



# Involving Parents in Youth Ministry

## **70** Why do we want to get parents more involved?

First, are the parents churched or unchurched? The answer to that question will determine, to a large degree, why you want to get them involved in youth ministry.

If the parents are unchurched, getting them involved with youth ministry may be a step toward getting them involved in the church. With unchurched parents, you want to move gradually and ask them to help in nonthreatening ways. For example, invite them to youth softball games or other sports activities. Ask them to help drive youth to skating rinks, concerts, and so forth and to help provide snacks or meals for youth meetings. As they become involved in youth activities, other parents will invite them to worship and Sunday school. Because they already know people in the church, they will not feel as unsure about attending worship. Involving them in youth ministry can move them into personal involvement with the church.

If the parents are already churched, you want to involve them in youth ministry so that they can live out their own commitments to their youth. In the service of the Baptismal Covenant, parents are asked, “Will you nurture these children in Christ’s holy church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God’s grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 34).

That is not an easy task to assume, and most parents feel incredibly inadequate about teaching the faith to their children and youth. By involving them in youth ministry, you give them an avenue where they can live out that promise, under your guidance and supervision.

Plus, we need parents who are helping teach and model the faith. You have direct contact with youth for only a few hours a week, perhaps in Sunday school and youth group. Parents, even in today's busy world, spend many more hours than you do with their youth. If they are aware of what is going on in Sunday school and youth group, they can talk more easily with their youth about those topics.

We need the support of parents simply for attendance. Younger youth who do not drive depend on their parents for transportation. And so do you, in order to have youth present in Sunday school and youth group.



**One of our major problems is getting parents involved. We have to ask for help from the faithful few who support us all the time. What can we do to stimulate increased involvement from parents?**

First, make a list of the kinds of support you need from parents. Include the obvious things, such as transportation and snacks. Then identify where the weak spots are. Do you need more parents for snack suppers? for transportation to events? for teachers and leaders? Under each of the kinds of support, list the names of parents who now help you in that category. This list tells you where you need to focus efforts immediately. So, what are some strategies for getting parents involved?

1. Have a regular parent meeting (see Question 76). Here you engage parents as helpers in youth ministry by their presence. Invite parents to meet regularly, to stay informed about what is going on in youth ministry, to have input in planning for the future, and to give feedback about what has been happening. This gives parents a stake in youth ministry. It also gives you a chance to know parents better and identify areas where they could be involved in helpful ways.
2. Involve parents as occasional experts. In almost every youth ministry, there are topics presented at youth group or in the Sunday school that are beyond the experience of the regular leaders/teachers. Sometimes parents are knowledgeable about those topics. Here is a chance to involve those parents in a leadership role in youth ministry. Invite them to help lead the group/class for one or two sessions by sharing

their expertise and answering questions about the field. You can use the same strategy for such things as work camps/mission trips. For example, I have almost no skills in carpentry, but I know a lot of dads, and quite a few moms, who do. Guess whom I ask to provide leadership for the work project?

3. For ongoing things, such as providing snacks, send a letter to all parents explaining exactly what you need and when you need it. Ask them to volunteer for one night's supper, for support services for a trip, or for handling supplies for the youth group or Sunday school.
4. The ultimate step is involving parents as teachers and leaders with youth. People have a wide variety of opinions on whether or not this is a good idea, but for the most part it seems to work. At least one large church I know of involves parents as leaders (both presenters and small-group leaders) in confirmation, and then they recruit volunteers from among those parents to teach youth Sunday school for a period stretching over several years. Other churches use parents as teachers in Sunday school for a year or so at a time. Still others use parents as leaders and support personnel in fellowship groups. If you use parents as leaders, remember that they should be recruited and trained in the same way you train other leaders, especially including Safe Sanctuaries training.



### **How do we help youth develop an appropriate value system if their parents do not reinforce it?**

To be honest, this question poses an almost lose-lose situation. Any value system you teach your youth that parents do not support and reinforce will fail, at least in the short run. It is, after all, the primary responsibility of the parents to teach and reinforce value systems. That is part of what it means to be a parent. And many parents will (rightly) resent your trying to teach their youth a different set of values.

On the other hand, some parents live and teach (at least by example) value systems that are counter not only to Christian principles but also to basic rules of civilized living. For example, some parents are involved in alcohol and drugs, are abusive to each other and their children, or do not care about the community. Even here, however, you are limited in how much you can teach youth about value systems. The best you can do is point out that there are alternative value systems to the one in which they live and then help them think about how they want to shape their own lives. This may not have any effect in the short run, but it will help youth develop their own values when they are on their own.



