faith.
2. Conventional faith—Young adolescents tend to criticize this aspect of faith, which includes the belief of the religious community that young adolescents belong to.
3. Searching faith—This pattern of faith becomes strong during early adolescence. It entails young people searching for a style of belief that fits their thinking and values.
4. Rejection of church-related faith—This patterns begins in early adolescence, but it becomes much more prevalent in later adolescence and in early adulthood.
5. Owned faith—The seeds for this pattern of faith are planted during early adolescence, but adults often don’t see young people owning their faith until young adulthood (typically between the ages of twenty-two to thirty-five).
6. Personal faith—This is the dominant form of faith for Christian adolescents, particularly those in the United States (Nelson).

When we allow young teenagers to embrace their idealism, act on their faith, and also question their beliefs, we help them integrate faith into their lives. “Calling adolescence a ‘phase’ may be a less than subtle method of blocking our own useful curiosity about what life is like for young teenagers, creating distance in order to quell our anxiety about managing their experience,” write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales. “An empathic appreciation of their developmental struggles is critical to good child rearing and can result in an enjoyable, playful, sometimes painful, but hopefully deeply enriching period of growth for families” (217).

Active, Engaged Parents

The relationship between parents and young adolescents often becomes strained and frustrating. Part of this is due to the nature of early adolescents. They're volatile and pushing boundaries, but ultimately, the most painful part for parents is that "parents remain present to children so that they can learn to leave them" (Nydam and Canales, 213).

This painful separation is another step along the path for a young person to become an individual. Parents remember the painful separations of the first day of childcare, the first day of preschool, the first day of kindergarten. During early adolescence, these steps toward independence often painfully occur on a daily basis, and sometimes multiple times a day (Galinsky, 241).

This is why parents need to stay engaged and involved with their young teenagers. "It is the steady reliable presence of the parent, the primary caregiver, who facilitates this trust in the availability of parents when they are needed" write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales (213).

What are parents ultimately try to teach young adolescents? "One of the goals of adolescence is differentiating, learning to be one's self, no longer needing parents, on the way to maturity," write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales. "The fully differentiated person can love deeply and maintain intimacy, can be relatively nonanxious in the midst of chaos, and can be realistic and accepting of human limitations" (213).

Parents of faith are parenting from Stage 5: Experimenting and Exploring. While young adolescents experiment with different identities, parents discover that they, too, need to experiment with new ways to interact with their young adolescent while encouraging him or her to develop a personal faith.

Young adolescents' faith formation grows out of the way they're parented. Researcher Diana Baumrind identified three major parenting styles: the Permissive style (where a parent is nonpunitive, accepting, and affirming, which gives the young teenager too much power), the Authoritarian style (where a parent controls and punishes a young adolescent, which gives the parent too much power), and the Authoritative style (where a parent sets boundaries but encourages more of a give-and-take approach to set and enforce boundaries). The best approach, the Authoritative style, emphasizes the power of both the parent and the young teenager (43–88). "Parenting out of anxiety and fear is qualitatively different from parenting out of confidence," write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales (216).

Parents are essential in helping develop the ten faith factors listed in this chapter. "Parenting with confidence requires patience, understanding, and maintaining a calm demeanor even amidst early adolescent angst, defensive reactions, and defiant mood swings, through it all offering support, guidance, and love," write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales (217). By staying engaged and involved, parents help young adolescents grow deeper in their faith.

Active, Engaged Grandparents

Since early adolescence can often feel rocky to both young people and their parents, grandparents have an even more vital and influential role. “Grandparents matter above and beyond parents,” concluded researcher Jeremy Yorgason in a study of families with young adolescents. “Grandparents are like the National Guard. If there is a problem, they come in and help out” (Bragg, 1).

Grandparents help young adolescents see the value in themselves and also the value in their questions and doubts. Researchers found that grandparents are valued especially by young teenagers for providing affection, reassurance of worth, and reliable alliance (Van Ranst, Verschueren and Marcoen, 311).

“Grandparents will have an increasing influence on religious transmission, support, and socialization in the twenty-first century,” writes John Roberto (45). Grandparents greatly influence their grandchildren’s faith journey by being involved in their lives and by supporting their spiritual steps, every step of the way.

Active, Engaged Extended Family Members

Like grandparents, other family members (such as uncles, aunts, siblings, cousins, great-grandparents, and others) can greatly impact a young teenager’s faith journey. While young adolescents may feel tension in their own homes, other extended family members can provide an important refuge and sounding board (Roehlkepartain, Scales, Roehlkepartain, et. al., 2–3).

Extended family members can also greatly influence a young teenager’s interest and talents. For example, sometimes a young teenager has an interest that isn’t shared within the immediate family (such as a young musician who lives in a family of athletes or vice versa). An extended family member who also shares that same interest as the young person can play an important role (and be a mentor) for the young person.

