Families at the Center OF faith formation

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Strategy 7: Developing a Strong Family Life

Family faith formation strengthens family life by developing the assets/strengths and skills for healthy family life and providing a supportive context for forming faith, living the Christian faith, and promoting positive development in children and youth. A strong family life provides the supportive context for forming faith and living the Christian faith. There are two elements of a strong family life: the first is developing assets or strengths as a family; the second is promoting character strengths in young people through developmental relationships. Two studies from the Search Institute provide research-based understandings for building a strong family life together.

Family Assets

There are family assets or strengths that help all kinds of families become strong. These assets help to keep youth safe, help each other learn and pursue their deep interests, create opportunities to connect with others, teach youth to make good decisions, foster positive identity and values, nurture spiritual development, build social-emotional skills, and encourage healthy life habits. There are twenty-one identified "Family Assets" that contribute to building a healthy and strong family life. When families have more of these research-based assets, the children, adolescents, and adults in the family do better in life. The twenty-one family assets discovered through the Search Institute's research are organized into five categories:

Nurturing relationships
- Positive communication—Family members listen attentively and speak in respectful ways.
- Affection—Family members regularly show warmth to each other.
- Emotional openness—Family members can be themselves and are comfortable sharing their feelings.
- Support for sparks—Family members encourage each other in pursuing their talents and interests.

Establishing routines
- Family meals—Family members eat meals together most days in a typical week.
- Shared activities—Family members regularly spend time doing everyday activities together.
- Meaningful traditions—Holidays, rituals, and celebrations are part of family life.
- Dependability—Family members know what to expect from one another day-to-day.

Maintaining expectations
- Openness about tough topics—Family members openly discuss sensitive issues, such as sex and substance use.
- Fair rules—Family rules and consequences are reasonable.
- Defined boundaries—The family sets limits on what young people can do and how they spend their time.
- Clear expectations—The family openly articulates its expectations for young people.
- Contributions to family—Family members help meet each other's needs and share in getting things done.

Adapting to challenges
- Management of daily commitments—Family members effectively navigate competing activities and expectations at home, school, and work.
- Adaptability—The family adapts well when faced with changes.
- Problem solving—Family members work together to solve problems and deal with challenges.
- Democratic decision making—Family members have a say in decisions that affect the family.

Connecting to community
- Neighborhood cohesion—Neighbors look out for one another.
- Relationships with others—Family members feel close to teachers, coaches, and others in the community.
- Enriching activities—Family members participate in programs and activities that deepen their lives.
- Supportive resources—Family members have people and places in the community they can turn to for help (*The American Family Assets Study*).

Developmental Relationships

Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people develop the character strengths to discover who they are, gain the ability to shape their own lives, and learn how to interact with and contribute to others. The Search Institute identified five key actions that promote healthy development, each of which is described from the perspective of a young person.

Express care: Show that you like me and want the best for me.
- Be present—Pay attention when you are with me.
- Be warm—Let me know that you like being with me and express positive feelings toward me.
- Invest—Commit time and energy to doing things for and with me.
- Show interest—Make it a priority to understand who I am and what I care about.
- Be dependable—Be someone I can count on and trust.

Challenge growth: Insist that I try to continuously improve.
- Inspire—Help me see future possibilities for myself.
- Expect—Make it clear that you want me to live up to my potential.
- Stretch—Recognize my thoughts and abilities while also pushing me to strengthen them.
- Limit—Hold me accountable for appropriate boundaries and rules.

Provide support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.
- Encourage—Praise my efforts and achievements.
- Guide—Provide practical assistance and feedback to help me learn.
- Model—Be an example I can learn from and admire.
- Advocate—Stand up for me when I need it.

Share power: Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.
- Respect—Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
- Give voice—Ask for and listen to my opinions and consider them when you make decisions.
- Respond—Understand and adjust to my needs, interests, and abilities.
- Collaborate—Work with me to accomplish goals and solve problems.

Expand possibilities: Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.
- Explore—Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- Connect—Introduce me to people who can help me grow.
- Navigate—Help me work through barriers that could stop me from achieving my goals (*Don't Forget the Families: The Missing Piece in America's Effort to Help All Children Succeed*).

