



The Importance of Family Faith for Lifelong Faith Formation

John Roberto

One of the most significant, and to many startling, findings in the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) is the impact of parental faith and religiosity on the beliefs and practices of teenagers. NSYR found: “of parents who report that their faith is *extremely* important in their daily lives, 67% of their teens report that faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8% of those parents’ teens report that faith is not very or not important in their lives.” (Smith and Denton, 57)

The opposite is also true: parents for whom faith is somewhat or not at all important have teens who believe the same thing. Smith concludes, “In sum, therefore, we think that the best general rule of thumb is this” ‘We’ll get what we are.’ By normal processes of socialization, and unless other significant forces intervene, more than what parents might *say they want* as religious outcomes of their children, most parents most likely will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves *are*.” (Smith and Denton, 57)

The importance of parental faith and practice on the lives of children and teens is clear.

Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misconceptions, we believe that *the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents* (emphasis added). Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children’s religious and spiritual lives. . .the best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual

John Roberto is the editor of the *Lifelong Faith* journal, author of *Faith Formation 2020*, and co-author of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*.

(This article is developed from the research presented in Chapter 5 of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* by Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto. St Paul: EYM Publications, 2010.)

lives of their parents *do* look like. Parents and other adults most likely “will get what they are.” This recognition may be empowering to parents, or alarming, or both. But it is a fact worth taking seriously in any case. (Smith and Denton, 261)

Smith and Denton conclude: “The best way to get most youth involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities.” (Smith and Denton, 267)

In a second NSYR study, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell exam the factors in adolescence that influence religious commitments and practices during emerging adulthood (18-23 year olds). Once again the impact of parents early in life and in adolescence continues into emerging adulthood.

Among the variables in the first NSYR survey of teenagers, having had highly religious parents, a high importance of faith, frequent personal prayer, a larger number of personal religious experiences, frequent scripture reading, and frequent religious service attendance during the teenage years are the *most strongly* associated with more religious service attendance, greater importance of faith, and more frequent prayer during emerging adulthood. (217)

In order to sustain high levels of religious commitment and practice during the emerging adult years (18-23), several distinct factors seem especially important: first, strong *relational modeling and support* for religious commitment; second, genuine *internalization* of religious significance (importance of faith, religious experiences, no doubts); and third, the *personal practice* of religious faith (prayer). It appears that also important are

certain theological *belief commitments* (in miracles), more intensity of *personal practice* of religious faith (scripture reading), another form of *relational modeling and support* (more supportive adults in the congregation), and *paying certain costs* for one’s religious beliefs (abstaining from sex, being made fun or for faith). (217, 219)

A teenager who among his or her peers scored in the top one-quarter of a scale measuring these four factors—(1) *parental religion*, (2) *prayer*, (3) *importance of faith*, and (4) *scripture reading*—stands an 85% chance of landing in the Highest category of religion as an emerging adult; but one who scores in the Lowest one-quarter on that scale stands only a miniscule chance (0.4 percent) of landing at the high end of religion when he or she is 18-23 years old. In short, the combination of a teenager’s parent religion, importance of faith, prayer, and scripture reading makes an enormous substantive difference in religious outcomes during emerging adulthood. (220)

A teenager who scores in the top quarter of a scale measuring three more factors—(5) *having supportive nonparent adults in one’s religious congregation*, (6) *having religious experiences*, and (7) *not doubting religious faith*—stands 75 times the chance of landing in the Highest category of religion compared to one what scores in the bottom quarter. These three variables taken alone thus also make a big difference in the probability that a teenager will end up being highly religious as he or she grows into emerging adulthood. (220)

The Importance of Strong Parental Religion

Smith and Snell believe that strong parental religion is linked to higher emerging adult

religion through at least two social causal mechanisms—religious socialization and the avoidance of relational breakdown.

One obvious possibility is simple **religious socialization**—that teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely that 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. Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents’ religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously. At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization. We think of this socialization as the “positive” side of the dynamic. But we also believe it is only part of the story.