## **What are some ways we can be supportive of parents and minister to them?**

Some youth ministry experts say that all youth ministry *is* family ministry. I am not sure I would go that far, but there is definitely an element of truth in the statement. So, how can you minister to parents?

The first step is to get to know the parents. Talk with them as they drop youth off at the church and pick them up. Talk with them in the halls at church, on the street, at the ball game, at the concert, or wherever you happen to bump into them. Make appointments to visit with parents in their homes (as much as you can, given your busy schedule). The goal in all this is simply to get to know the parents and what their situations are.

You begin to minister to parents out of your knowledge of who they are and what their lives are like. You are also part of a pastoral team in your church, whether you are a professional or a volunteer youth leader. Work with the pastor and others on the staff to minister to families; you do not have to be a lone wolf. Be sure you do not reveal confidences from parents as you talk with other staff about family situations, but do enlist staff help in ministry.

You can do some specific things. Regular meetings with parents of youth (see Questions 71 and 76) are an important ministry to parents. Include as a regular part of the agenda some information about youth development. Help parents understand how life is changing for their youth and what the changes mean for pressures in the family. For good resources on this topic, see this section in “For Further Reading” (page 124). Encourage parents to support one another in dealing with the turbulent teen years.

Be open to conversations with individual parents or couples about specific issues they are having with their teen. You probably will not be able to solve their problems, but you can give them some insight into adolescent development and how it is affecting youth in your group. Remember, do not betray confidences in these conversations.



## **What is an appropriate intervention in what we judge to be a threatening home situation?**

If a threatening home situation means one in which you suspect abuse—physical, sexual, or psychological—the appropriate intervention is to talk with the pastor and report the abuse to the appropriate officials in your community. That is the short answer. Now let’s flesh it out a bit.

You do not want to intervene in the situation yourself, since you are not trained to do that and do not want to make the situation worse.

Questions to ask yourself include these: What are the outward signs you notice? For example, is there physical evidence that a youth is being beaten? Is there a major change in behavior and attitude that cannot be explained and about which the youth may refuse to talk? (Obviously, if the youth pours out a story of abuse to you, the issues become much clearer.)

If you suspect a youth is being abused, tell your pastor. By this, I mean that you talk to the pastor in confidence about your suspicions and ask if he or she has noticed any indications. Ask the pastor to assist you in the reporting process. (In many states, you have a legal obligation to report suspected abuse.)

Obviously, reporting suspected abuse is a step you do not want to take lightly. If you are wrong, it could damage the family, both internally and in the community. But you also have an obligation to protect children and youth from abusive parents. Calling for expert help is an appropriate intervention.



### **How do we deal with difficult parents?**

What do you mean by *difficult*? Is this the parent who is always in your face about the youth group? the one who loudly disagrees with whatever you say? the one who talks to other parents about his or her concerns about what is going on in youth ministry but never comes to talk to you? the one who is always pulling youth out of Sunday school or youth group for what seem to be contrived reasons?

The answer to the question is probably as individualistic as the parents and the difficulties they present. It may be, however, that the best way to deal with all of them is also the hardest; that is, to be honest with them about what is happening. You do not have to accuse or attack them; there is a better strategy. Instead of saying, "Why are you always disagreeing with me?" you could say, "I feel as if there is something more going on when you disagree with me. Is there something we need to talk about?" We would all like to say, "Do not talk to your friends about your concerns. Come and talk to me." But try something such as, "I feel as if I'm part of the problem when I hear you have concerns about the youth ministry. I would like to be part of the solution. Can we talk about what's bothering you?"



## **My first parents' meeting is coming up.**

### **What do I say to them?**

I had the same concern about the first parents' meeting I hosted. My first concern was whether or not anyone would come. The second concern was what to say. I worked out an agenda for every parents' meeting, and it always seemed to work. My agenda included the following:

- Some get-acquainted/community-building time;
- Feedback from parents: “What do you hear from your youth?” “How are things going?”;
- An update on what has happened since the last meeting;
- A look ahead at what will be coming in the next quarter, including how parents can help;
- Presentation (by me) on some aspect of the faith or on some aspect of youth development;
- Questions;
- Closing worship.

We had parents' meetings once a quarter, and we always began with refreshments. Parents took turns bringing the refreshments. Other youth directors who have had parents' meetings once a month have included planning for parent involvement as part of the sessions.

My experience is that parents want to know what is going on and how to relate with their youth. If you are willing to be open and honest with parents (always keeping confidences in mind), they will respond. Then your big question will not be what to say but how to get it all done in one meeting.