The Search Institute found that one of the most powerful things parents in all circumstances and from all backgrounds can do for children and youth is to build and maintain a strong relationship with them. That is not always easy, but intentional investment in relationships with their young people is one of the most important ways parents help their children develop the strengths they need to be their best in school and life.

Think about how your congregation and community currently equips, supports, and partners with families, and imagine how you could in the future.

- To what extent do we *express care* with the families in our congregations and communities, including listening to them, showing interest in their lives, and investing in them?
- In what ways do we *challenge growth* in families by expecting them to live up to their potential and helping them learn from their mistakes?
- How do we *provide support* and advocacy when families really need it?
- How do we *share power* with families, treating them as true partners by giving them voice in things that matter to them and collaborating with them to solve problems and reach goals?

• How do we encourage families to *expand possibilities* by connecting them with other people, ideas, and opportunities to help them grow?

Create a Family Life Plan for Each Life Cycle Stage

How can congregations equip, resource, and support parents and families at home to cultivate a strong family life and strengthen developmental relationships?

Congregations can play an important role in building family assets. Congregations can utilize the family assets and developmental relationships as the framework for working with families to develop their strengths, build skills, and promote the positive growth of young people. The content of a congregational plan is built upon the research from the Search Institute—the twenty-one family assets and the five key characteristics of developmental relationships. A congregational plan for developing strong families connects programming at church or in the community with at-home activities and resources.

A congregational plan should include partnering with other congregations, schools, and community organizations in a collaborative effort to build strong families in the community. In every community there are congregations, schools, and community organizations who share a common commitment to building strong families, and have programs and resources that can be utilized to implement a shared plan for working with parents and families.

In *Don't Forget the Families: The Missing Piece in America's Effort to Help All Children Succeed*, the Search Institute reminds us that six shifts are needed in the approaches taken to recognize and engage with families as important actors and full partners in developing strong family life and nurturing key character strengths in young people. Our plans need to include:

1. Listening first to families rather than just developing and sending messages that don't resonate or motivate.
2. Focusing on building relationships with families, rather than only providing programs.
3. Highlighting families' strengths, even amid challenges, rather than adopting and designing approaches based on negative stereotypes.
4. Encouraging families to experiment with new practices that fit their lives, rather than giving them expert advice on what they need to do.
5. Emphasizing parenting as a relationship more than a set of techniques.
6. Broadening coalitions focused on young people's success to actively engage families as a focal point for strengthening developmental relationships

Using the content of the Family Assets and Developmental Relationships, congregations can curate and create developmentally appropriate programs, activities, and resources for young children, older children, young adolescents, and older adolescents. The ideas that follow—family website, parent programs, family programs, family mentors, and life cycle support groups for parents, and the resources in your

congregation and community—can become essential elements of a congregational plan for developing the assets/strengths and skills for healthy family life.

Family website

An online family website can provide parents and the whole family with activities to use at home: print, audio, video, apps, games, links to selected family and parent websites, and more. The website can also extend learning from a gathered program into everyday family life and parenting. For a great example of a parent/family website with a variety of media resources designed around the developmental relationships go to ParentFurther at http://www.parentfurther.com. An example of a parent/family website targeted to one life stage is Zero to Three: http://www.zerotothree.org.

Parent programs

In gathered settings (large group or small group) or online (webinars, online courses, video programs), parent programs can be created and curated to equip parents with the knowledge and skills for building strong families and strengthening developmental relationships. For example, the Search Institute offers six one-hour interactive sessions for parents of young adolescents that can be offered on a schedule that works for the sponsor (and parents). Between each session parents engage in relationship-building activities with their middle schoolers. The six sessions include: 1) the power of parent-teen relationships, 2) learn and talk about family priorities, 3) strengthen relationships, 4) prepare for the future, 5) goal setting, and 6) expand your child's web of relationships. This type of course could be developed for the other three stages of the life cycle. (For more information about the Search Institute program go to: http://www.parentfurther.com/content/keep-connected-program. For videos programs for parents from the Search Institute go to: http://www.parentfurther.com/content/workshops-webinars.

