

Designing Parent Education & Programming

(From: *Faith Formation with a New Generation* by John Roberto, LifelongFaith, 2018)

The family provides a significant and irreplaceable role in faith formation with children and adolescents. When Christian Smith and his colleagues in the National Study on Youth and Religion looked for the factors that produced highly religious emerging adults, they focused on parents and the family as the primary (but not only) influence. They reported that through the processes of religious socialization young people with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood.

Research studies over the past twenty years continue to affirm this truth. We know the factors that make a significant difference in promoting faith in children and adolescents:

- parents’ personal faith and practice
- a close and warm parent-child relationship
- parent modeling and teaching a religious faith
- parent involvement in church life and Sunday worship
- grandparent religious influence and relationship
- family conversations about faith
- family faith religious practices including praying, reading the Bible, serving others, and celebrating holidays and rituals.

In a recent study, *Nothing Less: Engaging Kids in a Lifetime of Faith*, Lifeway Research asked 2,000 Protestant and nondenominational churchgoers—of all whom attend services at least once a month and have adult children ages 18 to 30—what parenting practices pay off over the long haul when it comes to spiritual health. They asked parents to think about their children today (18-30 years old) and what proved to be significant in developing their faith and spiritual life. They discovered nine things parents do to influence the long-term spiritual condition of their young people (not ranked in order).

1. Parents participated in mission trips as a family as their kids were growing up.
2. Parents participated in service projects with their kids as they were growing up.
3. Parents frequently shared Christ with unbelievers as their kids were growing up.
4. Parents personally read the Bible several times a week or more as their kids were growing up.
5. Parents encouraged their teen to serve in the church.
6. Parents typically asked for forgiveness when they messed up as their children were growing up.
7. Parents encouraged their children’s own unique talents and interests as they grew up.
8. Parents attended churches that emphasized what the Bible says as their kids were growing up.
9. Parents taught their children to tithe as their kids were growing up.

The research and the Christian tradition make it clear: family-centered faith formation, parent engagement, and parent formation need to be central in faith formation with children and adolescents. We need to embrace a new set of beliefs and attitudes in our work with families:

To believe that God is actively present in family life, and that the family is the first community and the most basic way in which God gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world.

To see the family as the essential and foundational environment for faith nurture, faith practice, and the healthy development of young people.

To inform parents of their essential role and empower them to fulfill their role as faith formers of children and adolescents.

To reinforce the family's central role in promoting healthy development and faith growth in children and youth, and enhance the faith-forming capacity of parents and grandparents.

To build faith formation around the lives of the today's families and parents, rather than having the congregation prescribe the programs and activities that families will participate in.

To address the diversity of family life today by moving away from "one size fits all" programs and strategies toward a variety of programs and strategies tailored to the unique life tasks and situations, concerns and interest, and religious-spiritual journeys of parents and families.

To overcome the age-segregated nature of church and its programming by engaging parents and the whole family in meaningful intergenerational relationships and faith formation that involves all ages and families.

To build upon the assets, strengths, and capacities present in parents and families, rather than focusing on their deficits and solving problems.

To partner with parents in working toward shared goals and aspirations for their young people by supporting, equipping, and resourcing them.

Equipping Parents and Grandparents as Faith Formers

Equipping parents and grandparents with the knowledge and skills necessary for faith-forming: how to transmit faith and values to their young people, how to become a Christian role model, and how to build a community of faith at home that nurtures faith growth in the young.

We know that parents (and grandparents) are the most important social and religious influence on their children, adolescents, and emerging adults. The faith of parents and grandparents, their role modeling, their teaching, their warm and affirming parenting style are key factors in religious transmission and developing highly religious children, youth, and young adults. We know from research studies that the religious tradition of parents, their religious involvement, and whether the parents were of the same religious faith at marriage have a huge impact on how a faith tradition is transmitted to the next generation. Parental behaviors influence religious development through "role modeling"—what parents do in setting examples for religious practice and belief, such as attending church regularly, participating in church activities, and encouraging faith development at home through prayers, scripture reading, and religious stories. It is important that parents show consistency between belief and practice: "walking the walk and not just talking the talk."