A second social causal mechanism that we think connects strong parental religion to strong emerging adult religion is the more “negative” one of **the avoidance of relationship breakdown**. Most parents and children enjoy relationships—however imperfect—that they value and want to sustain. Parents and children in highly religious families, in fact, enjoy even closer and happier relationships than

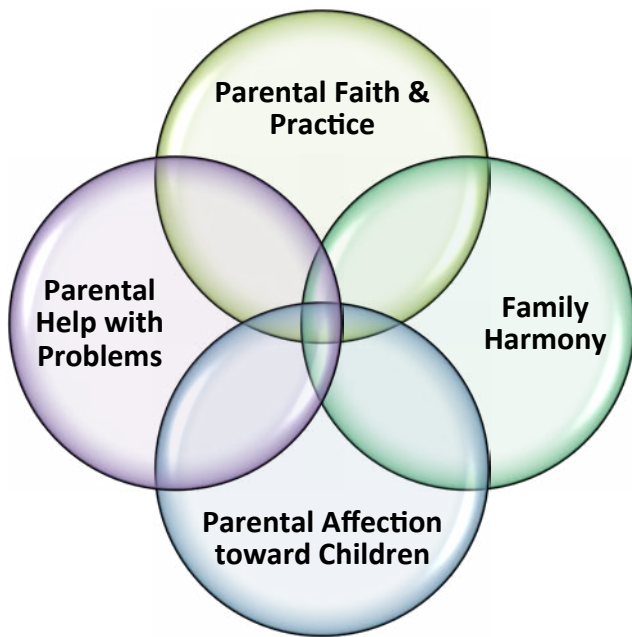
those of the national average. When it comes to parents, children, and religion, when religious faith and practice are particularly important to parents, it is usually the case that they want it to also be important in the lives of their children. When the children accept, embrace, and practice that religious faith, therefore, the relationship tends to be affirmed and sustained. When their children neglect or reject that religious faith, the relationship tends to be threatened. Children of seriously religious parents who are generally invested in avoiding relational breakdown therefore have an incentive not to disregard the religious faith and practice that they (usually accurately) believe their parents want them to continue. Unless some other overriding factor comes into play, therefore, the consequence of not believing and of living as a nonreligious person is too costly to accept. So we think that in part in this way, too, religious commitment and practice is reproduced from one generation to the next. (231-233)

Smith and Snell conclude that the lives of many teenagers who are transitioning into the emerging adult years reflect a lot more religious stability and continuity than is commonly realized. “The past continues to shape the future. This is important to know, because it means that *religious commitments, practices, and investments made during childhood and the teenage years, by parents and others in families and religious communities, matter—they make a difference*” (256).

Family & Household Faith

The “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” confirms the continuing influence of parents and the family on young people. Young people are influenced by the faith of their parents and family in a number

of significant, overlapping ways. These four overlapping influences describe the role of family and household faith.



Possessing Strong Parental Faith

Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith. A vital and informed parental faith includes understanding the Christian faith, participating in worship, praying, and engaging in service and mission. Young people are in households and relationships with parents where mature faith is cultivated and modeled.

The NSYR research tells us that parents will end up getting religiously of their children what they themselves are. The strong, vital, mature faith of parents in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” congregations is surely one of the most important contributors to nurturing sons and daughters of vital, committed Christian faith. These are parents who are committed to Jesus Christ and experience the presence of God in their daily lives and relationships with others. Their faith helps them decide what is right or wrong and take responsibility for serving those in need. The most highly rated characteristics of the faith

of parents in the study are the listed below. (The highest rating is 9.)