Parent programs can be incorporated into congregational events and programs that already engage parents, such as parent preparation programs for baptism, first communion, or confirmation. They can be incorporated into the celebration of milestones (see "Strategy 3: Forming Faith through Milestones" on page 169). They can also be offered at the beginning of each life stage transition: birth, start of grade school, start of middle school, start of high school, graduation from high school.

Family programs

In gathered settings or at home, family programs can engage the whole family (parent-child, parent-teen) in developing family life skills. Congregations can sponsor family workshops throughout the year (perhaps in partnership with other congregations or community organizations) using the content in the Family Assets and Developmental Relationships. For example:

- Communicating effectively.
- Establishing family routines: family meals, shared activities, daily commitments.

- Celebrating meaningful traditions and rituals.
- Discussing tough topics.
- Making decisions and solving problems as a family.
- Learning how to build strong relationships and express care for each other.
- Developing the strengths and potential of children and youth.
- Supporting each other: encouraging and praising, giving feedback, standing up for each other.
- Treating each with respect and dignity.

Another example of a program that builds assets and relationships at home is reading books, using a list developed by Search Institute and First Book, as a fun way for parents and kids to grow stronger as a family. A list of curated books is available online with a free, downloadable guide for each book. Each guide has questions and activities to help the family explore their strengths. The books all tie to Search Institute's research on family strengths and relationships. They are organized into the following topics. Go to the ParentFurther website for the program http://www.parentfurther.com/content/build-strong-families-stories.

- Express care
- Provide support
- Challenge growth
- Expand possibilities
- Share power
- Create routines and traditions
- Connect to your community

Family programs can be built around film festivals with movies selected for their positive messages about family life or growing up. In addition to viewing the movie, there can be family discussion of the movie, skills development, and lots of popcorn. An example of a movie that provides a foundation for follow–up activities is Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out* about the emotional life of child growing up. There are lots more. To select movies for the film festivals check out reviews at: Common Sense Media (https://www.commonsensemedia.org), Pauline Center for Media Studies (http://media.pauline.org), Spirituality and Practice (http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films), and Visual Parables (http://www.readthespirit.com/visual–parables).

Family mentors

Family mentors can provide guidance and support for parents and the whole family at each stage of life. Every congregation has mentor resources in the grandparent generation, those who are actively engaged in church and bring decades of parenting and family life experiences. Congregations can identify and provide training for mentors (mentoring skills, understanding today's family, learning how to access online resources and activities, and more). Developing relationships between

parents and mentors can begin with birth/baptism. Mentoring can be life cycle specific—mentors who focus on children or adolescents.

Life cycle support groups for parents

Support groups for parents—in gathered settings (church, home, community) and in online groups (such as a Facebook parents group)—provide opportunities for parents with children in the same age group to talk about parenting, get information and encouragement, discuss family life issues and challenges, and more. Congregations can also sponsor support groups for divorced parents, parents in blended families, parents of children with special needs, and other affinity groupings. An example of a life cycle support group is MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers). Go to their website to learn more: http://www.mops.org.

Strategy 8. Empowering Parents and Grandparents

Parents (and grandparents) are the most important social and religious influence on their children, adolescents, and emerging adults. The faith of parents and grandparents, their role modeling, their teaching, and their warm and affirming parenting style are key factors in religious transmission and developing highly religious children, youth, and young adults. We know from research studies that the religious tradition of parents, their religious involvement, and whether the parents were of the same religious faith at marriage have a huge impact on how a faith tradition is transmitted to the next generation. Parental behaviors influence religious development through "role modeling"—what parents do in setting examples for religious practice and belief, such as attending church regularly, participating in church activities, and encouraging faith development at home through prayers, scripture reading, and religious stories. It is important that parents show consistency between belief and practice: "walking the walk and not just talking the talk" (Bengston, et al., 185).

Grandparents and great-grandparents are having an increasing influence on religious transmission, support, and socialization. One way they do this is by reinforcing or accentuating parents' religious socialization. A second way is by providing, replacing, or substituting for parents' religious socialization by becoming the moral and religious models and teachers for their grandchildren (Bengston, et al., 185).