What’s key is relationship. When young teenagers have different adults they can turn to and talk about their lives and their faith, they’re more apt to grow spiritually. When they have different adults they can trust, they’re more willing to seek these adults out when things aren’t going well with their parents (Scales, Benson, et. al.). Extended family members, including grandparents, help young adolescents find their way during a time when the way often becomes muddy and unclear. By doing so, extended family give young adolescents a sense of security and safety, which also helps young people feel more secure about their faith journey.

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Part 5D. Nurturing the Faith of Older Adolescents: Ages 15 to 18

“Youth today live in a new world in many ways. The settings in which the average teenager lives his or her life are often so conflicting and confusing that they leave many youth drifting in search of roots,” writes Stephen D. Jones in *Faith Shaping: Youth and Experience*. “No longer can we assume harmony even between the church and the home, or the home and the school, or the church and the youth peer culture. A new approach to nurture is needed in this area” (83).

This conflict makes the transmission of faith to older teenagers extremely challenging. With the developmental task of separating from their parents and finding their own voice and way (Steinberg, 233), many teenagers drift away from the church, and some never return. “Faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements,” says James W. Fowler, the author of *Stages of Faith* (172). But how do we help older teenagers create this coherence when they find so much dissonance between different aspects of their lives?

Part of the tension lies with the way teenagers now live with the overpowering presence of technology. “Teenagers no longer have bedrooms as a sanctuary to rest and relax, but command centers, which send out hundreds of e-mails, text messages, blog postings, phone calls, tweets, live feeds, photos, and songs that pour in every day,” writes Mark Bauerlein.

Church clergy and lay leaders who work with older teenagers often lament that they can never get groups of older teenagers together because of their impossible, crammed schedules. One youth worker discovered that the only time he could connect with older teenagers, particularly ones actively involved in school, was at 7 a.m. on a school day for breakfast—and with only one at a time.

What do older teenagers need to grow well in the faith? The research on the healthy development of older adolescents reveals ten faith factors that emerge as critical aspects of development. These ten factors synthesize a large body of developmental information.

Ten Faith Factors of Older Adolescents

Factor 1: Discovers a balance between acceptance and independence

“One of the goals of adolescence is differentiating,” write Ronald Nydam and Arthur David Canales, “learning to be one’s self, no longer needing parents, on the way to maturity” (213). Although older teenagers may act like they no longer need parents, they actually do. Their needs are just different, and their needs sometimes are met by being accepted through other groups at school, at church, or in the clubs that they’re involved in.

One way parents can nurture their older teenager's faith journey is by getting to know their friends and welcoming them, even if some of the friends make parents uncomfortable. "Adolescents sometimes go to extremes to prove that they are not like their parents, and that they are independent of adults," writes Laurence Steinberg, an expert in adolescent development. "The boy who is dressed in leather and reading motorcycle magazines this year may be wearing preppy clothes and running for class president next year. Nasty comments will only make the adolescent feel that he can't bring friends home" (169).

Through all the different places where an older teenager spends time (at home, at school, at church, at after-school activities, at a part-time job, and other places), this balance between acceptance and independence is key. "When God is a significant other in this mix . . . the commitment to God and the correlated self-image can exert a powerful ordering on a youth's identity and values outlook," writes James Fowler, the author of *Stages of Faith* (154).

Many families, however, don't witness their older teenager embracing God and the church. They often worry that they haven't done enough or that they have somehow driven away their teenager from a life of faith. When a teenager shows little interest (and sometimes disdain) for religion at this age, it's often because of an imbalance between acceptance and independence, with the balance leaning more heavily toward independence. When this happens, focus on acceptance while setting clear expectations and listening to teenagers. Continue to be welcoming and inviting toward church activities and faith practices. Allowing teenagers to find their own way is an important part of their faith journey.

Factor 2: Redefines meaningful support

An important aspect of growing deeper in faith involves developing caring relationships. For older adolescents, their caring relationships are shifting, and they're seeking to form relationships that are meaningful.

That means older teenagers are redefining their relationship with their parents, with their siblings, with their grandparents, with their friends, with their teachers. Anyone they come into contact with, they examine and ask: Is this relationship important to me? And if so, how?

This also affects their relationship with God. Older teenagers still tend to view God as a personal God (Fowler, 156), but they're also making sense of that relationship as well. When we surround older teenagers with people of faith, with mentors of faith, we can help them make sense of their relationship with God—and with their relationship with everyone else.

Factor 3: Yearns to learn and succeed in meaningful ways

For older teenagers, learning takes on a new dimension. This is where you see a widening gap between teenagers who embrace learning and those who resist it. When parents continue to stay engaged and involved in their older teenager's lives, they can still greatly influence their teenager's motivation to learn.

This learning not only affects young people academically at school but also what they're learning about faith. With many older teenagers taking Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, how are we giving them more advanced teachings about faith and their faith journey?

In the six stages of faith, James Fowler says that older teenagers are immersed in stage 3: the Synthetic-Conventional Faith (153). During this stage, older teenagers are trying to make sense of the disparate aspects of their lives and synthesize these differences into something that makes sense to them. That's why some teenagers drop out of some activities that they've done for years (such as a club or a church activity) while trying something else. They're trying to make sense of what may no longer make sense to them.