A Parent Plan

Every congregation needs an intentional plan that addresses parenting and grand parenting for faith growth at each stage in the first two decades of life: young children, older children, young adolescents, and older adolescents. A plan needs to incorporate three elements: promoting the spiritual and religious growth of

parents, developing their faith forming skills, and equipping them with the knowledge and skills for parenting children and adolescents today.

We are proposing that every congregation develop a parent plan with a progression of workshops, webinars, courses, activities, support groups, and resources from infancy through the end of the adolescent years. Each new stage—birth: parenting young children; start of school: parenting older children; middle school: parenting young adolescents; high school: parenting older adolescents; graduation from high school: parenting emerging adults—would be introduced through a variety of educational opportunities and then sustained through support groups, continuing education, and online resources and activities. For many churches the life stages correspond to sacramental and milestone celebrations: baptism, first communion, confirmation. These celebrations provide an excellent opportunity to infuse parent formation.

1. Adult Spiritual and Religious Growth

One way to develop the content of parent faith formation is to create and curate programming and resources around the ten characteristics of maturing faith. Chapter Five includes a religious growth discernment tool for parents and a process for develop faith forming experiences around the ten characteristics.)

1. Developing and sustaining a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ
2. Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and making the Christian faith a way of life
3. Reading and studying the Bible—its message, meaning, and application to life today
4. Learning the Christian story and foundational teachings of the Christian faith (Trinity, Jesus, creed, morality and ethics) and integrating its meaning into ones life
5. Praying—together and by ourselves, and seeking spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines
6. Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and values
7. Living the Christian mission in the world—serving those in need, caring for God’s creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace.
8. Worshipping God with the community at Sunday worship, ritual celebrations, and the seasons of the church year
9. Being actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the faith community
10. Practicing faith in Jesus Christ by using one’s gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world

Use gathered opportunities to help parents diagnose their spiritual and religious growth needs using the ten faith maturity characteristics, and then provide a variety of ways for them to address their growth needs from gathered programs to online content and experiences. Provide theological and biblical formation in a variety of learning formats to make it easy for parents and grandparents them to access the opportunities: independent (online), mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, or church-wide. Utilize online faith formation for parents using courses and resources from Christian colleges, seminaries, and Christian educational organizations.

Parent formation offerings need to be responsive to the needs and interests of parents in each of the four spiritual-religious types—Engaged, Occasional, Spiritual, Unaffiliated. There is no one-size-fits-all model of parent faith formation that will work today. (See Chapter Five for more guidance.)

2. Faith Forming Skills and Practices

Christian Smith and Justin Bartkus identify three primary roles parents play in transmitting religion. These three roles can provide a framework for developing the faith forming roles and practices of parents and grandparents.

At each stage of life congregations can teach parents how to be effective sponsors, gatekeepers, and interpreters of the faith.

1. *Sponsor of the Faith*: Parents are the point of access between the church and their children. If children are not initially exposed to the Christian faith by their parents, they usually will not be exposed to it at all.
2. *Gatekeeper of the Faith*. Parents have nearly total control over how much and what sorts of religious content their children encounter—whether prayer, reading the Bible, or receiving Communion will occur regularly in their lives; whether they will be exposed to relationships and communities that have a religious dimension, and so forth. Parents are thus the “gatekeeper” of religious content for their children. To use another metaphor, parents are like a faucet, determining whether religious content will arrive in children’s lives at an occasional drip or in a regular flow.
3. *Interpreter of the Faith*. Parents are definitive role models, mentors, who embody a specific manner of being Christian. They teach children how to apprehend the world, how to understand what is good and what is evil, how one ought to affectively, intellectually and practically engage with the world, and so on. They do not just “represent” the faith; in many cases, they are the only meaningful embodiment of that faith in the lives of children. Parents render faith a matter of flesh and blood rather than a lifeless mishmash of doctrines and teachings. If children do not “see” the Christian faith in the “face” of their parents, they will likely never gain sufficient familiarity with it to commit to practicing the faith in the long run.
(Adapted from Smith and Bartkus, 15)

