

Reaching Out to Drop-Off Parents

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Jenny had been a youth pastor for 5 years when she started looking for a new position. It wasn't the "problem kids"—she loved working with them. It wasn't the pressure to produce numbers. It wasn't even the ubiquitous adminis-trivia that threatens to overwhelm all of us in this business.

It was, she said simply enough, the parents. She explained, "It's not that they are critical. It's that they just don't get it. Whenever I talk about the incredible influence parents can have on the faith of their children, I might as well be talking about calculus. They just tell me what a great a job I'm doing with their kids, like I'm the spiritual drive-through, just another service provider right alongside their soccer coaches and piano teachers."

She described some of the programs she had tried: "Two years ago, we did this class for parents and youth together. It was embarrassing. We have 125 kids in the room for this "parent/youth" event and 25 parents show up! Last year, we do this big deal parenting seminar, and 30 come, and, of course, those were the very parents who needed it the least. I've got a church full of drop-off parents!"

As I told Jenny that day, the secret to engaging "drop off parents" is not likely to be found in "parent-focused" programming. Those programs are often just as likely to repel parents as attract them. What we do need is a new mindset, a few new ways of thinking about working with parents that can, in the long term, help them to move alongside us as partners rather than spectators.

MI NDSET CHANGE #1: THIN K PANAMA...CANAL, THAT I S.

The Panama Canal gives a picture of a brilliantly designed process for moving a ship from one elevation to another. Rather than hoisting, pulling or

dragging the ship to higher levels, the engineers created a series of locks, and in each lock, ships are lifted naturally simply by raising the water level.

Let's face it. Trying to push, pull or drag parents into taking initiative for the Christian nurture of their own children can easily become an exercise in frustration. But what we can do, though, is "raise the water level" and create a new sense of what is normal for parents in the church.

I learned this lesson the hard way. Excited and absolutely convinced about the unparalleled power of parents in the faith formation of their children, I made an immediate shift from "traditional" youth programming to a more parent-focused approach. I reduced regular programming and exchanged those programs with exhortations and expectations that parents take a larger role in the faith formation of their children. And I met predictable resistance from all sides.

I was violating the Panama Principle. Pushing, pulling and dragging parents just didn't work. I've seen it in our church and in scores of family-based youth ministries across the country. The churches that practice the Panama Principle by focusing on what their parents are doing well, who tell the stories of the small victories those parents are having in their homes, who "raise the water level" to a new normal, these are the youth ministries whose parents are beginning to "get it." But those who violate this principle and find themselves focusing on parental passivity reap an epidemic of resistance and spiritual inactivity among those parents.

So how do we "raise the water level"? A few ideas:

- Pass along to your pastor the stories of parents in your church who ARE being intentional about the faith formation of their children, and ask that those stories be used in a worship service.
- Create a team of parents responsible for supporting and empowering other parents in the church and ask them to "experiment" with home-based faith-nurturing practices.
- Pull together a group of parents (half of whom could be typical "drop-off parents") to help with a specific event just for parents. You could easily use 20 parents to help with food, decorations, promotion and prayer. The *process* creating the

event can itself draw parents in, even if the event itself is far from perfect.

MINDSET CHANGE #2: THINK CANINE

Just by the way Dr. Johnson introduced himself, I could tell this would not be a pleasant call. He wanted to know why he had not yet received the information on the upcoming retreat. He had, he explained, requested the information three days earlier and had not yet received it.

On this particularly normal week, I was up to my eyeballs in crises and deadlines and simply asked if Dr. Johnson had any particular questions I could help him with. "Actually, there is," he began with intensity, "I want to know if this is going to be one of those proselytizing things...because if it is, I want you to know that I will not permit Katie to be a part of it."

It seemed like I had just hung up the phone with Dr. Johnson, when I got a call from a mother of a teenage boy in the church. She wanted to know if we had plans to give the kids any real spiritual "meat" on this same retreat, because her son Tom "quite honestly" didn't really have time for a weekend full of fun and games.

Enter the Canine Principle. Different breeds of dogs behave in very different ways. Different breeds of parents do too. And we would be foolish to respond the same way to all of them. Over the years, I have observed at least four different "breeds" of parents: the Pit Bull, the Terrier, the Golden Retriever, and the Sheepdog. And though my descriptions will be inexact at best, they might just provide a framework for understanding how to effectively reach the very different types of parents we work with.

- Pit Bulls—The Fighters

Jeff was a kid who came to church in spite of the biting criticism of his mother. When he sang a solo in the church musical, she refused to come. Nothing could soften her, nothing, that is, until Jeff started failing algebra. When one of Jeff's youth leaders started coming over on Tuesdays to work on algebra, she remained cold and distant. But when his six weeks' grade moved from an F to a B-, she saw in the

youth ministry and ally, not an adversary. Jeff's mom is a long way from being willing to attend a parenting seminar at church, but there is no question that this ministry was successful in reaching this drop-off parent.

