



Making Parents a Priority

Jolene and Eugene Roehlkepartain

What does your family ministry look like? In many congregations, family ministry is more about children than it is about families. Maybe you have a nursery, religious education for children, youth activities, and an occasional family activity as your family ministry. These are all important, but many family ministries overlook equally important members of the family: the parents.

How can your congregation help parents? The way you answer that question determines not only how children grow up but also how parents develop as individuals and how well each family thrives. Too many parents are merely surviving. Your congregation can help bring out the best in families so that each individual in the family does well.

Understanding Parents Today

You can't minister to families effectively if you leave out the parents. What are your parents thinking, experiencing, trying to change? To understand parents more fully, we were part of a research team that conducted a poll of 1,005 parents in the United States (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 5). We also interviewed parents and talked with congregational and community leaders to find out how they're effectively helping parents. Through the poll, we discovered five key findings:

1. Most parents are going it alone.
2. Many parents lack a strong relationship with a spouse or partner.
3. A majority of parents feel successful as parents most of the time.
4. Most parents face ongoing challenges.
5. Many things these parents say would help them as parents are easy things that others can do. (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 6-7).

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This study revealed that most of the parents surveyed are working hard as parents, despite little support from family, friends, and their community. Rather than focusing on what parents do wrong (which is what researchers usually examine), we asked parents about their own sense of success and what they need to be effective parents.

The Power of Your Congregation

Many congregations are doing many things right, but this study of 1,005 parents suggests ways for congregations to be even more effective. This study invites your congregations to rethink how you engage parents. For example, your congregation can provide:

- **A caring community for parents.** This study clearly shows that parents want to connect with others in meaningful ways but that they have few opportunities to do so. By encouraging members and congregational leaders to get to know parents, these relationships will help parents feel more supported and nurtured. When parents are part of a caring community, they also will know whom to turn to when parenting becomes difficult.
- **Positive activities that engage and challenge parents.** This study shows that parents generally value informal, personal forms of support more than programmatic supports. This doesn't mean you should stop providing programs for parents, but the study does suggest that it may be helpful to rethink these programs so that they

help parents connect with each other and with other people in your congregation.

- **Clear values, beliefs, and commitments that guide parents.** Congregations are one of the few places in our society that articulate and teach positive values, beliefs, and meaningful commitments. These values, beliefs, and commitments help parents teach their children and teenagers to make wise and healthy choices. With the complexity of life today, a congregation can be a prophetic voice in teaching the difference between right and wrong while also helping individuals respond with integrity to the many shades of gray.
- **An invitation to ministry.** Parents are not primarily objects of a congregation's ministry. They are subjects, contributors to the mission of the church not only through their involvement in congregational life, but also as they nurture their children. By emphasizing and unleashing the strengths of parents, congregations not only help parents be better parents but also equip them to live out their calling to help their children grow in body, mind, and spirit.
- **Practical ways for parents to succeed.** This study also ties into a research framework that reveals how parents can best help their children grow up well. A number of congregations are using the Developmental Asset

framework to help parents succeed (see *Building Assets in Congregations*). This framework, which Search Institute developed in 1989, identifies the key building blocks that children and teenagers need to grow up to be competent, caring individuals (see *What Kids Need to Succeed* and *What Young Children Need to Succeed*). Surveys of more than 2.2 million young people in the United States and Canada show that the more developmental assets young people have the less likely they will try dangerous things (such as using drugs and having sexual intercourse as teenagers), the more likely they'll act in positive ways (such as succeeding in school and helping others), and the more likely they'll bounce back from difficulties.

The Difference Your Congregation Can Make

As a congregation, you have been called to be God's hands and feet in our world. How will you do that for parents and their children? Your congregation will be most effective in helping parents when you see yourself as having a real impact and realize that the little things you do can make a big difference. Your congregation can do more than you think in helping parents. All it takes is some creative thinking in response to this study of 1,005 parents, and the faith that what you do for parents really does matter.

Finding I: Most Parents Are Going It Alone

The U.S. Census reports that one out of three families is headed by one parent, instead of two (*U.S. Census*, 51). When Search Institute interviewed parents across the United States, researchers learned that not only are single parents going it alone, but also so are many married parents. A number of married parents are not getting adequate help from their spouse, much less from others in their families and communities (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 15).

Research shows that parents are more effective when they have the support and encouragement of those around them. Whether the support comes from a spouse, another adult family member, extended family, friends, or people within the community—ideally, all of these places—that support makes a big difference. Adding this role to the many that your congregation, leaders, and members already have may seem daunting, but it doesn't need to be overwhelming or exhausting. Congregations that have taken on this new role have found that not only do young people and parents benefit, but so does the congregation and those in it.