Based on research findings and the wisdom of the Christian tradition we can identify important faith forming skills and practices that can be incorporate into a parenting plan in developmentally-appropriate ways. This content includes, but is not limited to:

- having family conversations about religious topics
- reading and discussing the Bible with children and teens
- prayer as a family and encourage children and teens to pray
- participating in Sunday worship as a family
- celebrating family rituals and milestones
- celebrating holidays and seasons as a family
- engaging in actions of service, justice, and care for creation as a family and encouraging children and teens to serve
- talking about faith and the religious tradition, and providing moral instruction and discussing moral issues with children and teens

Chapter Five includes a family practices discernment tool that can be used with parents to help determine the key practices to include in parent formation.

3. Knowledge and Skills for Parenting

Research studies have identify some of the most important knowledge and skills for effective parenting. The Search Institute’s research into Developmental Relationships provides an essential source for the key content of parent education (go to <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework>).

This knowledge and skills for parenting includes, but is not limited to:

- expressing care to young people by listening to them, being dependable, encouraging them, and make them feel known and valued
- challenging young people by expecting them to do their best and live up to their potential
- providing support for my young people by encouraging their efforts and achievements and guiding them to learn and grow
- treating young people with respect, hearing their voice, and including them in decisions that affect them
- inspiring young people to see possibilities for their future, expose them to new experiences and places, and connect them to people who can help them grow
- demonstrating a warm and affirming parenting approach
- creating a warm, caring supportive family environment.
- practicing effective communication skills
- managing “screen time” and social media use
- learning effective discipline practices
- creating a warm, caring supportive family.

Envisioning

Here are a variety of ideas for developing programming around the three content areas of parent and grandparent formation.

1. **Parent website.** A parent or family faith formation website can provide online learning experiences (workshops, webinars, courses, audio podcasts, video programs). A website can provide parents with resources in all three content areas in a variety of media. The website can also extend learning from gathered parent programs. The website can include original programming created by the congregation and curated programming from other sources. Digital initiatives, such as the website or webinars, provide a way to reach a wider audience of parents in the community. A great example of a website designed for parents is ParentFurther (<http://www.parentfurther.com>).
2. **Parent programs.** In gathered settings (large group or small group) or online (webinars, online courses, video programs) parent programs can be created and/or curated using the content suggested earlier.
 - Incorporate parent formation and education into congregational events that already engage parents, such as parent preparation programs for baptism, first communion, or confirmation, as well as the celebration of milestones
 - Add a parent-only component to family-intergenerational learning programs that addresses parent faith formation or skills development while their children are participating in child-focused activities. Gather the groups together for a shared experience to put into practice what they learned.
 - Add a parallel parent program to the existing children and adolescent program where parents can gather occasionally while their children are in age-specific programs.
 - Add a parent component to vacation Bible school in the evenings or online.
3. **Laboratory experiences.** Immerse parents in hands-on experiences—with or without their children—that teach knowledge and skills for faith-forming and parenting. A family-centered worship experience can be an opportunity to teach parents about worship, reading the Bible, and how to do these things at home. A church-wide service day can be an opportunity to teach parents about the biblical basis of service and how to integrate service into family life. A church year seasonal celebration can be an opportunity to teach about

ritual and how to celebrate rituals and church year seasons at home. These immersion experiences can be supported with online content for parents and for the whole family.