- My faith helps me know right from wrong. (8.24)
- I have a sense of sharing in a great purpose. (8.20)
- I have had feelings of being in the presence of God. (8.12)
- I have a sense of being saved in Christ. (8.09)
- I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God’s creation. (7.89)
- God helps me decide what is right or wrong behavior. (7.88)
- I have found a way of life that gives me direction. (7.72)
- Religious faith is important in my life. (7.37)
- My life is committed to Jesus Christ. (7.72)
- My life is filled with meaning and purpose. (7.33)
- I have a real sense that God is guiding me. (7.30)
- I feel God’s presence in my relationships with other people. (6.87)
- I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually. (6.65)
- I try to apply my faith to political and social issues. (6.65)
- I talk with other people about my faith. (6.42)
- I give significant portions of time and money to help other people. (6.12)

Parents in the study seek out opportunities to grow spiritually. The overwhelming majority of parents are involved in spiritual support groups in their churches. They reported that they belonged to at least one church group in which others will prayer with them and for them as needed (7.23); in at least one church group in which they can talk about spiritual issues (6.99); and in at least one church group in which it is possible to talk about personal problems (5.88).

Promoting Family Faith Practices

Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life. Parents not only know and live Christianity themselves, they draw their teenagers into faith practices. Parents pray with their adolescents at table, at family celebrations, during times of crises and over individual and family decisions. Service is a way of life.

The “Effective Christian Education Study” (Search Institute. 1990) found that family religiousness was *the* most important factor in faith maturity.

Of the two strongest connections to faith maturity, family religiousness is slightly more important than lifetime exposure to Christian education. The particular family experiences that are most tied to greater faith maturity are the frequency with which an adolescent talked with mother and father about faith, the frequency of family devotions, and the frequency with which parents and children together were involved in efforts, formal or informal, to help other people. Each of these family experiences is more powerful than frequency with which an adolescent sees his or her parents engage in religious behavior like church attendance. (Benson and Eklin, 38)

The “Effective Christian Education Study” found that families that express faith do the following things: often talk about religious faith, often have family devotions, prayer, or Bible reading at home, and often have family projects to help other people.

The research also found that youth in families that often express faith do the following things *twice* as often as those families that do not express faith: read the Bible and pray when alone, read and study about the Christian faith, are spiritually

moved by the beauty of God’s creation, and have often felt God’s presence in their life.

Youth in families where faith is often expressed by a parent in word and deed are *three* times more likely to participate in family projects to help others and *twice* as likely to spend time helping other people than youth from families that did not express faith. Search Institute surveys of 217,000 sixth- to twelfth-grade youth in public schools (1999-2000) found that youth who say their parents “spent lots of time helping others” are almost twice as likely themselves to serve others. Among young people whose parents model helping, 61% volunteer at least one hour per week. Among those whose parents do not model helping, only 36% volunteer. People who live lives of service, justice, and advocacy often point to early experiences in their family as being normative.

Families that express faith also have an impact on participation in church life and service activities. Twice as many youth in families that express faith are involved in a church youth group, go to church programs or events that include children and adults, go to church camp or work camp, and regard a religious faith as a very or most important influence in life. Their attendance at worship services is almost 20% higher than youth from families that never express faith.

It is evident that youth who are most likely to mature in faith are those raised in homes where faith is part of the normal ebb and flow of family life. The “Effective Christian Education Study” provides convincing evidence of the power present in the religious practices of a home. Religious practices in the home virtually *double* the probability of a congregation’s youth entering into the life and mission of Christ’s church.

In the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” young people were asked how their parents influenced their faith life, they people identified six ways that parental faith influences them. Confirming the findings from the Effective Christian Education Study, five of the six influences

identified by the young people focus on family religiousness: talking about faith, serving others and God, and reading the Bible.

Parental Faith Influences	Mother	Father
1. Values are focused on serving others and God	7.41	6.88
2. Positive influence on my religious faith	7.23	6.21
3. Talked with me about my relationship with Jesus Christ	6.75	5.43
4. Attending Sunday worship	6.54	5.76
5. Talked with my parent about religious faith	4.89	3.95
6. Reading the Bible	4.10	3.48

When asked “How often does your family sit down together and talk about God, the Bible, or other religious things?” one in four young people said their family does this on a weekly or daily basis, and 40% once or twice a month. The combination of parental faith and parental faith influences promote a family which engages in faith practices at home. These are parents who read the Bible and pray with their teenagers, and include them in faith-informed discussions of family decision and budgets. Young people know about their parents’ vital faith not only from observing them at church, but also from conversations about faith in the midst of everyday life. Young people in exemplary congregations explore understandings of God and matters of faith in their families. Faith instruction in these congregations does not all occur in their youth ministries; families reinforce what’s learned at church through intentional faith practices and conversations at home.

