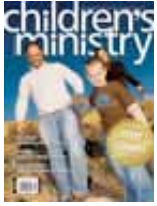


## children's ministry magazine back issue archives



keyword search:

search

Children's Ministry Magazine, September-October, 1996 | [back to the archives index](#)

### Title: A Blueprint for Family Ministry

What is this thing called "family ministry"? Plus, family ministers who've built strong programs from the ground up.

By Christine Yount

Family is in. Marketers know it. Employers know it. But does the church know it?

After talking to children's ministers across the country, the answer is a resounding yes. Whether churches have plunged into this thing called family ministry or held back for the right timing, the biggest trend in children's ministry today is a shift to family ministry.

"We need to treat children's ministry as a whole. Children's ministry is family ministry," says Darrell Fraley, a children's pastor in Mason, Ohio. "You cannot change a child over a long period of time without impacting the parents. Families and the church have to be partners."

You may be doing "family ministry" already and not even realize it. You may still be in the dreaming stage of starting a family ministry. Or you may have a full-blown ministry in place. Wherever you are in your journey, you can be assured that you're riding one of the biggest current sociological waves that -if it hasn't already- will crash into your church.

What does that mean for your church? It means lots of things to churches who really care about impacting this generation and generations to come.

#### OUT WITH THE OLD?

Is family ministry the most important ministry in your church? Should your church be "less concerned about building good churches and more concerned about building strong families" as one family ministry proponent suggests?

A word of caution: Any time a new ministry trend emerges, those of us who live in black and white realities are quick to toss out the old and bring in the new. But children's ministers who've moved into the realm of family ministry advise moving slowly. Bring people on board, share your vision, and then ease into change.

In addition, keep your eyes on the goal. What is it that God has called your church to? What is the mandate for the church at large?

Many sociologists tell us that societal woes are due to the breakdown of families. If only the family were "fixed," our world would be a much better place. So why shouldn't your church jump on the family bandwagon?

Well, you should, of course. But you should do it for the right reasons.

Some people say families should not be the church's focus. William Easum in *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers* writes, "Family is never a priority in Scripture. It is mentioned only six times in the New Testament and never in relation to a

congregation. Family is always secondary to Christ's claim on us (Matthew 10:37). On several occasions Jesus de-emphasized the importance of family. Family obligations came behind the demands of discipleship."

Is Easum right?

Take another look. I believe with all my heart that God is not calling the church to strengthen families for the sake of society. Or for the sake of simply building church attendance. Or even for the sake of the family itself. God is calling the church to strengthen families so the Kingdom of God is strengthened.

Why is God interested in Christians growing to be more like him? So they'll let their light shine in such a way that people will see their good works and God will be revealed (Matthew 5:14-16). Why is God interested in the healthy life of families? Women are encouraged to build healthy families "so the Word of God may not be dishonored" (Titus 2:5). Overseers and deacons are admonished to be "good managers of their children and their own households" because if they can't take care of their own families, how will they "take care of the church of God"? (1 Timothy 3:5). Wives and husbands are to be a picture of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33).

We in children's ministry lament the fact that we have so little time with the children in our churches. They're only with us a few hours a week. It's difficult to make a lasting impact for the Kingdom of God, we think. Therefore, and this is the crux of family ministry, we need to multiply our ministry to children through their parents. As we disciple and train parents, their growth will significantly impact their children.

So, in everything we do at church, we keep our eyes on the goal of knowing and proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And we gear our programs to be most effective in accomplishing that. If we really want to create long-term growth in children, we'll retool our ministries to involve parents and families. We'll see our role in children's ministry as equippers of the most effective disciplers of children-parents. Rather than planning "intergenerational" events that split up families, we'll plan real intergenerational events that keep families learning, playing, serving, and worshiping together.

Family ministry looks different in every church. The key factor of a family ministry is not its programs, but rather its philosophy.

Ben Freudenberg, a youth minister and family ministry proponent, explains his philosophy of family ministry: "We need to change our paradigm. How can we have the home-and not just the church-be a center of faith? Homes have to be conscientious about sharing faith. Parents are the primary ministers of faith."

#### BREAKING THE MOLD

In our well-meaning efforts to counteract the breakdown of families, the church has dumped truckloads of hurt on families who don't fit the traditional mold. Single parents have been blamed for everything from declining reading scores to raging teenage violence. Dual-income families are accused of not really caring for their children as much as traditional single-income families do. The forecast for blended families is that their children will never have healthy self-esteem or succeed in school or life.

Sadly, all we've accomplished in our simplistic interpretation of data is to speak condemnation and judgment to families. And the truth is, there are many variables other than family style that shape children. We need to speak about grace and God's power to today's families.

"We need to find out where families hurt and encourage and support them..." says Diana Warden, a director of children ministries in Virginia. "We need to come alongside them. Share with them. We'll have to meet the needs that come from the chaos our culture produces. We have to fight it with spiritual resources."