Congregations can empower parents and grandparents to be *faith formers* of young people in three interrelated ways: 1) promoting their growth in faith, 2) teaching the skills for parenting for faith growth, and 3) developing their competence and confidence as parents. We explore relevant research in these three areas that can inform the creation and curation of programs, activities, and resources for parents and grandparents. We conclude with practical ideas for bringing these three ways to live in a congregation.

Promoting the Faith Growth of Parents

Congregations can promote the growth of parents/grandparents in faith and discipleship and the practice of a vital and informed Christian faith. Parents who possess and practice a vital and informed Christian faith have a huge impact on the faith of their young people. A strong, vital, mature faith in parents is one of the most important contributors to nurturing sons and daughters of vital, committed Christian faith.

In the "Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry," reported in the *Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, young people of mature Christian faith had parents who were committed to Jesus Christ, experienced the presence of God in their daily lives and relationships with others, had a faith that helped them decide what is right or wrong, and took responsibility for serving those in need. Parents in the study sought out opportunities to grow spiritually.

The "Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry" found that parents rated the following characteristics of the Christian faith as highly important to them (ranked in order). These findings could easily become topics in a formation program for promoting the faith growth of parents and grandparents.

1. My faith helps me know right from wrong.
2. I have a sense of sharing in a great purpose.
3. I have had feelings of being in the presence of God.
4. I have a sense of being saved in Christ.
5. I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God's creation.
6. God helps me decide what is right or wrong behavior.
7. I have found a way of life that gives me direction.
8. Religious faith is important in my life.
9. My life is committed to Jesus Christ.
10. My life is filled with meaning and purpose.
11. I have a real sense that God is guiding me.
12. I feel God's presence in my relationships with other people.
13. I seek out opportunities to help me grow spiritually.
14. I try to apply my faith to political and social issues.
15. I talk with other people about my faith.
16. I give significant portions of time and money to help other people (Martinson, et al., 174).

The overwhelming majority of these parents were involved in spiritual support groups in their churches. They reported that they belonged to at least one church group in which others will pray with them and for them as needed; in at least one church group in which they can talk about spiritual issues; and in at least one church group in which it is possible to talk about personal problems (Martinson, et al., 174–75).

The challenge today is the dramatic changes in the spiritual–religious identities of parents (see Chapter Two). We know from research that Generation X and Millennial parents reflect an increasing diversity in religious beliefs, practices, and affiliation. A growing number of parents and whole families are now religiously unaffiliated and/or spiritual but not religious. Twenty-three percent of Generation Xers and more than 34 percent of Millennials are not religiously affiliated and the number of unaffiliated Millennials is growing. We know that families of Generation X and Millennial parents are participating less in church life and Sunday worship. Parents may bring their young people to educational programs and milestone celebrations (first communion, confirmation), but they are not participating in Sunday worship or other church activities. Religion and spirituality may be important to families today, but for many it is not usually expressed by participation in churches.

We now see that the first generations of not religiously affiliated parents (Generation X and Millennial) are raising their children to become the second generation of not religiously affiliated. Families can transmit the importance of religion—the Christian faith and practices, and belonging to a church community—but they can also transmit nonaffiliation and how religion and faith are not important in daily life. What we are seeing today is large numbers of parents transmitting nonaffiliation. As the number of "Nones" grows among the younger generations, we can expect this trend to continue.

Promoting the faith growth of parents needs to begin with their spiritual–religious identities. We can identify at least four spiritual–religious types of parents. Each will need spiritual and theological formation tailored to their spiritual–religious identities and their religious-spiritual needs and hungers. Their formation will need to be personalized with different content and experiences that address their needs, interests, and hungers.

- The *Engaged* are parents for whom faith is central to their lives, who are transmitting this faith to their children and are actively engaged as a family in a church community. They are spiritually committed and growing in their faith.
- The *Occasionals* are parents who participate only occasionally in church life and for whom transmitting a religious faith primarily means bringing their children to educational programs at church. Some may even attend worship regularly. Their spiritual commitment is low and their connection to the church is more social and utilitarian than spiritual. While receptive to an established church, these parents/families do not have a faith commitment that would make their relationship with God and participation in a faith community a priority in their lives. Their occasional engagement in church life does not lead them toward spiritual commitment.
- The *Spirituals* are parents who identify themselves as spiritual, and even Christian and practicing their Christian faith, but with no connection to a

church community. They identify themselves as spiritual—they pray, read the Bible, serve others—but don't identify themselves as Christian necessarily. They may be searching for God and the spiritual life, but are not affiliated with organized religion and an established Christian tradition. These parents may involve their children in educational programs and vacation Bible school sponsored by a church.

