

Family Ministry Ideas

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My entire thinking about ministry began to change as my own teenagers became part of my youth ministry. Prior to that, I wasn't anti-family, I just didn't give parents/families the attention that they deserved/needed. I was all about building our youth ministry and discipling teenagers and didn't realize how I was hurting the families by not engaging and caring for them like I do now.

I've learned some things in recent years about becoming more intentional about ministry to families. For youth workers, these ideas won't require you to change your entire ministry paradigm, but they will move the needle in a more positive direction for families. For parents, if you find your church's youth ministry is doing these things, celebrate! If not, it might be that your youth ministry leadership team could benefit from seeing these ideas.

1. Give them dates: The earlier you can communicate important dates to parents, the more you'll help them. Families plan. They plan around the important dates of their teenagers. If you spring a last minute date on parents, you will create tension in their home. Parents make plans for their family and "now" their kids don't want to go because of a group activity they are just now hearing about. This pain can be avoided by early communication. The earlier the better.

2. End on time: It's really frustrating to drive to pick your kid up at a specific end time and waste time sitting in the car waiting. When you give parents a "pick up" time make sure you end on time. Just like you're frustrated when parents keep you waiting to pick their kid up, they're also ticked when they have to wait for your meeting to end. Respect parents by getting them home early (or at least on time).

3. Get them talking: Don't assume that teenagers go to their home and begin talking to their parent(s) about what was addressed in your meeting. Also, don't assume parents are going to ask and take the initiative to engage in spiritual conversations. When possible, either send kids home with questions to talk about, or email parents follow up questions, or post them on your blog or website. For good parents, if they know what was discussed at youth group they talk about it in the car or at the dinner table. Give them some conversation resources and they'll appreciate the effort.

4. Keep them home: One of the best ways we can care for families is to not barrage their kids with so many opportunities to leave the house for "church." I think most ministries do too much and they would be healthier if they cut their program opportunities in half. Minimal programs would also make families healthier too. When all three of my kids were teenagers, a family-night got very difficult with all their various commitments. Evenings at home became rare and sacred. This same principle applies to many families. Let parents know that you don't want their kids out very often and you will limit "church nights" so parents can take advantage of their family time at home.

5. Talk them up: it's easy to bash parents...and many in ministry do so! Taking verbal shots is not family-friendly (i.e. "Your parents don't know what they're talking about...", "Today's parents are scared...", "Sometimes parents can be so dumb.") Parents are already under enough attack and made to look like buffoons in media/culture/stereotypes. Don't go there in your ministry! While there are lots of opportunities (and many may even feel worthwhile,) don't fall prey to the easy temptation. Some ministry workers believe it makes them look better when they position themselves against parents—it doesn't! A verbal bash may assist in making a point, get a laugh, or make you look better (for a minute,) but in the long run you'll be minimizing your integrity. Instead, talk highly of parents. Verbally support them and encourage their very difficult role when you're talking to students.

6. Speak good words: When you get the privilege to interact with a parent, do everything you can to affirm their child. Many

parents are constantly feeling like failures. Give them some hope and breath life into their weary parenting bones with some words of affirmation. Parents want to hear positive comments about their kids, and some kind, targeted, encouraging words will make a huge difference (i.e., “Your son was a star at camp this weekend...”, “I love watching Lauren talk to those who aren’t connected—she’s amazing at making others feel welcome...”, “I smile every time I see Erik, I so enjoy having him around.”) Make your words count.

7. Teach them more: You shouldn’t pretend to be the authority on parenting if you haven’t been thru the parenting expedition yourself (then, even if you have, you are more a fellow-journeyman/woman and less of an authority.) Parents often feel like failures and they’re looking for help, coaching, ideas, and “been-there” parents to share their stories. In ministry, you can facilitate some parenting classes and/or seminars to increase their knowledge and skills.

8. Keep costs down: This seems like a no-brainer, but it’s not. In ministry, we often don’t think of costs because we’re typically not paying to attend the events. Consider leaving to camp a little later so you don’t have to pay for an extra meal at camp and/or come home before another meal (those meals add up.) Think of scholarships or help for those families that have more than one student in your ministry. This is not just a “it’s a tough economy” principle...this is family-friendly during a good economy too.

9. Watch their calendar: Be aware of what’s happening during a school year and the holiday calendar. Try to stay away from a lot of meetings/events during the holiday seasons when families gather/celebrate. Also, keep your activities to a minimum at the end of school semesters when kids are focused on exams. I once held a big event on the weekend right before finals. Every kid needed to study but they all wanted to attend the event too. That type of poor programming puts pressure on families to make and enforce tough decisions.

10. Invite them along: As often as possible, let parents know that you want them to join some of the ministry activities. Let them know they’re welcome to sit-in, tag-along, and occasionally pop into different programs and events. I’m not suggesting that you encourage them to lurk and never leave their kid’s side, but make sure they feel welcome. One time, I invited my 9th grade boys (from my small group) over to watch UFC and I invited the dads. Only a few came, but they loved it and I had a blast doing relational ministry with some of the dads. I will definitely build on those relationships.

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