Reflecting Family Harmony

Family members’ expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith. Families and households find ways to navigate the challenges and stresses of daily life with approaches marked by respect, equal regard, open communication, and cooperation. Parents, grandparents and others practice individual accountability,

forgiveness and reconciliation modeling faith in action and generating an atmosphere where faith can be referenced and discussed.

Young people in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” live in families where there is a high degree of family harmony as expressed in the interest that parents show their teens, close family relationships, and doing things as a family. In addition, young people experience parental affection from their parents and parental assistance with problems, They also experience a *lack* of parental verbal abuse. Each of these four features of family life influence the faith of young people and contribute to the development of a vital Christian faith in their lives.

Congregations Equipping Parents & Families

The congregations in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” ***offer instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equip parents for nurturing faith at home.*** Congregations provide strong adult faith formation, emphasizing adult discipleship and offering strong preaching, Bible studies, small groups and many forms of adult Christian education. Programs develop parental faith and prepare parents for nurturing the faith of their children and adolescents.

The congregations in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” ***offer parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.*** Parent-youth programs focus on adolescent-specific issues such as family communication, adolescent independence, decision-making, choosing friends, sexual expression, and conflict resolution; as well as faith themes such as studying the Bible together, discussing case studies from youth culture, and exploring popular media. Parent-youth programs enhance the capacity of parents and

teenagers to communicate and work together on matters of faith and life.

These congregations equip parents to pass on faith to their young people by:

- providing education and resources parents needed to teach their youth Christian concepts of right and wrong.
- showing parents how to foster the development of moral values in their teens.
- encouraging families to teach service as a way of life through their involvement in helping activities.
- encouraging parent-youth communication through classes on how to discuss adolescent issues with youth.
- helping youth and their parents deal with conflict.
- helping provide opportunities for teens and parents to interact.
- helping parents learn how to promote the faith of their children.
- helping parents share their faith with their youth at home by such things as rituals, faith conversations, etc.
- establishing a network of care and support for youth and their families

Conclusion

Family matters! Parental faith and influence matters! Family faith practices matter! The “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry” clearly shows the continuing influence of parents and the family on the development of a vital Christian faith in young people. The parents in the study possess a mature, committed Christian faith and this has a profound influence on the lives of young people. Family faith practices—caring conversations, family devotions and prayer, family rituals and traditions, family service—influence the faith lives of young people. Congregations have a role to play by equipping parents to pass on faith and strengthening family relationships,

contributing to the influence of parents and the whole family on the development of youth of vital Christian faith. Given parents profound influence in the lives of their teens, youth ministries involved them directly in youth programs and activities, becoming a potential source of growth in faith for both teenagers and their parents.

Works Cited

Benson, Peter L. and Carolyn H. Eklin.

Effective Christian Education: A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990.

Smith, Christian and Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults.* New York: Oxford Press, 2010.

Smith, Christian with Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.



Order from the [Lifelong Faith Store](#).

Exemplary Youth Ministry Website:
<http://www.exemplarym.com>

Developing the Faith of Parents & the Family

Use the following questions to explore how your congregation can enhance its ministries with parents and families during the childhood and adolescent years by reflecting on the five characteristics of Family and Household Faith identified in the “Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry.”

- How is your congregation currently addressing each of the five characteristics of Family and Household Faith during the childhood and adolescent years? Identify specific illustrations of how your congregation is addressing each characteristic.
- How can you enhance what you are already doing?
- Which areas need attention? How can you develop these?

Characteristics of Family and Household Faith

Possessing Strong Parental Faith: Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith.