• The *Unaffilated* are parents who are nonaffiliated and for whom religion and spirituality are not important elements of their family life. They may believe in God (most "Nones" do), but religious faith or spiritual practices are not present in their family life. It is not only the parents who are not affiliated, the whole family is not affiliated. They tend to reject all forms of organized religion.

In her book *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents Are Raising their Children*, Christel Manning provides more insight into the world of the *Spirituals* and *Unaffiliated* and how they are raising their children religiously. She identifies five different ways that parents incorporate religion in the lives of their children. (See Chapter Three for more information.)

1. *Nonprovision:* These are parents who do not incorporate religion into their children's lives. They do not intentionally include religion or spirituality in the home life or enroll the child in institutional religious education programs.

2. *Outsourcing:* These are parents who rely on other people to incorporate religion into their children's life. They do not intentionally incorporate religion or spirituality in the home, but do enroll the child in a formal program. They are not members of a religious institution.

3. *Self-provision:* These are parents who try to incorporate religion into their children's upbringing without institutional support, do not enroll the child in a formal religious education program, and intentionally incorporate religion or spirituality into home (talk to child about God or higher power, pray or meditate with child, read religious stories).

4. *Alternative:* These are parents who were unaffiliated before they had children and reported searching for and eventually affiliating with an organization that welcomes doubters and the nonreligious. They enroll their child in programs that teach children about many different religions and intentionally incorporate religion/spirituality in the home from a variety of traditions.

5. *Traditional:* Some unaffiliated parents return to the religion they were raised in, enroll their child in a conventional religious education program, and incorporate religion in the home (Manning 2013, 13–19).

Manning found that in most cases, there was a great deal of consistency between the parents' religious or secular identity and how they raised their children. She observes, "The fact that most parents in the study took steps to incorporate religion into the lives of their children is surprising only if we take None to mean the

absence of any religious, spiritual, or philosophical worldview. Once we discover the more substantive dimensions of unaffiliated parents' worldviews, we see that they transmit those beliefs and practices to their children much as affiliated parents do" (Manning 2013, 19).

The five approaches to how unaffiliated parents are raising their children religiously provides a much need understanding of what drives parents to engage (or not to engage) their children in religious education and congregational life. This new understanding calls congregations to be cognizant of parent motivations as they communicate with parents, assess current programming, and design new initiatives to reach and engage parents.

This more complex and nuanced portrait of religiosity calls upon congregations to create parent formation that is responsive to the needs, interests, and concerns of parents and families in each of the four spiritual-religious types—*Engaged, Occasional, Spiritual, Unaffiliated*. There is no one-size-fits-all model of parent faith formation that will work today.

Developing Faith-forming Skills

Congregations equip parents and grandparents with the knowledge and skills necessary for faith-forming—learning how to transmit faith and values to children, becoming a Christian role model for children and adolescents, and building a community of faith at home that nurtures faith growth in the young.

Parenting and spirituality

In *The Spiritual Child* Lisa Miller identifies key findings from the growing body of research (including her own) on parenting and spirituality that can inform how we equip parents as faith formers of their children.

- A parent, grandparent, or other spiritually engaged, loving adult is equally capable of transmitting spirituality and religion to a child. The transmission comes through the child's sense of parental love and transcendent love (some call it God's love) mixed together as one felt experience.
- The intergenerational transmission of spirituality is passed through its practice, whether in personal prayer, religious observance, or other spiritual practice: an ongoing shared awareness of spiritual presence in the world. The child sees the parents' experience of spirituality and then follows suit, while being immersed in the love of the parent.
- The parent living out spiritual values and morality together with the children guides the intergenerational transmission of lived spirituality and spiritual values. This is spirituality put into action, with care, respect, moral courage, and compassion.
- Components of intergenerational transmission of spirituality are often held in religion—through family prayer, attending services or holidays together, and other religious practices, for instance. However, they can

exist and do exist outside of religion, when the spiritual value or spiritual presence in living is clear and spiritual life is made apparent by parents.
• The intergenerational transmission of spirituality is more protective than anything else against alcohol, depression, and risk taking for children.