That's why we need to help older teenagers become clearer about their faith and their faith journey without discarding the entire process (which a number of older teenagers are tempted to do). We need to show them that faith is still relevant in their lives and that they can continue to grow in their faith and that the faith journey is one of change and growing (Lee, 221–22).

Factor 4: Enjoys meaningful milestones

Marking meaningful milestones, rituals, and sacraments connect older teenagers with their faith journey. Unfortunately, most churches stop marking milestones with older teenagers, except for the one of graduating from high school. Young teenagers tend to experience many more religious milestones and rituals than older teenagers in the church.

Yet older teenagers relish meaningful milestones and rituals. If you look closely at their high school, you often see classes, clubs, and other activities marking all kinds of meaningful milestones. That's one reason many teenagers enjoy the senior year of high school. They experience one milestone after another.

Although older teenagers may not participate as much in milestones, rituals, and sacraments at home (since they're trying to become independent and show how they're different from their families), it's vital that families continue these milestones, rituals, and sacraments anyway. Over time, this shows older teenagers the value of these milestones. They give older teenagers a sense of grounding, even when teenagers act like they don't care. Families continue to plant seeds along their older teenagers faith journey. Even if the ground seems hard and not open to accepting seeds, the seeds may actually be falling into places parents can't see. A number of young adults (once they reach the ages of twenty-five and older) often talk about how meaningful the rituals were that their parents had at home when they were teenagers, while the parents look at each other with great puzzlement.

Factor 5: Meditates and prays with questions

Prayer and meditation are key components on an older teenager's faith journey. Yet parents may not see any evidence (or interest) that their older teenagers are

praying or meditating, and this disconnect is common among older teenagers (Schwadel, 126).

Parents and other adults sometimes define meditation and prayer too narrowly compared to older teenagers. When teenagers were asked which activities make it easier for them to be spiritual, they mentioned these top factors: spending time outside or in nature (87 percent), listening to or playing music (82 percent), and being alone in a quiet place (74 percent) (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, et. al., 31).

Prayer, however, is one of the five consistently very important factors that's associated with higher religiousness when teenagers become young adults (Smith and Snell, 218). The five factors include:

1. Frequent personal prayer
2. Strong parental religion
3. Places a high importance on religious faith
4. Has few religious doubts
5. Has religious experiences

Older teenagers may turn to prayer when life becomes difficult (Schwadel, 146). These acts of prayer may be private and unseen to others around them. That's why it's essential that parents and other adults continue to talk about prayer, continue to model prayer, and be open to discussions about prayer to discern what older teenagers think about prayer and meditation. By creating a warm, open exchange, adults can nurture older teenagers faith journey by allowing them to have questions, doubts, and wonderments about faith.

Factor 6: Creates a commitment to service

Older teenagers, particularly those who have been involved in service from an earlier age, often will become passionate and strongly committed to service. With experience, they can see that their efforts make a difference, and they often feel good about helping (Friedman and Roehlkepartain, ix-x).

"Youth service is becoming a key focus of youth work in congregations across many faith traditions," write the authors of *Growing Up Generous*. "Congregations are seeing how engaging young people in service to others often becomes a catalyst for reinvigorating and transforming a congregation (Roehlkepartain, Dalyah Naftali, and Musegades, 59).

While service benefits a congregation, service also enriches family life. When older teenagers volunteer with their families, families benefit in four ways say the authors of *Doing Good Together*: "1) providing quality family time when family members can become closer, 2) strengthening family communication, 3) offering ways for family members to be role models, and 4) giving families the opportunity to make significant contributions to their community" (Friedman and Roehlkepartain, ix).

Older teenagers who serve and help others discover that their faith journey deepens and expands as well.

Factor 7: Participates in worship in ways that reflect a personal faith journey

Attending worship services is an essential part of a person's faith journey, yet many older teenagers resist attending worship services. Parents and other adults often fear asking their older teenagers about their resistance, but hearing what teenagers have to say about worship—and why—is important to help them make sense of their faith journey.

According to research, teenagers are more likely to pray, read scriptures, and say faith is important than they are to regularly attend religious worship services (Schwadel, 144). Many claim that they don't have meaningful experiences during worship services (Schwadel, 144).

Some families counter this resistance by allowing teenagers a say in how they want to be involved in worship (such as sitting with family, sitting with friends, singing in the choir, playing with the handbell choir, or helping out with the soundboard) or by visiting other church worship services as a family to talk about what older teenagers find meaningful.

Often older teenagers don't enjoy worship services because they don't feel like they belong there. When other adults make an effort to welcome older teenagers and include them in meaningful ways (such as allowing older teenagers to usher, read scripture, and help serve communion), older teenagers often feel more connected to a worship community.

Factor 8: Explores meaning and purpose

Older teenagers yearn for purpose and meaning as part of their spiritual journey (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 21). They're searching for experiences that matter, experiences that give them a sense of purpose.

When young people were asked what types of experiences they found spiritually meaningful, they said:

1. Having the inner strength to make it through a difficult time.
2. Feeling a profound inner peace.
3. Feeling complete joy and ecstasy.
4. Feeling an overwhelming sense of love.
5. Experiencing God's energy, presence, or voice (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, et. al., 15).