A vital and informed parental faith includes understanding the Christian faith, participating in worship, praying, and engaging in service and mission. Young people are in households and relationships with parents where mature faith is cultivated and modeled.

Promoting Family Faith Practices: Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life.

Parents not only know and live Christianity themselves, they draw their teenagers into faith practices. Parents pray with their adolescents at table, at family celebrations, during times of crises and over individual and family decisions. Service is a way of life. Together parents and young people “turn their faces outward” and live life for others.

Reflecting Family Harmony: Family members’ expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.

Families and households find ways to navigate the challenges and stresses of daily life with approaches marked by respect, equal regard, open communication, and cooperation. Parents, grandparents and others practice individual accountability, forgiveness and reconciliation modeling faith in action and generating an atmosphere where faith can be referenced and discussed.

Equipping Parents: The congregation offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equip parents for nurturing faith at home.

Congregations provide strong adult faith formation, emphasizing adult discipleship and offering strong preaching, Bible studies, small groups and many forms of adult Christian education. Programs develop parental faith and prepare parents for nurturing the faith of their children and adolescents.

Fostering Parent-Youth Relationships: The congregation offers parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships.

Parent-youth programs focus on adolescent-specific issues such as family communication, adolescent independence, decision-making, choosing friends, sexual expression, and conflict resolution; as well as faith themes such as studying the Bible together, discussing case studies from youth culture, and exploring popular media. Parent-youth programs enhance the capacity of parents and teenagers to communicate and work together on matters of faith and life.

Strategies for Parent & Family Faith Formation

For the good of families and the whole Christian community, congregations can provide opportunities to equip homes as centers of faith formation at every stage of life. Congregations and age group ministries can make family faith formation a focus of everything they do as a church community, using an array of approaches and strategies to nurture faith at every stage of the family life cycle and in all the diverse forms and structures of the contemporary family. They can educate and enrich parents and the whole family to embed foundational religious practices—faith conversations, family devotions and prayer, Bible reading, service, and rituals and traditions—into the daily experience of family life. Congregations and youth ministries can strengthen the partnership between home and congregation by focusing on empowering, resourcing, and supporting the development of the family as the center of faith formation. To help your congregation strengthen its approach to families, here are several strategies that congregations are using effectively.

Strategy 1. Utilize church ministries and programming to teach, model, and demonstrate family faith practices, and then provide the resources for families to live the practice at home.

Churches can utilize Sunday worship and church programs and activities to teach, model, and demonstrate faith practices that families can incorporate into home life, and provide them with specific resources to live their faith at home. Weekly worship and church events are significant opportunities for families to experience faith practices—conversations, devotions and prayer, Bible reading and reflection, service, and rituals and traditions—which can be extended into the home.

Strategy 2. Involve the whole family in congregational life, programs, and leadership roles.

Most ministry activities of congregations have involved persons as individuals, not as families. What is missing in current practice are more ways families can participate *together* in the mission, ministries, and programs of the church. Start with ministries and programs where at least one family member is already active and incorporate family or parent-teen participation. Assess all of the possibilities in your congregation to promote whole-family experiences. Without adding more programming, congregations can involve the whole family. For example:

- Redesign children/adolescent Christian education programming or adult Bible study programs to incorporate family learning programs or parent-child/teen learning programs as an integral part of the program year.
- Involve the whole family in worship roles, such as reading the Scripture on Sunday, leading prayer, decorating the environment for worship, singing in the choir as a family, greeting people as they arrive for worship, collecting the offering, and so on.
- Redesign existing service projects for children, teens, and adults into whole-family service projects.
- Involve the whole family in congregational leadership, such as taking leadership roles in summer vacation Bible school or organizing the annual church festival.

Strategy 3. Offer family and intergenerational learning programs, as well as parent-child/teen programs.