"This is what the church is about," says Mark McCormick, a Roman Catholic priest in South Dakota. He contends that any role the congregation can play in galvanizing the community to care for parents and their kids "is why we are here."

When parents do turn to others for support, they're most likely to turn to immediate or extended family. More than one third of the parents interviewed said that it was "very true" that they turned to family members, making the family the most common source of support. Only

twenty-five percent said that it was "not true" that they turned to immediate or extended family (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 16). Twenty percent of parents turn to friends for help, and eleven percent seeks support from community resources. What was most alarming, however, is that fifty-three percent of the parents polled said they did not have any support. Only four percent say they get support from all three sources: family, friends, and the community (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 11-14).

How Your Congregation Can Help Parents Feel Less Isolated

As a congregation, you have much to offer parents so they feel less alone. How can you do this when you already have a full plate with many needs? Start thinking big by starting small in significant ways. Supporting parents doesn't have to entail starting a new ministry or even a new program. Consider some of these ideas:

- **Incorporate a parent gathering into an educational or fellowship activity.** Periodically invite all the parents to their children's Christian education class. Have one leader do activities with the parents that help parents get to know each other, while in a separate area another leader does activities with the children. End the class with an activity that parents and children can do together. Consider doing this for a youth group gathering, a confirmation class, or other activities that are designed for young people in your congregation. It's

one thing to build community among the children and youth; it's another to build it among their parents.

- **Expand your concept of congregational care.** Some congregations call this "pastoral care," while others call this "congregational care" and expect all members of the congregation to minister to each other. In many congregations, however, this often turns into crisis care, especially visiting the sick, the hospitalized, and the homebound and praying for those who are in dire need. The truth is, we all need care. Effective congregations often create circles of care where every person who attends church regularly (member or not) is assigned to a "care group." Sometimes these are assigned by geographic location (according to where these people live) or by interest, such as a parenting teens group, a young adult group, a seniors group, and so on. Consider ways that all members can be included in receiving and giving care.
- **Designate someone to get to know parents.** This may be a lay leader or a congregational staff person, but having one person in charge can transform your congregation into being a more parent-friendly congregation. All this person needs to do is to seek out the parents in your congregation and talk with them briefly. Get to know their names. Find out how they spend their day. Learn what

their joys and concerns are. Then connect parents with similar interests and concerns with each other.

Finding 2: Many Parents Lack a Strong Relationship with a Spouse or Partner

What helps parents succeed? People often point to income, education, or race. Yet we found that the *quality* of a parent's relationship (whether or not they were married) proved to be the most important factor in raising children well. This was even more important than income, education, profession, religiosity, and race. Parents in this poll who reported having an excellent relationship with their partner were more likely to feel successful and up to the challenges of parenting. These parents even had significant advantages over the parents who rated their relationship as good (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 29).

In polling parents, we found that a strong relationship between parents was beneficial to the parents and the children. Of the parents we polled, those who reported an excellent relationship with their spouse or partner were more likely than other parents to:

- experience fewer challenges as parents;
- feel confident in dealing with the daily challenges of parenting;
- seek support from immediate or extended family as well as community resources;
- feel successful as parents most of the time;
- believe that certain opportunities (such as talking with other parents or seeking advice from a trusted

professional) could really help them as parents; and

- engage in parenting strategies that contribute to the healthy development of their children (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 18).

Despite the importance of a high-quality relationship between parents, only half of those surveyed rate their relationship with their spouse or partner as excellent. Although married parents were more likely to report having an excellent relationship with their spouse, marriage itself does not guarantee of a high-quality relationship (though it makes one much more likely).

Isn't a good relationship good enough? We found that good was better than fair to poor, but a good relationship didn't produce the benefits that an excellent relationship did. Analysis of the data revealed that parents tended to feel consistently more successful (and actually were in some cases) when they had an excellent relationship instead of a good relationship with their partner.

How Your Congregation Can Nurture Partner Relationships

Nurturing adults in two-parent families is one thing and ministering to single parents is another. Your congregation can do both, and you'll often be more effective if you create separate strategies for these two types of parents. Before you begin, consider these suggestions:

- **Define what family is.** How do you define family as a congregation? Which types of families are you willing to minister to? Nurturing a relationship between two adults who live and parent together requires some theological

and programmatic thinking on your congregation's part since some people have strong feelings about certain types of families. Controversy can arise within your congregation when two-parent families are made up of unmarried couples or same-sex couples. Although there are types of single-parent families that also can stir up your congregational gossip lines (such as an unmarried mother who had her first child as a teenager), single parents often can hide these things easier than two same-sex parents arriving at your worship service with children. Some congregations have developed a process to work with members to develop an open and affirming stance toward all types of families. Diana Garland, author of *Family Ministry*, recommends that congregations shift from defining family as a married couple and their children (if they have any) to defining family as the persons who commit themselves to attempt to be family for one another (Garland, 26).