The common thread through all of these is a child's experience of a parent's unconditional love and spiritual values together embodied in everyday interactions. This means the parent represents or acknowledges the transcendent relationship and provides a spiritual road map for living, along with a spiritual compass for doing the right thing. Intergenerational transmission of spirituality works because the child's experience and guidebook to spirituality is taught through the parent-child relationship. A child's innate natural spirituality becomes a powerful lifelong capacity through the unconditional love of the parent-child relationship (Miller, 89–90).

Parenting style

Reinforcing this view of the role of the parent and grandparent in transmitting spirituality and faith is the research on the influence of parenting style. We know from research that parents who are warm and affirming are more likely to have children who follow their religious preferences. This points to the importance of parenting style for faith transmission. Research indicates that an *authoritative-communicative parenting style* seems best suited to promoting faith transmission and nurturing faith growth.

After reviewing research studies on parenting styles and children's spirituality, Sungwon Kim summarizes the impact of parents in this way:

A variety of parental factors—religiosity, God-concept, the parent-child relationship, parenting styles, and discipline styles—influence children's spirituality, religiosity, and God-concept. Concerning the parent-child relationship, parental love, support, care, and acceptance are always required for children's healthy spiritual growth. Several studies, however, showed varying results regarding parental discipline. Two key factors the research identifies are the motivation and manner of discipline. Love-oriented discipline (verse power- or punishment-oriented discipline) appears to be most helpful for the children's spiritual development. The affectionate constraint style, also known as the authoritative style, results in the most positive spiritual outcomes in children (244–45).

The parenting style that exhibits most nearly the balance between love and control is the authoritative style. Authoritative parents communicate to their children in a respectful and rational manner; the children are accepted and respected by parents. The parents value both autonomous self-will and discipline conformity; they affirm the child's present qualities but also set standards for future conduct. In sum, authoritative parents are loving and supportive, while offering and enforcing appropriate

boundaries and guidelines. Recent research suggests that the principles undergirding authoritative parenting, in particular, promote children's spiritual growth and development (247).

Donna Habenicht affirms these finding and provides the following characteristics of the authoritative-communicative parenting.

Authoritative-communicative parents are seeking to follow God's model for parenting: unconditional love and grace, clear guidelines for moral values and behavior, and disciplinary action when needed.

Authoritative-communicative parents have warm relationships with their children and are considerate of and attentive to their needs. Parents are firm, patient, loving, and reasonable. They teach their children to reason and make decisions. The rights of both parents and children are respected.

Authoritative-communicative parents are interested in and involved in their children's lives. They know their kids' whereabouts, activities, and associates when away from home, and they keep up with what is happening at school. Parents and children converse daily. The children know that their parents will listen, consider, and value their opinions.

Children of authoritative-communicative parents tend to be more securely bonded to their parents. Their moral development is strong and firm. They are confident, friendly, happy, and cooperative, and they enjoy personal self-respect and self-esteem. Usually they do well academically and are achievement-oriented and successful. Responsible and independent, they often show leadership skills.

Usually they choose to embrace the values and the religion of the family they grew up in. A strong, reasonable conscience enables them generally to have the strength to resist peer pressure and do what they know is right. Their God is the perfect blend of mercy and justice, a God who continually loves them and draws them closer to himself (21).

Habenicht notes that the positive effects of authoritative, directive parenting are strong for every cultural group studied. "Responsiveness or emotional closeness has cultural specific components. Children understand how their culture expresses closeness between parent and child. Regardless of how specific cultural groups define and express responsiveness, the fundamental premise of the authoritative model that children need to feel loved, respected, and firmly guided while they are maturing into adults seems to be true for all children" (22).