Many of these spiritual experiences involved their emotions. The way older teenagers feel greatly affects their religious experience (Fowler, 156) and their quest for meaning and purpose.

Talking about the meaning of life is something that older teenagers often talk about (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, et. al., 17). Of young people who say that their spirituality has changed, the #1 reason is "how much I have a sense that life has meaning and purpose" (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, et. al., 21).

Factor 9: Questions religious and spiritual beliefs

Older teenagers who tap into their abstract reasoning, independent thought, and reflection have a lot of questions about religion, spirituality, and faith (Kelcourse, 87). Although this often makes many parents and other adults uncomfortable, this questioning is a key component of a healthy faith (Jones, 17–18).

“If you have no questions about God, no uncertainty or doubt, then you have little need for faith in God,” writes Stephen D. Jones, the author of *Faith Shaping: Youth and the Experience of Faith*. “It is only when you consider that you cannot prove God’s existence to yourself or to others, or that you may not understand God’s will for your life, that faith is essential” (18).

Creating safe ways for older teenagers to articulate their doubts and questions is critical. Teenagers need to see that faith is stronger than the questions asked about it and that faith isn’t so sacred that it can’t be questioned or challenged. Of course, it’s important to place boundaries around questioning. We don’t want teenagers destroying another person’s faith or becoming so judgmental that relationships strain. The challenge is how to create a sacred space for questions that allows for diversity, tolerance, and respect.

Yet researchers have found that when teenagers have fewer doubts, they tend to be more religious when they become young adults (Smith and Snell, 218). The tension is that often, too many adults don’t take teenagers’ doubts seriously. We tend not to address doubts and help teenagers make sense of them. When small doubts languish, they grow into bigger doubts. By knowing that doubts are part of the faith journey (and also knowing that we don’t want a teenager’s doubts to grow and multiply), we can help teenagers talk about their questions and doubts.

Factor 10: Deepens faith integration while continuing to question

Integrating faith into daily life is an important way for older teenagers to grow spiritually. Adults need to be patient and caring during this aspect of spiritual growth because it often will appear to be uneven and even contradictory at times.

“A person in Stage 3 [of the stages of faith] is aware of having values and normative images,” writes Fowler. “He or she articulates them, defends them, and feels deep emotional investments in them, but typically has not made the value system, as a system the object of reflection” (162).

That’s why it’s important to notice the strides older teenagers make in their faith journey and also to embrace their experience. Older teenagers need to know that the way they’re integrating faith into their life and their thinking—matters. Sometimes, they’ll go astray, but we, as adults, can ask further questions and point out other options.

The way adults live out their faith and model it also makes a huge impact on older teenagers as well. Older teenagers notice when adults are hypocrites. They also pay attention to when adults are doing the right thing and are living out an authentic faith that matters.

Patient, Involved Parents

Older teenagers say parents are the most common resource to help them with their spiritual life, yet one out of five young people say that no one helps them with their faith journey (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 7).

How often do older teenagers have conversations with their parents about what their parents believe? Research reveals that 42 percent have these types of conversations a few times, 12 percent have them about once a month, 7 percent have them about once a week, and 5 percent have them once a week. The rest don't have these conversations at all (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 17).

Parents of older teenagers often feel overwhelmed and inexperienced with the problems they face with their teenager (Galinsky, 240). "The problems are bigger, and yet parents' power is diminishing," writes Ellen Galinsky, the author of *Between Generations*. Many parents of teenagers feel like they've lost their kids for a while, but involved parents keep hanging in there and finding new ways to connect (241).

Part of the conflict entails the journey that parents are on at the same time as their teenagers. While teenagers are separating more from their parents and becoming more independent, a number of parents are going through a mid-life crisis, feeling the effects of aging, and questioning their purpose (Galinsky, 259). Researchers have found that only 15 percent of middle-age men and 40 percent of middle-age women have an integrated faith, a mature measurement of faith (Benson and Eklin, 18, 13).

Parents need to stay involved with their older teenagers not only in general but also about their faith journey. "Parents for whom religious faith is quite important are thus likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is quite important, while parents whose faith is not important are likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is also not important. The fit is not perfect. None of this is guaranteed or determined, and sometimes, in specific instances, things turn out otherwise. But the overall positive association is clear" writes Christian Smith in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers* (57).

Parents of faith are parenting from Stage 6: Guiding and Questioning. High school-age young people need parents who help them make sense of their world and their future. While older teenagers question various aspects of faith, parents need to question how they can continue to model and talk about faith issues that bring them closer to their teenager rather than drive them apart.

Parents who live out their faith and talk about it make a big impact on teenagers. "The prime source of faith for self-described 'religious' people was the way faith permeated the daily life of their family," writes John Roberto. "Spiritual practices were woven into the very fiber of people's being: it was a total immersion. For these people, being religious was a way of life" (2007, 4).