- **Create marriage study groups.** Marriage enrichment leaders recommend two books for couples to study in small groups. One is *The Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* by Scott Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain, and Milt Bryan (Jossey-Bass, 1998). The other is *The Seven Principles for*

Making Marriages Work by John Gottman and Nan Silver (Crown Publishers, 1999).

- **Link single parents with other caring adults.** Just because a single parent does not have a partner does not mean that you can't provide community for that parent. Some congregations create single-parent support groups to help single parents connect with other single parents to work together to raise kids, rather than going it alone. In other churches, individuals help single parents identify other significant adults who can be helpful in parenting, such as a grandparent, a sibling, a neighbor, a co-worker, or a friend.

Finding 3: A Lot of Parents Feel Successful as Parents Most of the Time

Although the media likes to portray parents at their worst and our society likes to judge parents harshly in general, researchers have found that most parents are doing a reasonably good job as parents. While there are no perfect parents and there are some parents who hurt their children, most parents meet their children's basic needs and help them grow up well. Not only is it important how parents are doing but also how parents feel about their parenting. While there are slight differences among parents surveyed, we found that most parents feel successful as parents most of the time (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 47).

How do parents define parenting success? We asked

parents directly, and we received a wide range of answers. The top four definitions that rose from the data included:

- having children who are respectful, exhibit good behavior, and have positive values;
- giving love to their children;
- being involved and making time to be there for their children; and
- helping their children lead healthy, productive, successful lives.

We also found that parents tended to define success in the positive rather than the negative. Only one percent of parents surveyed said that the definition of a successful parent was keeping their children off drugs. Most pointed to raising their children in ways that helped their children develop well and succeed (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, 22).

Most parents surveyed say they feel successful as parents most of the time. About one third say they feel successful as parents nearly every day. Fifty-four percent say they feel successful on most days. Some differences exist among parents about how successful they feel. The following groups of parents are more likely than others to feel successful:

- younger parents (those ages 18-34);
- parents who have lived in their neighborhood between one to five years;
- parents with children four years old or younger, particularly compared to parents of 11 to 15 year-olds;
- parents who have an excellent relationship with their spouse or partner; and
- African-American parents compared to white parents. (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 48).

What do these results mean? The age of the child, the age of

the parents, and the length of time in a neighborhood suggest that parents may feel more successful in the earlier stages of parenting rather than the later. How parents "feel" about their parenting and how they're actually "doing" as parents are actually two different things. Most parents tend to become even more effective when they feel they're on the right track, but it's also true that some parents have misperceptions about themselves. Congregations can give parents concrete ways to help parents feel like they're succeeding when they actually are.

How Your Congregation Can Help Parents Feel Successful

Parenting is one of those jobs where there is no annual review and no outside assessment of how parents are doing (unless the state's Child Protection Services is considering removing a child from the home due to abuse or neglect). Parents aren't required to take any training or learn any skills. (Although prospective adoptive parents often feel they are carefully scrutinized.) This is where congregations can have a major impact on helping parents by supporting parents and helping them feel successful. Consider some of these ideas:

- **Teach parents the Developmental Asset framework to help them and their children succeed.** Many congregations now use the Developmental Asset framework in their family ministry, children's ministry, youth ministry, and religious education. Some even use the framework as a lens for everything the congregation does. Once parents see how

developmental assets help their kids succeed, they're often inspired to use the framework in their parenting.

- **Check in with parents periodically.** We often greet each other with a "How are you doing?" and hope that everything is fine. Yet, stopping for a moment and seeking out an honest answer can be revealing and helpful to parents. In congregations, parents often don't share their difficulties because these situations seem small compared to people who are in the hospital, dealing with long-term illnesses, or may be even dying. Yet how will you know how parents are really doing if you don't ask them—and take the time to hear their honest responses? Seek them out and find out what's happening in their lives.
- **Focus on the positive.** Examine your existing parenting and family programs to determine whether they focus more on family problems or family strengths. Parents are more likely to attend events and classes that affirm the good work they're doing so far, and how they can be even more effective as parents.