Who are these families with children that we need to support? Take a look at these statistics:

\*Between 1975 and 1993, the number of dual-earner families rose from 42 percent to 64 percent.

\*In 1975, 34 percent of mothers with children under 3 were in the labor force; in 1995, it was 59 percent. Three-fourths of mothers of school-age children are working mothers.

\*Between 1970 and 1994, single-parent families rose from 13 percent to 31 percent. In that time, two-parent families declined from 87 percent to 69 percent.

\*15.6 million, or 23 percent, of all American children live with their mother only. More than 2 million children lived with only their father in 1993. That number has tripled since 1970.

\*More than 1 million children are being raised by their grandparents.

\*An estimated 25 million American children under age 13 live in stepfamilies.

To meet the needs of today's varied families, family ministers must work on their message. Freudenberg says, "The #1 thing is to accept the home the way it is. This is not a message of law. Help parents be the model of faith. Parents want to do it but don't know how. We need to support, love, encourage, and resource them. I don't know one parent who doesn't want what's best for his children. They just don't know how to do it. Parents need empowerment. Not guilt. They don't need another guilt trip."

And who is most suited to equip parents to raise the children God has given them? You!

Armed with God's Word and his power, your family ministry will impact generations to come. Now that's what I call a blueprint made in heaven! cm

Christine Yount is editor of Children's Ministry Magazine.

#### EQUIPPING PARENTS

"We wanted to provide opportunities for parents to learn how to instruct their children," says Tim Smith, a pastor to family life at Calvary Community Church in Westlake Village, California.

To do this, Tim has regular parenting seminars and classes. His church sponsors a dinner made by a popular restaurant and brings in a speaker. "People love it! It's a more relaxed approach.

'Seekers' don't feel like they're in church," Tim says.

Ongoing parenting classes are held in homes and people bring in their neighbors. The content is targeted to life stages, such as Baby Steps for expectant and new parents, and classes for parents of kids ages 3 to 8, ages 8 to 12, preteens, and teenagers. The church has two support groups for parents: Confident Kids and PARTY (Parents of At-Risk and Troubled Youth).

Tim sends out a Family Times newsletter six times a year. The newsletter contains resource reviews, promotion of parenting classes, and information on parenting issues.

A big fan of Promise Keepers, Tim tries to capitalize on the momentum of that men's movement. "We train dads to interact with their children. We have Father/Son and Father/Daughter retreats where we pass on the blessing to our sons and daughters ages 10 and up. It's kind of a bar mitzvah for Christians—a rite of passage."

"The thing about family ministry," Tim says, "is that it's not an "either/or" thing but a "but/and" thing. We can do it in our structure. We don't have to throw out Sunday school. We think of ways to add to what we're already doing."

#### TEAM UP

"When I started five and a half years ago, it was my passion to do family ministry. But I had to wait for the right time. We've just gotten started in the last year," says Lynn Block, children's director at Kensington Community Church in Troy, Michigan.

Lynn's philosophy is to do the same things they've always done, but to do them as families. "Do it together," Lynn says. "Learn together. Be together. We underestimate the value of what we learn from each other."

Lynn has tagged her program "Team Up"-families together building God's Kingdom. Families work, play, and learn together. Family small groups meet twice monthly-once with adults only and once as families.

"We have Friday night quarterly worship nights geared toward the entire family. There's a worship time and an interactive time. The music is real upbeat and there are extensive children's hand movements. We do it on Friday because kids don't have to be in bed early."

Families serve together inside and outside the church. "We encourage parents to be involved in training. Families might run Sunday morning classes together. Older children help with puppets or snacks.

"And families minister together at nursing homes and inner city churches and missions. It teaches kids that they are ministers too. It excites the kids to not just be spectators. This is very important because parents want their kids to be givers, rather than self-absorbed takers."

#### PARTNERING WITH PARENTS

"Today's society has a lot of fragmentation in the family," says Walt Pitman, a children's pastor at Grace Church in Edina, Minnesota. "Church is guilty of the same. Separateness is not God's intention of how it should be all the time. We need to partner with parents through modeling, communicating, and providing resources and alternatives."

Walt's church has a special family ministry section where family activities abound. They have summer family camp, parent/child retreats, marriage conferences, fun family activities, and open houses.

Stand-out family ministries at Walt's church include:

\*Super Saturdays-Preschoolers and their dads meet at the church for activities together. Then they separate and dads receive parenting instruction.

\*Month of the Family-In February, the church provides speakers on all aspects of the family. They have a Day at the Dome where they rent the Metrodome and invite families to play. Last year, 1,200 people attended.

\*Sports Plus Clinic-Parents help children learn character traits in the context of learning a sport. Walt's passion is to equip parents to train their children.

"Family devotions are a lost art," Walt says. "It starts with Mom's individual life, with Dad's individual life. If kids don't see their parents doing spiritual things, it will take some other significant thing in their life to get them to do it later on."

---

*Please keep in mind that phone numbers, addresses, and prices are subject to change.*