

Small Group Responses to the question: *How can we engage parents and their families in faith formation?*

At the conclusion of the Parish and Parents as Partner track, Dr. Anne Frederick asked the participants to enter into small group discussion in order to identify practical strategies of family engagement. Each group considered a specific sub-set of families in their discussion. The list of strategies by category follows.

Families involved in sports and extracurricular activities

- Conduct a blessing of the children who are about to participate in an activity (sports or extracurricular)
- Inform parents that you will provide a meal or snack for them and/or their children who are rushing from their activity to attend a faith formation class
- As a catechist – “slow up” enough to hear from the students and parents about the activities that are making them busy. Be approachable.
- If an activity truly keeps youth from attending their faith formation at the parish, consider home schooling for that family
- Show up at the activities that your youth participate in. Let them know you are there supporting and praying for them.
- Have all of the pastors within the city (all denominations) join together to preach on the same weekend on the topic of “sports/activities”. The general message is that both are very good and capable of giving glory to God but that they can also be easily made into an idol.
- Let parents know up front that you acknowledge the challenge of schedules and apologize in advance for tough decisions to be made.
- Send students involved in activities/sports a note of encouragement before a big meet or event. Perhaps enclose a holy card of St. Sebastian or another patron Saint asking them to pray to the Saint as they engage in their chosen activity. You could also include a scripture quote. While you are at it, send the parents a note also letting them know that you are joining your prayers to theirs.
- Cut out newspaper clippings of students and send them to the parents/students with a note such as... “Way to use your God-given talents and develop them for the greater glory of God.
- Ask if you can offer a prayer or blessing at a team meeting or dinner.

Families preparing for baptism

- Offer a Blessing of the Child in the Womb in your parish after all masses four weekends a year.
- Host a meal for the expecting parents and the God parents. Offer one of the introductory sessions from the Teaching the Way of Love series.
- Host a reunion meal for families who all went through the Baptismal Preparation together.
- Talk with and engage parents to tell their own faith story to you as they prepare for the birth of a child. Find out where they are in their faith journey. Ask them how the parish can encourage them to grow more faithful and become stronger witnesses to the faith for their children.

Families with pre-school children

- When planning activities, be mindful of the pre-school family needs so that parents and children alike feel welcomed (e.g. ample room for children to move; atmosphere of hospitality that allows for the additional noise and activity; provisions of extra diapers, changing table, wipes, place to nurse...)
- Have a family space or room at Mass where parents can “manage” the extra wiggles and squirms without embarrassment.
- Sponsor date night activities for parents that include childcare.
- Include hospitality and socialization after mass so that families can spend time with other families.
- Consider starting Mom’s groups and Dad’s groups.
- Make all parish information (events, school functions, weekly homily, updates...) readily available on-line for parents.
- Consider text messages that go right to the parent’s cell phone alerting them to various activities and functions in the parish.
- Increase parenting education for your parents using a variety of delivery methods. *Teaching the Way of Love* is a great resource for this purpose.
- Start “children’s church” during the liturgy of the word.
- Create a lending library of resources for your parents.
- Beef up your web presence so that parents can find out what is going on quickly. Keep the site up to date.

Families whose child is preparing for First Communion

- Include the parents in the preparation. Give them solid catechesis using a variety of delivery methods (on-line, small group, large group, on and off site...)
- Host a family retreat with lots of activities for both parents and the children to do.
- During the preparation year, help parents to write a mission statement.
- Consider starting First Communion prep in 1st grade. This allows for more parent formation.

Families of grade school children

- Create a church “scavenger hunt” for families to do. Parents with their children enter the church and see how many of the items on the list they can find (e.g. Tabernacle, tabernacle light, copy of the Eucharistic prayers, Baptismal font, Stations of the Cross...). This could be done on an RE night or individually as families have time.
- Have each RE class select at the beginning of the year a class project that they will do. Host a “project fair” at the end of the year that families will visit.
- Give parents an open invitation to attend the classes of their children.
- Intentionally learn about the family dynamics of the students you have in your class. Get to know the parents by listening to them. Ask them what they do; what keeps them active, what their dreams are for their children... Value these parents by developing relationships with them.
- Do your best to bring the school, RE and Hispanic families together.
- Remember that parents with school age children tend to race from activity to activity. Help them slow up by serving them meals on RE or faith formation nights.
- Be flexible with scheduling.
- Consider “parking lot” ministries. Meet parents where they are.

Families with adolescents (middle school)

- Invite parents in to be small group leaders. Make sure you prepare them for this role. Do not assume they know how to lead a group.
- Remember that parents with adolescent children tend to race from activity to activity. Help them slow up by serving them meals on RE or faith formation nights.
- Use resources like Bodies and Boundaries from the Teaching the Way of Love series to help parents connect with their young adult.
- Provide a list of ways that families with adolescents can be involved in their parish and experience a sense of belonging. Do what you can to design programming that intentionally invites “the family” and not just the adolescent into the activity.

Families with young adult children (high school)

- Structure retreats so that parents can play an active role – one that goes beyond just bringing in a snack or beverage. Intentionally invite parents to assist by personal contact. When you invite them, be prepared to give them a clear overview of what they will do in the role.
- Spend time each week praying for the parents of your students by name.
- If a young adult is going on a retreat without his or her parents, provide the parents with a detailed explanation of the purpose of the retreat, the activities during the retreat, and ways that the parents can extend the fruits of the retreat when it is over. Send them prayers that they can say for their child during the retreat. If possible, give them the times of day when the prayers will be most important.
- Ask parents to write a letter of support and encouragement to their children who are attending a retreat. The letter will be given to the young adult at some time during the retreat. You may need to give the parents examples to help them.

Families with no children living at home

- Provide parents whose children are no longer at home with personal invitations to participate in faith formation programming. Ask them to consider being Baptism mentors, Sacramental mentors and/or prayer partners.
- Offer empty nester groups which provide an opportunity for fellowship, study and service. These groups can range from once a month events to weekly. Tailor to your parish needs.
- Team empty nesters (especially those whose children are not geographically close) with families who are overly busy. These empty nesters may enjoy becoming “grandparents” for another family.
- Remember to ask these families to become more involved with the daily needs of the parish; Eucharistic Ministers, PCCW, KCs, greeters, readers, ushers, hospitality ministers. Also invite them to take on leadership roles like pastoral council members, finance council members, RE teachers.

Families dealing with grief/loss

- Do more than just offer families dealing with grief with resources. *Partner* with the family. Be at their side to listen and comfort.
- Create a critical incident response team at your parish so that in the event of a tragedy, you have a group of people ready to step in and respond. This group would be ready to respond with prayer support, financial assistance, childcare, housing, transit, meals, housekeeping and laundry. In addition, the group would provide a designated parish liaison to the family who is suffering grief or loss.