Parenting faith practices
Marcia Bunge has identified practices from the Christian tradition that describe how parents can fulfill their duties as Christian parents. These eight practices are often mentioned in the Christian tradition as ways to strength a child's moral and

spiritual development. These practices resonate well with the research on faith transmission and can serve as the basis of programs and resources for equipping parents and grandparents as faith formers of their young people.

1. Reading and discussing the Bible with children.
2. Participating in community worship, family rituals, and traditions of worship and prayer.
3. Introducing children to good examples and mentors.
4. Participating in service projects with parents or other caring adults and teaching financial responsibility.
5. Singing together and exposing children to the spiritual gifts of music and the arts.
6. Appreciating the natural world and cultivating a reverence for creation.
7. Educating children and helping them discern their vocations.
8. Fostering life-giving attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and marriage (14–17).

The eight practices also provide rich content for developing faith-forming skills for talking about faith at home, reading the Bible and sharing Bible stories, praying at home and teaching children to prayer, teaching how to teach right from wrong (moral decision-making), celebrating rituals and holidays, participating in service at home and in the world, worshipping with the church community, and more.

Developing Skills for Parenting

Congregations provide parent education that develops the knowledge, skills, and confidence of parents (and grandparents) for parenting children and teens, informed by the best research on effective child-rearing and parenting practices. The Developmental Relationships (Search Institute) in Strategy 7 provide an important source for developing parent education. This section presents additional sources of content and perspectives for developing parent education.

Child-rearing practices
In "What Makes a Good Parent?" Dr. Robert Epstein identifies the ten most effective child-rearing practices—all derived from published studies and ranked based on how well they predict a strong parent-child bond and children's happiness, health, and success.

1. *Love and affection.* Parents support and accept the child, are physically affectionate, and spend quality one-on-one time together.
2. *Stress management.* Parents take steps to reduce stress for themselves and their child, practice relaxation techniques, and promote positive interpretations of events.
3. *Relationship skills.* Parents maintain a healthy relationship with their spouse, significant other, or coparent and model effective relationship skills with other people.

4. *Autonomy and independence.* Parents treat their child with respect and encourage him or her to become self-sufficient and self-reliant.
5. *Education and learning.* Parents promote and model learning and provide educational opportunities for their child.
6. *Life skills.* Parents provide for their child, have a steady income, and plan for the future.
7. *Behavior management.* Parents make extensive use of positive reinforcement and punish only when other methods of managing behavior have failed.
8. *Health.* Parents model a healthy lifestyle and good habits, such as regular exercise and proper nutrition, for their child.
9. *Religion.* Parents support spiritual or religious development and participate in spiritual or religious activities.
10. *Safety.* Parents take precautions to protect their child and maintain awareness of the child's activities and friends.

Parenting practices

In a meta-analysis of research studies, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focused on the content in parent education programs that had the greatest impact on parenting approaches. Their findings point to important knowledge and skills to incorporate in parent education.

• *Teaching parents emotional communication skills.* This includes using communication skills that enhance the parent-child relationship: developing active listening skills and teaching parents to help children recognize their feelings, label and identify emotions, and appropriately express and deal with emotions. This also included allowing children to feel like they are part of the conversation, equal contributors to the communication process.
• *Teaching parents positive parent-child interaction skills.* This includes teaching parents to interact with their child in nondisciplinary situations (e.g., every day activities) and engaging in a child's selected and directed play activities. This can include showing parents how to demonstrate enthusiasm and provide positive attention for appropriate child behavior and choices.
• *Teaching parents discipline practice such as the correct use of time out.* This includes the correct application of time out and how it reduces the need for other forms of discipline when used correctly and consistently.
• *Teaching parents to respond consistently to their child.* This includes teaching parents the importance of consistent responses to child behavior. Parents learn to use consistent rules across settings

The CDC's analysis also included an important characteristic of effective parent education programs: *having parents practice with their own child during program sessions.* This is in contrast to training programs where no practice takes place or where parents are asked to role-play with another parent or the group leader.