The way adults parent their children (Baumrind, 43–88) and the way they talk about faith makes a big difference (Benson and Eklin, 65). "Given the power of family religiousness on the faith development of youth, priority should be given to

the faith formation of parents and the teaching of faith development skills” (Benson and Eklin, 65).

Patient, Involved Grandparents

The more religious a grandparent is, the more likely he or she will be involved in the life of their grandchildren (King and Elder, S323). “Religious grandparents are indeed more likely to be involved with their grandchildren in multiple ways” (King and Elder, S323).

“Grandparents who attend church services frequently are more likely than infrequent attenders to mentor their grandchild and share skill experiences with them. They are also more likely to perceive that they can influence their grandchild and they feel that their grandchild takes their advice seriously,” write researchers Valarie King and Glen Elder. “They participate in more shared activities, have more frequent contact, and are more likely to care for their grandchild when he or she is sick. Finally, these grandparents are more likely to play the role of friend and report that they are closer to their grandchild” (S323).

Grandparents of grandchildren who are older teenagers also make a profound impact on these teenagers (Creasy Dean, 18). Young people know they can trust and confide in their grandparents and that their grandparents will still value and love them. This type of relationship greatly enriches the faith journey, even when it gets bumpy for the older teenager.

Patient, Involved Extended Family Members

Older teenagers who have more “plentiful and high-quality relationships with adults do better” than older teenagers who don’t have them (Scales, Benson, Mannes, et. al., 24). This affects not only their overall development but also their faith journey.

Extended family and other caring adults who attend religious services weekly are more likely to engage with older teenagers and to value those interactions (Scales, Benson, Mannes, et. al., 155). Older teenagers need many caring, involved adults (who are patient and give teenagers space) in order to make sense of their faith journey.

One study found that nearly half of teenagers said a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin was a “special adult” in their life (Scales, Benson, Mannes, et. al., 35). An extended family member has the potential of making a big influence on a teenager’s faith life and to become a significant adult in that teenager’s life.

We all need adults—within our family and outside our family—who care for us and who care about our faith journey. That’s true for every stage of development. Older teenagers who are full of questions also need this care and this interest from those around them. This care helps older teenagers remain connected to their faith and growing spiritually.

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Chapter 5E. Nurturing the Faith of Emerging Adults: Ages 19–29

For emerging adults, finding their own way and making all their own choices mark their entry into adulthood. “The freedom that emerging adults have to choose how to live results in a striking diversity of beliefs and values. . . . Many of them have developed their own idiosyncratic beliefs by combining different religious traditions in unique ways and adding a dollop of popular culture,” writes Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in *Emerging Adulthood*. “If there is a unifying theme in all of this diversity, it is their insistence on making their own choices about what to believe and what to value” (186–87).

Depending on the emerging adult’s faith journey, the young adult will either remain firmly in a Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith shared with younger teenagers and where many adults get stuck (Fowler, 161) or move on to a deeper faith, exploring Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (Fowler, 174). “The movement from Stage 3 to Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith is particularly critical for it is in this transition that the late adolescent or adult must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes,” says James W. Fowler, the author of *Stages of Faith* (182).

Older adults and parents tend to become frustrated with emerging adults, wishing they’d “just grow up” (Graham, 232). Yet the exploration of young adults is a key aspect of their overall development and their faith journey. “The 17- to 20-year-old must deal with both contradictory emotional messages from parental figures and his or her own internal swirl of anxieties,” writes Alice Graham, executive director of Interfaith Partnerships. “At times, it seems impossible to sort out the entangled sources of anxieties frustrating the young person who is struggling to make major life decisions” (232).

Why do some emerging adults thrive while others wither? “Young people who appear to be successfully navigating emerging adulthood tend to engage in identity exploration, develop internalization of positive values, participate in positive media use, engage in prosocial behaviors, report healthy relationships with parents, and engage in romantic relationships that are characterized by higher levels of companionship, worth, affection, and emotional support,” writes Larry Nelson in *Emerging Adults’ Religiousness and Spirituality*. “For others who appear to be floundering, emerging adulthood appears to include anxiety and depression, poor self-perceptions, greater participation in risk behaviors, and poorer relationship qualities with parents, best friends, and romantic partners” (“Series Foreword,” viii).

Ten faith factors emerge as critical aspects of healthy development for emerging adults. These ten factors grow out of a large body of developmental information about healthy development in general and about faith development.

Ten Faith Factors of Emerging Adults

Factor 1: Finds a unique place in the world with value and acceptance

Although emerging adults appear to be very independent, they actually rely heavily on other people's opinions and acceptance. "It is critical to feel valued and to feel that behavioral choices are consistent with those of someone who values him or her," writes Alice Graham. "For this valuing to contribute to forward movement, it must have non-negating meaning for the [young adult]" (239). Finding a community of acceptance is key for young adults to thrive.

What young adults seek in terms of value and acceptance varies by gender. "Men's friendships are focused on companionship, whereas women's friendships are more focused on emotional intimacy," write Carolyn McNamara Barry and Jennifer Christofferson (80).