Congregations can design programming that involves and engages the whole family in faith formation. In his report of the NSYR research (*Soul Searching*) Christian Smith observes, “Faith formation of children and teens would probably best be pursued in the larger context of family ministry, that parents should be viewed as indispensable partners in the religious formation of children and youth.” Most congregations would do well to transform their over-emphasis on age-group learning and incorporate family-centered learning programs or intergenerational learning programs, which involve the whole community: singles, couples, families with children/teens, empty nest families, and older adult families.

There are a number of possibilities for learning programs that involve the whole family and/or the whole community:

- monthly large group family or intergenerational learning programs (that can replace or be integrated with age-group programming)
- family workshops through the year focused on family faith practices, church year seasons, and/or family-focused topics
- family cluster or small group learning programs (at the church or in homes)
- family-centered (small group or large group) lectionary-based Scripture reflection
- family-centered or intergenerational vacation Bible school
- family retreats and camps
- family Bible study

Congregations can also plan programs for parents and children/adolescents on common areas of interest and need, such as communication, vocational decisions, cultural/media influences, social issues, and so on.

One model for family/intergenerational learning that is being used in churches incorporates the following elements:

1. Welcome, community building and opening prayer
2. Part 1: An All-Ages Learning Experience for the whole assembly that introduces the theme or topic for the program.
3. Part 2: In-Depth Learning Experiences that probe the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) or for specific age-groups (families with children or children-only, adolescents, young adults, and adults), and conducted in one of three formats:
 - *Whole Group Format*: learning in small groups with the whole group assembled in one room (age-specific or all ages small groups);
 - *Age Group Format*: learning in separate, parallel groups organized by ages;
 - *Learning Activity Center Format*: learning at self-directed or facilitated activity centers (age-specific and/or all ages learning centers).
4. Part 3. An All-Ages Contributive Learning experience in which each generation teaches the other generations.
5. Part 4. Reflection on the learning experience and interactive group sharing.
6. Closing Prayer

(Source: *Intergenerational Faith Formation*, Mariette Martineau, Joan Weber, and Leif Kehrwald. New London: Twenty-Third, 2008).

Strategy 4. Develop family faith formation around life-cycle milestones.

Milestones are significant moments in life's journey that provide the opportunity for individuals and their families to experience God's love, and grow in faith through sacred and ordinary events both in the life of the congregation and in daily life. Milestones faith formation provides a natural opportunity to create a partnership between the congregation and the home. Milestones faith formation uses four elements to shape this vital partnership:

- *Naming* the sacred and ordinary events that are recognized in the life of a congregation and those that take place in our daily lives—our beginnings, endings, transitions, achievements, failures, and rites of passage—creates rituals and traditions that shape our identities and give us a sense of belonging to the family of Jesus Christ.
- *Equipping* brings the generations together, builds community, invites conversation, encourages storytelling, and provides information. Opportunities are provided here to model faith practices for the home.
- *Blessing* the individual, and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home, says that it is *all* about faith. God is present in all of daily life, making the ordinary sacred.
- *Gifting* offers a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life.

From childhood through adolescence a variety of milestones such as baptism, first prayers, start of school, First Communion, receiving a Bible, Confirmation, receiving a driver's license, and graduations (middle school, high school), provide an opportunity for family faith formation. For each milestone, a congregation can provide faith formation that includes: (1) rituals and traditions; (2) intergenerational learning programs (building community, inviting conversation, encouraging storytelling, providing information, and modeling faith practices for individual and families); (3) a blessing of the individual and marking the occasion in a worship service and in the home; and (4) a tangible, visible item that serves as a reminder or symbol of the occasion being marked, as well as a resource for the ongoing nurture of faith in daily life at home

For resources see:

Faith Stepping Stones. Faith Inkubators.

Milestones Ministry Manual for Home and Congregation. Vibrant Faith Ministries.

Bloomington: Vibrant Faith Ministries, 2007.

Shift—What It Takes to Finally Reach Families Today. Haynes, Brian. Loveland: Group, 2009.

Take It Home: Inspiration and Events to Help Parents Spiritually Transform Their Children.

Mark Holmen. Ventura: Gospel Light, 2008.