4. **Parent mentors.** Provide guidance and support for parents and the whole family at each stage of life with mentors drawn from the grandparent generation who are actively engaged in church and bring decades of parenting and family life experiences. Congregations can identify and provide training for mentors (mentoring skills, understanding today's family, learning how to access online resources and activities, and more). Developing relationships between parents and mentors can begin with birth/baptism. Mentoring can be life-cycle specific with mentors who focus on children or adolescents. Churches can also identify mentors (spiritual guides) who attend to people's spiritual life, guiding them in growing in their relationship with God and learning more about the Christian faith.
5. **Life cycle or affinity groups for parents.** Create gathered settings (church, home, community) and in online groups (such as a Facebook parents group) that provide opportunities for parents with children in the same age group to talk about parenting, get information and encouragement, discuss family life issues and challenges, and more. Congregations can also sponsor support groups for divorced parents, parents in blended families, parents of children with special needs, and other affinity groupings. An example of a life cycle support group is MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers).
6. **Have parents practice new skills with their own children during program sessions.** This is in contrast to training programs where no practice takes place or where parents are asked to role-play with another parent or the group leader.
7. **Design programs that engage parents in the learning experience.** Parent programs need to have content that is relevant to parents and processes that help parents learn and want to participate in new learning. Here are several tips for designing and leading effective educational experiences for parents.
 - Create a supportive, caring environment for learning. Greet parents, provide time for them to get acquainted with one another, and encourage mutual support during and after the experience.
 - Actively engage parents in the learning. The amount they learn will be in direct proportion to how much they put into the experience.
 - Let parents be the experts. Show that you value their knowledge and experience by giving them opportunities to contribute to the learning experience.
 - Tie the learning activities around the parents' experiences and values so they know "this is for me and about my family."
 - Focus the content on real needs, issues, and concerns, not just on content that parents ought to know. If, for example, you want to help parents teach their child/teen about healthy concepts of right and wrong, first identify the ways this connects with parents' needs or concerns regarding moral values, then develop the experience to reflect those concerns.
 - Include information and skills parents can put into action immediately. Such application reinforces and helps parents internalize what they learn.
 - Demonstrate how to use skills and practices during the program so that parents have a direct experience of how to use the skills or practice at home.
 - Provide resources that parents can use for their own personal growth and with their family. Consider developing a parent website with resources and links to websites to enhance and expand the learning experience.
8. **Use a variety of environments and methods to engage all parents, anytime and anywhere.** Use a variety of settings— independent, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church-wide, in the community, and in the world—to offer a diversity of programs as well as to offer the same program content

in multiple learning environments. This provides parents with more options to participate and broadens the scope of parent formation and education offerings.

9. **Use online platforms and digitally enabled strategies.** Utilize the abundance of digital media and tools for parent formation and education—to engage parents anytime, anyplace, and just-in-time—and extend and expand faith formation from physical, face-to-face settings into their daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems.

Online platforms for parents (websites) integrate the content (programs, activities, resources), connect people to the content and to each other, provide continuity for people across different learning experiences, and make everything available anytime, anywhere, 24-7-365. Digital media tools and resources—social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more), webinars and online learning, video conferencing, videos, audio podcasts, and much more—provide more features in designing parent programs, more methods for delivering programs, and more ways to connecting parents to each other.

10. **Give parents a plan.** Reggie Joiner and the Think Orange team emphasize how important it is to give families a plan. “When parents show up at church, they are often asking silent questions that we must answer; questions they don’t even know they’re asking. To begin looking at parents through a different filter, imagine that every time a parent walks through the door, he or she is asking you to do three things:

- *Give me the plan.* Most parents are parenting reactively, yet many of them desire to be proactive. They want a plan that will give them a system of support, consistent influence, and a steady flow of relevant information. In essence, what they need from the church is a partner.
- *Show me how it works.* Parents need to be influences as much as children do, and they desire to be engaged in the process in a way that prompts them to take the best next step. Church leadership has the potential to challenge them collectively and give them a network of families to connect with personally.
- *Tell me what to do today.* If we are going to truly partner with parents, we have to give them specific instructions or resources to use this week. Sometimes parents have a lack of vision, but often they just don’t know where to start. Give parents a map and a schedule. (Joiner 2010, 89–90)

Works Cited

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