Finding a community that values and accepts the young adult is unnerving in the beginning. "It can be a frightening and somewhat disorienting time of being apart from one's conventional moorings," writes James Fowler. "Whether a person will really make the move to an Individuative-Reflective stance depends to a critical degree on the character and quality of the ideologically composed groups bidding for one's joining" (178).

Factor 2: Discovers an adult support system

Caring relationships help emerging adults form a deep faith. Many young adults find themselves immersed in discovering a new support system when they move to college, begin full-time employment, join the military, or start a new path, which often begins during the young adult years.

When emerging people find people who they connect with, they discover who they are and what they believe. Yet the push to find a peer group is radically different for the young adult compared to the older teenager. Seventy-five percent of young adults surveyed by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett say "they worry less now about what their peers or friends think of them, compared to high school" (221-22).

Although young adults are more independent than older teenagers, they're aware of what their peers think of them, particularly if they don't feel supported. "The fear of nonconformity on the part of the status quo society will not so much redirect or transform the human spirit," writes James Loder, "but if possible, suppress or break it so it will conform without complaint" (205).

The close relationship of a young adult focuses on friends (instead of parents), and this tendency continues until the young adult finds a prominent romantic partner (McNamara Barry and Christofferson, 80). Young adults tend to find friends who share their religious beliefs, "even though most do not participate in religious groups together" (McNamara Barry and Christofferson, 80).

Factor 3: Explores curiosities and masters deeper learning

No matter which way they choose to go, emerging adults find themselves exploring new ideas and mastering deeper learning. In fact the majority of young adults

in the United States now attend some form of higher education (Arnett, 121). “The spread of college education has been an important influence in creating a distinct period of emerging adulthood in American society,” writes Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. “Because of the extensiveness and openness of the American system of higher education, young people in the United States are more likely than young people in virtually any other country in the world to have the opportunity for an extended period of educational exploration” (121).

When it comes to exploring religion and spirituality, some young adults find a gold mine at college. “On the one hand, the cross-disciplinary study of religion is expanding, cocurricular support for student religious groups and interfaith dialogue on secular campuses is growing, and certain kinds of Christian colleges are also increasing in both influence and numbers,” write Peter Glanzer, Jonathan Hill, and Todd Ream. “As a result students’ religious and spiritual beliefs and practices do not necessarily suffer and some may even flourish” (164).

Yet not all emerging adults experience an increase in knowledge of spiritual matters and religion in college. “In higher education as a whole, students demonstrate less religious knowledge and show less belief that higher education should help them with big questions,” writes Peter Glanzer, Jonathan Hill, and Todd Ream. “Students striving to integrate what they are learning, both socially and academically, with their own faith commitments will likely receive less support in the curricular area” (164).

Factor 4: Redefines and celebrates milestones

Celebrating sacraments, milestones, and rituals help emerging adults experience a deeper faith journey. Many young adults, however, may not participate in religious rituals, milestones, and sacraments because they say that religion isn’t important in their lives (Gjelten, 4).

That’s why it’s key that parents and families continue to celebrate rituals, milestones, and sacraments, especially when young adults visit and spend time with them. “It is much more challenging for parents of emerging adults to serve as models of religiousness and spirituality if their children cannot see them (e.g., do not live at home)” writes Larry Nelson (“The Role of Parents,” 63). But young adults typically don’t live away from home full time, particularly in the early years of young adulthood when many attend college and live on campus part of the year and visit home for breaks. How families continue to mark milestones and rituals may be some of the few times that young adults experience religious rituals.

Factor 5: Meditates and prays

Meditation and prayer guide emerging adults on their faith journey. Yet parents and their young adults often differ in the importance of prayer with parents often valuing this practice more than young adults (“The Role of Parents,” 63).

Yet when researchers ask young adults if they pray, 69 percent of them say yes (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 83). The practice of prayer reveals a lot about a young

adult's religious commitment in college. Young adults who pray on a daily basis during the college years are more likely to become more committed to religion whereas young adults who don't pray tend to become less committed (86).

Factor 6: Becomes more compassionate

Emerging adults tend to become more compassionate as they grow. A five-year study of college students and their spirituality found that young adults' sense of compassion about others and their sense of connectedness to all beings (called an ecumenical worldview) increases during the college years (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 81). "Students who are more actively engaged in campus clubs and organizations, or who belong to religious organizations are more likely to grow and develop in an ethic of caring, ecumenical worldview, and charitable involvement" write the researchers (81).

Community service, however, tends to decrease as emerging adults age. "All community service activities—doing volunteer work, performing service as part of a class, participating in food and clothing drives—decline in frequency between the freshman and junior years," the researchers say (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 69). What goes up, however, is young adults donating money to charity and helping friends with their personal problems (81).

Factor 7: Worships in ways that fit a personal value system

Attending worship services is an important component of a person's faith journey. Yet for many emerging adults, worship tends to be one of the ways that they don't act on their faith. Forty-two percent of young adults say that attending religious services is not at all important to them, and only 23 percent say it's somewhat important (Arnett, 168).