Finding 4: Most Parents Face Ongoing Challenges

Although most parents feel successful as parents, they still face obstacles and challenges. In this parenting poll, job demands and bickering among their children are the top things that

parents say make parenting harder. The specific situations that parents find themselves in also shape the challenges they have (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 61).

We asked parents about the effect of various issues on their role as a parent. Out of the six potential obstacles named, job demands topped the list. Seventeen percent of all parents surveyed said that work demands their parenting much harder, while thirty-three percent said that their job made parenting somewhat harder.

Bickering among children was the second biggest challenge to parents. Forty-eight percent of parents said conflict among their children made their parenting very much or somewhat harder. Two other significant stresses (which forty-one percent of parents said made their parenting challenging) were overscheduling (which included getting children's homework done) and the family's financial situation. The family's financial situation was much more stressful for parents who have a hard time buying what their family needs. Yet even among families who say they have no problem buying what family needs and can also buy special things, twenty-five percent say that finances are an obstacle for them.

Thirty-four percent of parents say they feel pressured to buy things, and that pressure creates stress for them. Twenty-four percent said that being a single parent and having little support was a major challenge (Roehlkepartain, *Building Strong Families*, p. 36).

We combined all six challenges and analyzed which groups of parents are more likely to report that they found these issues make parenting harder. We discovered that parents were more

likely to experience challenges if they:

- have a household income of less than \$50,000 a year or report having a hard time financially;
- have child-care arrangements other than staying at home with their child;
- have only a good, fair, or poor relationship with their spouse or parenting partner; or
- are unmarried.

These parents may have deeper challenges as parents, such as inadequate supports and allies in parenting, economic hardship that consumes parents' energy, and other responsibilities that make parenting harder, such as working outside the home or working multiple jobs (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 64).

How Your Congregation Can Ease Parenting Challenges

Depending on where they live and their circumstances, parents may have different challenges. The key to ministering to them effectively is knowing what their challenges are and being part of the solution. Consider these ideas:

- **Find out the challenges of parents in your congregation.** Create a short, written-survey, asking parents what their challenges are. Or, have a meeting with parents and form small groups to have these groups talk about the challenges. No matter how you find out the information, learn about the unique challenges of the parents within your congregation. They may differ from other parents. (Or you may also discover some similarities.) Some congregations even get

parents' feedback on an annual basis to ensure that they're continuing to meet their needs.

- **Seek out uninvolved parents on their turf.** Most likely you have some children and teenagers who get dropped off at your congregation for activities and you never (or rarely) see the parents. Call these parents and set up a time to visit them in their homes. Use this meeting as a way to gather information about how to support parents and make it easy for them to be involved. Take seriously the concerns parents raise about overscheduling. Work together to help parents find balance in family life.
- **Provide opportunities for parents to serve others.** When parents are struggling, our first reaction is to presume that they just need to be cared for themselves, so we may stop asking them to participate in ministries that help others. Leif Kehrwald suggests, serving others can have a healing, renewing effect on parents and families. "Faced with so many problems of their own," Kehrwald writes, "many families are not motivated to serve others. Yet often, acts of selfless mercy can transform woes into healing as well as bring help to those in greater need" (Kehrwald, 56).

Finding 5: Many Things that Would Help Parents Are Easy Things Others Can Do

Parents value many simple ways that others can support them. Sometimes parents look for a bit of advice from a congregational leader or another parent. Other times, they just long to hear someone say that they're doing a good job as parents. We asked parents about what specifically would help them in their parenting. The results suggest that parents may be more interested in building their informal, relational network of support, advice, and encouragement than in using formal programs, services, and resources.

Our results show that there are a number of things that parents say would really help them as parents. The things they think would help them the most are not expensive or time consuming. Most emphasize informal supports that can be provided by congregational leaders and members, family, and friends. These include:

- getting parenting advice from their religious leaders, their child's teachers, and their doctors;
- people they trust spending a greater amount of positive time with their kids;
- talking with other parents about parenting issues;
- people telling them they're doing a good job as a parent; and
- having a more flexible work schedule.

At least one in four parents say that each of these opportunities would help them very much. In contrast, only about one in ten say that going to parenting classes or having more

after-school programs and child-care options would help them very much (Roehlkepartain, *Embracing Parents*, 73-74).

How Your Congregation Can Make a Difference for Parents

Little things mean a lot to parents, and your congregation can offer parents support just by getting to know them and by being interested in their family lives. You also can go deeper and provide more for parents.