Strategy 5. Offer a variety of developmentally-appropriate family or parent-teen service projects.

Congregations can offer a variety of developmentally-appropriate family or parent-child/teen service projects where families can choose from different levels of commitment from beginner experiences to advanced projects that are local, regional, national, and international. Each mission/service project includes a learning component that focuses on understanding the issue being addressed, exploring the teachings of Scripture and tradition, developing the skills for mission and service, and then, upon completion of the project,

reflecting upon the involvement. Mission projects are “developmental” with projects geared to different levels of involvement and challenge including:

- local mission projects lasting anywhere from a few hours to one day in length
- short-term mission trips lasting anywhere from two to five days and requiring an overnight stay on location
- weeklong mission trips within the United States as well as to foreign countries, designed for those who are ready to take the next big step in service.
- global expedition trips of 10 to 14 days that provide the opportunity to be immersed for a longer period in the targeted community and culture

Strategy 6. Provide at-home resources for the core family faith practices.

Congregations can provide families with a variety of resources—print, audio, video, and online—to help families embed faith practices in family life at each stage of life, including resources for parents at each stage of life, for in-home celebration of church year feasts and seasons, for extending Sunday worship into the home, for celebrating milestones, for engaging in service, and so many more. Churches can use their websites and digital communication to resource and connect families, delivering timely faith formation resources to the home, providing social networking among families to share faith stories and practices, and providing support, for parents.

Strategy 7. Use the Internet to resource and connect families.

Congregations can create their own online presence (website) as the centerpiece of their online faith formation. They can deliver faith formation experiences and resources anytime and anywhere, reaching people wherever they go online (home, work, school, vacation, coffee house). They can also promote continuing faith growth and practice by using their online presence and digital communication tools to extend relationships and faith formation initiated in a face-to-face learning settings. Churches can use a variety of online digital media strategies for faith formation including:

- A resource center with daily, weekly and seasonal resources for the family, including faith conversation activities, family devotions and prayer, Bible reading activities, service projects, and rituals and traditions
- A parenting center with “how to” parenting articles and videos, faith enrichment resources, a “gathering space” for parents to interact, a blog staffed by parent mentors, parent-generated ideas and activities, links to highly rated parent and family websites
- A milestones and life transitions center with sections for each milestone/transition that include rituals, blessings, commentaries, personal stories, a “gathering space” for sharing stories and ideas
- A virtual chapel sharing not only audio and video clips of some of the sermons and other worship experiences but also extending it through the daily posting of images, songs, meditations, inspirational stories, prayers of the people, and online worship exercises.
- A calendar of events with locations, times, and descriptions, with Web-streamed audio and video recordings of select offerings.
- Themed “gathering spaces” for synchronous and asynchronous interaction, including live text-based chat and live audio/video conferences, threaded discussions, collected blog links, self-paced tutorials on a range of topics, and so on.

- A community directory that includes “home pages” with pictures, contact information, and other self-determined personal information. Each individual can include more of his or her personal dreams, goals, and activities through statements or interactive blogs.
- A library pod with access to e-journals, e-books, archived streaming video of speakers and events, a clearinghouse-type collection of links to resources, and other Internet-mediated resources.
- A mission/service opportunity clearinghouse for local, national, and international internships, volunteer opportunities, and jobs.
- A learning center with courses and webinars on topics such as faith themes, Bible studies, life issues, and Christian practices, self-paced and facilitated by church staff and church members at scheduled times.
- Small group gatherings online for faith sharing, Bible study, and book discussions

Strategy 8. Focus on parents—parent faith formation and parental training.

Congregations can equip parents of teenagers for their parenting roles and sharing faith with teens through classes, workshops, retreats, and/or support groups. These could include such things as parenting classes, parent-youth discussion times, parent support groups, seminars for parents of younger youth as they enter adolescence, seminars for parents of older youth as they provide for college, and so forth. Churches can provide stand-alone parent programs, as well as incorporating parent faith formation and parent education into existing faith formation programs and support groups for parents.

Parent workshops and educational 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.