- Terriers—The Skeptics

When Jerry's mom, Marie, stormed into the living room where we were to have our youth meeting one Sunday night, she immediately asked for the person in charge and started drilling me with questions. It was an uncomfortable few minutes, but Marie finally allowed Jerry to stay for that night's program (and a hundred or so more), and eventually became my one-woman Terrier-response team, answering questions of other skeptical parents.

- Golden Retrievers—The Encouragers

When I first met Al, he was the typical Golden Retriever parent. He picked up his son outside my house after a Super bowl party. He was excited about Jimmy actually WANTING to be involved, even though he and his wife had not been in a church consistently since they were married. Over the next year, Jimmy became a regular, and one morning as I was heading to Sunday School, I ran into Jimmy's parents in the hallway...on their way to Sunday School themselves. I doubt that Al and his wife are having family devotions, but I've got no doubt they are moving in the right direction.

- Sheepdogs—The Doers

My friend John is a parent of two teenage boys at a church in another city. I know him well enough to know that he "gets it" (to borrow Jenny's phrase) when it comes to leading his own children spiritually. Recently, he called and said, "I just want to know if this is normal. I volunteered to teach youth Sunday School at my church, and the youth director basically gave me the 'don't-call-us-we'll-call-you' response. Is that normal?"

As strange as it may sound, it happens all the time. Available, eager, committed Christian parents often try to volunteer only to

receive an apathetic response that leaves them scratching their heads. Sure, not every parent is cut out to be a youth Sunday School teacher. But if you've got sheepdog parents in your church who are ready to help and you ignore them, you're barking up the wrong tree.

It goes without saying that these different breeds of parents have very different needs. Our mission in reaching them is to help them make incremental steps toward living into their God-given responsibilities with their children. Depending on the type of parent, they may not care about the gospel or our program. But what they do care about is their kids, and our common love for their kids can provide a profound starting point for partnership.

Possible Sidebar:

Parent Type	Pit Bull	Terrier	Retriever	Sheepdog
Attitude	Antagonistic	Skeptical	Open	Eager & Active
Need	Results	Trust-Building Consistency	Encouragement & Exposure to Sheepdogs	Training and Opportunity to Lead
Definition of Successful Youth Ministry	"There's something different about my kid...and I like it."	"My child is safe in this group. They know what they're doing."	"My child wants to be there."	"My child is growing toward maturity in Christ."
Desire for Their Kids	Happy, Well-Behaved Kids	Positive Peer Group	Moral Children	Godly Children
Common Mistakes	Turning Kids Against Parents	Broken Promises	Blaming and Criticizing	Excluding from the Youth Ministry
Opportunity	Demonstrating the Credibility of the gospel	Connection to Contagious Believers	Personally Following Jesus Christ	Partnership in the Gospel

MI NDSET CHANGE #3: THIN K HINGES

And talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (Deuteronomy 6:7)

These instructions are often used to help parents understand how they can best pass on their faith to their children, but interestingly enough, some of the very same principles apply to our work with those parents. What I love about this text is its strategic focus on what I call “hinge moments.” As a parent, I know that often, the most receptive times for my own kids is during these moments when we are changing gears—sitting down to eat, getting up to go somewhere, at bed time and at the beginning of a new day.

In working with parents, particularly drop-off parents, we can watch for hinge moments, times when they are most likely to be receptive to our ministry. Hinge moments typically come at a new beginning or at an ending. It may be leaving or returning from a church trip, a graduation, a confirmation, or even just a birthday.

This past summer we took Jan, a 15-year-old girl, on one of our mission trips. Her mother was somewhere between a pit bull and a terrier, skeptical at best. After having at least one tense phone conversation before the trip, I knew that I wanted to make every effort to connect with her when she picked up Jan at the church.

When we stepped off the van, I kept my eye out for Jan’s mom, and told her how impressed I had been with her daughter, what a great contribution Jan had made to the trip. As this mom looked over my shoulder at the expressions of exhausted delight on her daughter’s face, I could see the ice melting. It was a hinge moment.

When a new minister comes to the church, when a new adult Sunday School class begins, when the new school year begins...they’re all hinge moments, opportunities for us to forge again and again in this partnership we share with the parents of our youth.

But the partnership has to begin with us. If we expect parents to join us in our mission with their kids, we need first to join them in theirs. None of us are called to churches where the parents are consistently “getting it.”

We are missionaries to a strange and multi-layered tribe of teenagers and their unpredictable moms and dads, called to watch for the unfolding work of God's Spirit in their lives as well.

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