Consider these ideas:

- **Ask parents.** A first step in helping parents know that your congregation is paying attention is to ask them what they want, need, and value. What do the parents in your congregation and community value? Where do they feel a need for support or information? Instead of having an "if we build it, they will come" attitude, adopt an attitude of "Let them build it, and we will come to them."
- **Create parenting groups by linking families with similar backgrounds.** Some congregations create parent groups by the age of children or the number of children. Others create parent groups by family type, such as blended families, single-parent families, and dual-income families. At St. Luke's Methodist Church in Indianapolis, the congregation has a group called Jesse's Street, which is a group for parents who have children with special needs. At Bon Air Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia,

there's a support group for parents of autistic children. Because St. Luke Presbyterian Church in Minnetonka, Minnesota, had many parents who had adopted children internationally, the congregation periodically sponsored events where the families got together.

- **Encourage education teachers to get to know their students and their students' parents.** Build community and connections to parents by having other adults in your congregation get to know their names and a little about them. Parents often are interested in how their children are doing in religious education, confirmation, and other congregational activities, so giving them some feedback while also taking the time to talk with them often is helpful and appreciated.

Conclusion: Equipping and Supporting Parents

The five findings from our study of parents across the United States invite you to reflect on the ways your congregations do—and could—equip parents. Your congregation already has a strong start. It does a number of things well for parents, and you can do even more. This doesn't mean you need to start new programs, hire additional staff, or tap into resources that you don't have. It's about more effectively using what you do have and building on your strengths. These include:

- **Parents feeling part of a caring community.** How connected are parents to other adults and other parents in your

congregation? Do parents feel they have people they can turn to in good times and bad? This keeps parents from falling into finding #1: going it alone, and finding #4: feeling overwhelmed by challenges.

- **Parents being nurtured and supported.** How does your congregation help parents grow? How are marriages and parent partnerships strengthened? How are parents nurtured to be even more successful as parents? This focuses on finding #2: most parents lack a strong parenting partner, and finding #3: many parents feel successful as parents most of the time.
- **Parents being the recipients of small, helpful gestures.** How do congregational leaders and members help out parents in small ways? When a young child begins to misbehave during a worship service, do adults try to help the parent, or does the parent feel scolded and shamed? How often do adults in your congregation interact with children and teenagers so that young people know other adults besides their parents? This ties into finding #5: small things make a big difference for parents.

Effective programs can make a difference for parents, but effective programs are only one piece of the puzzle in helping parents. Parents need time to get to know other parents and other adults in your congregation. But how do you do that if a parent only attends a worship service for an hour each week and nothing

else that your congregation offers? How do you get parents to connect with each other if your programming is only about training or educating them?

Create structures so parents have time to connect with each other. Build in time for parents to talk (such as assigning them a conversation starter) during an educational activity. Form support groups for parents. Reach out to parents so that they feel welcome and want to come to your congregation more often.

Your congregation has the power to influence parents and their children in positive ways. When congregational leaders and members help parents, parents can more easily raise their children and teenagers well.

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appear in this article from this study can be found in this publication. You can download this study free of charge from the Web site www.search-institute.org/families. You also may download highlights from the study (a 16-page booklet) titled *Building Strong Families: Highlights from a Preliminary Survey from YMCA of the USA and Search Institute on What Parents Need to Succeed*.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene and Eugene. *Embracing Parents: How Your Congregation Can Strengthen Families*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004. This book is a practical guide on what congregations can do to nurture families based on the survey of 1,005 parents.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., *Nurturing Faith in Families*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. More than 425 creative ideas for family ministry are presented in this practical, family ministry book.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., *Parenting Preschoolers with a Purpose*. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2006. Care for yourself as a parent and also for your three- to five-year-old with the creative tips and ideas in this book on 40 everyday issues from sibling relationships to bedtime battles.

Roehlkepartain, Jolene L., and Leffert, Nancy. *What Young Children Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1999. This book presents the Developmental Asset framework for children from birth to age 11.

Web Resources on Parenting

Search Institute

www.search-institute.org

- Search Institute offers information and many resources, including a scientific, low-cost survey for congregations. Go to: www.search-institute.org/congregations
- For information on the Developmental Assets go to www.search-institute.org/assets

Building Strong Families Research

- For an in-depth report and summary reports on the "Building Strong Families" research go to the Search Institute web site: www.search-institute.org/families/bsf2002.html

MVP Parents (Search Institute)

www.MVPParents.com

- All parents want their children to succeed. But knowing how to help them make smart choices and avoid pitfalls isn't always easy. MVPParents.com is a trusted resource for raising smart, strong, responsible kids. Sign-up for *Everyday Parenting Ideas Newsletter*—a collection of weekly affirmations and parenting tips from the experts at Search Institute, designed to speak to specific parenting issues from a positive, asset-building perspective.