Part of young adults' struggle with worship is that many of them are in the mode of "make your own religion" (Arnett, 171). "One reason the beliefs of many emerging adults are highly individualized is that they value thinking for themselves with regard to religious questions and believe it is important to form a unique set of religious beliefs rather than accepting a ready-made dogma," Arnett says. "The individualism valued by many emerging adults makes them skeptical of religious institutions and wary of being part of one" (172).

For a number of emerging adults, worship becomes highly individualized, a way of being in the world or "worshipping" in nature or in some other way. Many balk at the term "worship," and many parents struggle and worry about their young adults lack of interest in worship. Many families continue to model their value of worship by attending worship services without pushing their young adults to act in ways that don't fit their belief system at this stage of life.

Factor 8: Searches for deeper purpose and meaning

Finding purpose and meaning is a key aspect of the faith journey for emerging adults (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 21). "When you ask

young people, the vast majority will assert that life has a spiritual dimension. For some, it grows out of a sense of meaning, purpose, connectedness, or inner peace,” write the authors of *With Their Own Voices*, a research study of young people’s spiritual development (Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, and King, 12–13).

“Emerging adults’ meaning-making has been associated with positive adjustment, which might yield opportunities for flourishing,” write Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena. “Yet for those who do not engage in meaning-making or who do so in the absence of sufficient emotional and structural supports, they tend to be lost in transition, and such floundering may result in perilous developmental outcomes” (4).

Young adults find and create meaning by solidifying their identity and by interacting with key people who influence their lives: parents, friends, the media, places of higher education, and the religious community (McNamara Barry and Abo-Zena, 9–11). “This third decade is a time ripe for religious and spiritual development,” write Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (4). A key aspect for young adults is the search for deeper purpose and meaning.

Factor 9: Tinkers and challenges religion and spirituality

What alarms many parents and adults about the faith development of emerging adults is that many young adults tend to disconnect from the church, opting out of mainstream religion (Graham, 240). “For the vast majority of emerging adults, the task to self-author their identities, worldviews, and communities leaves them less tethered to tradition and more individually focused than at any other time in development,” write Gina Magyar-Russell, Paul Deal, and Iain Tucker Brown in their article about young adult spirituality (41).

Young adults are tough on churches, traditional beliefs, and religion in general. “The individualism valued by many emerging adults makes them skeptical of religious institutions and wary of being part of one,” writes Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. “To most emerging adults, participation in a religious institution, even a liberal one, requires them to abide by a certain set of beliefs and rules and therefore constitutes an intolerable compromise of their individuality” (172).

One congregation, located near a college campus in Texas, decided to deal with this situation head on. They created a “Skeptics Corner” class where college students could come and bring all their questions and arguments about religion and spirituality. The class, led by a religion professor from campus, became a popular class among college students. The professor created a warm, inviting environment, welcoming any question, any skeptical observation. Relationships formed, and college students felt affirmed and valued for their faith journey while many of their parents struggled to make sense of their process. That process, however, was an important part of their faith journey: finding their own voice and way in their spiritual development.

Factor 10: Develops an integrative faith independent of others

For emerging adults, integrating their faith into their lives evolves more around questions than about participating in faith practices. “The ‘big questions’ that preoccupy students are essentially spiritual questions: Who am I? What are my most deeply felt values? Do I have a mission or purpose in life? Why am I in college? What kind of person do I want to become? What sort of world do I want to create?” write the authors of *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives*. “When we speak of students’ ‘spiritual quest,’ we are essentially speaking of their efforts to seek answers to such questions” (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 1).

The faith journey for an emerging adult often rattles parents, grandparents, and extended family members because the young adult needs to define his or her own faith journey, independent of everyone else. “For most emerging adults, simply to accept what their parents have taught them about religion and carry on the same religious tradition as their parents would represent a kind of failure, an abdication of their responsibility to think for themselves, become independent from their parents, and decide on their own beliefs,” writes Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. “Quite consciously and deliberately, they seek to form a set of beliefs about religious questions that will be distinctly their own” (Arnett, 177).

Parents and other adults, however, can easily misinterpret this process of young adults integrating their faith, because it appears to be more of a deconstruction rather than a reconstruction. “Too often, deconstruction is mistakenly understood as a singular nihilistic exercise leading to the complete rejection and destruction of home-making propositions,” write Gina Magyar-Russell, Paul Deal, and Iain Tucker Brown. “However, deconstruction involves a double movement of dismantling in order to rebuild, of individuating in order to reintegrate. . . . In essence, the goal of leaving is not to become an ideological vagabond, but rather home-leaving is a prerequisite for the homecoming to a more mature and cohesive identity and worldview” (50).

Connected, Interested Parents

One of the key factors of whether or not emerging adults explore their spirituality has to do with their parents. When parents have a strong religious commitment (meaning they attend worship services regularly and talk about the importance of faith), the more likely young adults will find a religious grounding (Smith and Snell, 218).

For young adults to thrive, they need to separate from their parents. “Emerging adults see the three cornerstones for becoming an adult as accepting responsibility for yourself, making independent decision, and becoming financially independent,” writes Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. “Each of these criteria has connotations of independence specifically *from parents*” (48).

Parents feel the pain of this separation. They often feel like they're "losing" their son or daughter, and they often don't know how to connect to their young adult in general and around faith issues. But young adults who thrive, redefine their relationship with their parents, and parents who allow and participate in this redefinition also benefit greatly. Young adults need parents who are connected and interested in their lives—and parents who give them space to explore and discover.

"Parents take stock of the whole experience of parenthood," writes Ellen Galinsky about this stage of parenting. Parents "have the related tasks of preparing for the departure, then adjusting their images of this event with what actually happens, redefining their identities as parents with grown-up children, and measuring out their accomplishments and failures" (283).

This separation in the early years of young adulthood creates a lot of discomfort and flared tempers. "Conflict arises, as adolescents press for more autonomy while parents continue to feel responsible for protecting their children from potential harm," writes Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. "The changes in parents and their emerging adult children allow them to establish a new intimacy, more open than before, with a new sense of mutual respect. They begin to relate to each other as adults, as friends, as equals, or at least as near equals" (56, 58).

Unfortunately most parents don't view their emerging adult's spiritual development as anything close to becoming equal or near equal. In fact, for parents, their young adult's spiritual journey often feels like watching their son or daughter barreling over a dangerous cliff. Instead of panicking, keep talking about faith issues (without forcing them too much on your young adult).

"There is a strength about religion that's not going to go away," says Vern Bengtson, author of *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations*. "There is a life course trajectory by which a lot of young people leave religion and then come back" (Brown, 1).

As young adults leave home and find their way in the world, they need parents who remain connected to them while letting them go. Parents are in Stage 7: Launching and Fostering. Parents continue to serve as faith models for their young adults, providing a safe place for young adults to grapple with faith issues.

Parents are essential in helping emerging adults develop the ten faith factors listed in this chapter. "The way in which parents socialize their children and adolescents appears to be related to the religious and spiritual development of emerging adults," writes Larry Nelson. "It may be that while their role as direct socializers of religiousness and spirituality diminishes as their children enter the third decade of life, parents may still play an important role via their broader parenting practices and the overall quality of the parent-child relationships during this period of development" ("The Role of Parents," 65). What's key for parents at this stage is to continue valuing, modeling, and showing the importance of religion (Smith and Snell, 57). Continue attending worship services regularly. Talk about faith. By staying connected and interested, parents help young adults make sense of their faith journey.

Connected, Interested Grandparents

Grandparents can play a vital role in an emerging adult's spiritual journey, particularly if they're intentional about their relationship and the power dynamics of their relationship. Researchers have found that grandparents who are close with their young adult grandchildren have great influence over their young adult grandchildren's beliefs and values (Brussoni and Boon, 267).

Researchers have identified five patterns of grandparenting, and each pattern affects the emerging adult in different ways (Krauss Whitbourne, 1):

1. Formal grandparent—This type of grandparent doesn't become overly involved, providing an interest in the grandchild and getting together occasionally with the grandchild.
2. Fun-seeking grandparent—This grandparent emphasizes fun, games, and leisure, seeing their role as the one entertainer.
3. Surrogate parent—Some grandparents take over the caretaking role, especially when they see that the parent can't (or won't) do this.
4. Reservoir of family wisdom—This grandparent provides wisdom, advice, and resources, becoming a guide for the young adult grandchild.
5. Distant figure—This type of grandparent shows up for holidays and special occasions but otherwise has infrequent contact with the grandchild (Krauss Whitbourne, 3).

“Despite considerable social change in family and religious life over recent decades, we suggest that contemporary families possess a stock of religious capital sufficient to influence the religious orientations of successive generations,” write researchers Casey Copen and Merril Silverstein (497). Grandparents greatly impact the faith journey of their young adult grandchildren, providing an important sounding board and source of stability when grandparents remain connected and interested.

Connected, Interested Extended Family Members

Aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, great-grandparents, and other extended family members also can influence an emerging adult's faith journey. Researchers have found that when extended family members support the religious socialization that young adults received at home, young adults are more likely to have a positive experience of religion (Cornwall, 207).

While many adults (60 percent) say that discussing religious beliefs with young people is important, few actually do so (Scales, Benson, Mannes, et. al., 102). Only 35 percent of adults talk about religious beliefs with young people (Scales, Benson, Mannes, et. al., 102). How will young people make sense of their faith journey when adults are reluctant to talk about faith issues?

Adults also have other huge gaps in what they value for young people and the way they act (see Display 5.3).

DISPLAY 5.3

What adults say and do

	Percentage of adults who say it's important	Percentage of adults who do this
Teach shared values	80	45
Guide decision-making	76	41
Have meaningful talks	75	34
Discuss personal values	73	37
Pass down traditions	56	38
Provide service opportunities	48	13
Model giving and serving	47	16

(Scales, Benson, Mannes, et. al., 102)

Although emerging adults are finding their unique, individual paths, they're observing the adults around them. How are adults talking about faith? How are they acting on their faith? How are they helping young adults make sense of the questions, doubts, and contradictions they see in religion? All this matters in the faith journey for emerging adults. They need adults who are connected and interested in them, not only personally but also about their faith journey.

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