Agile parenting

Bruce Feiler, the author of *The Secrets of Happy Families*, developed his ideas for effective parenting from his three-year journey to find the smartest ideas, cutting-edge research, and novel solutions to make his family happier. Instead of the usual psychologists and family "experts," he sought out the most creative minds from Silicon Valley to the country's top negotiators, from the set of the TV show *Modern Family* to the Green Berets and asked what team-building exercises and problem-solving techniques they use with their families. Feiler then tested these ideas with his own wife and children.

Through his research and practice Feiler developed the concept of an "agile family." Agile is a system of group dynamics in which teams do things in small chunks of time, adjust constantly, and review their progress frequently. Ideas don't just flow down from the top but percolate up from the bottom. The best ideas win, no matter where they come from. Many families have been using similar techniques to improve how their families function. Agile families have a system to change and react to family chaos in real time.

The Agile Family Manifesto
1. Commit to constant improvement—innovate and practice, practice, practice.
2. Solutions exist: don't rely solely on a family expert; talk to anyone who's an expert in making groups run smoothly. Solutions are out there—you just have to go find them.
3. Empower the children: teach them executive skills by allowing them to take a role in their own upbringing. Let them plan their own time, set weekly goals, evaluate their own progress, suggest rewards, and set appropriate punishments.
4. Parents aren't perfect: break free from the all-knowing parent and give everyone an equal say.
5. Build in flexibility: evaluate and adapt—and always remember it's okay to change.

He decided to adapt what he learned about creating an agile family from inside his own house. He and his wife experimented with a morning list, and then presented the idea to their girls. Together, they assembled their list, creating a home-made poster and a daily chore chart. In the first week alone, the Feilers cut parental screaming in half. Soon they began holding a weekly family meeting. After some trial and error—learning to ask the right questions—something amazing happened. Bruce and Linda began to see into their daughters' emotional lives and their deepest thoughts and feelings. "When Linda and I adopted the agile blueprint with our daughters, weekly family meetings quickly became the single most impactful idea we introduced into our lives since the birth of our children. They became the centerpiece around which we organized our family. And they transformed our relationships with our kids—and each other—in ways we never could have imagined," Bruce explains.

In addition to the practices of developing a morning checklist and holding weekly family meetings, Feiler describes how to rethink the family dinner (what you talk about is more important than what you eat), create a family mission statement, resolve conflicts through negotiation, set an allowance (like Warren Buffet manages money), have difficult conversations and keep talking, and share the family history, to name few of the practices in the book.

Feiler's TED Talk, "Agile Programming for Your Family" (https://www.ted.com/talks/bruce_feiler_agile_programming_for_your_family) presents the key concepts as does his book *The Secrets of Happy Families* (William Morrow, 2013).

Generation X and Millennial parenting styles

Generation X parents (born 1962/64–1979) and Millennial parents (born 1980–1999) have distinct parenting styles that reflect their generational experiences as well as the current world in which their children are growing up. Parent education programs and activities need to be responsive to the concerns, interests, and approaches of Gen X and Millennial parents. (See Chapter Two for more information.)

Generation X parents approach child-rearing as a set of tangible practices that will keep their children safe, reasonably happy, well-behaved, and ready to take on life's challenges. They practice protective parenting. Gen X parents approach child-rearing like any other technique—there must be a good way and a bad way to get the job done. They are also much more scientific—books and other resources need to show that there's empirical evidence favoring one way over another, because skeptical Xers don't take advice on faith. Gen X parents are practicing more traditional bedtimes and scheduled mealtimes and playtimes. They want to create a family life with more order and structure (than they may have had when they were growing up). Gen X parents are focused on control. They often have an extreme distrust of institutions—really, of anyone and everything outside their inner circle of family and friends. Combine that with the tight bonds they have with their children, and you get parents who demand control, options, transparency, and oversight. When volunteering, they tend to choose roles that allow them to supervise what's happening directly. They advocate for whatever helps their own kid.

Millennial parents, reflecting their values of individuality and self-expression, focus more on a democratic approach to family management, encouraging their children to be open-minded, empathetic, and questioning—and teaching them to be themselves and try new things. They are moving away from the overscheduled days of their youth, preferring a more responsive, less directorial approach to activities. Helicopter parenting is frowned upon by Millennials who are now developing a new technique called "drone–parenting"—the parents still hover, but they're following and responding to their kids more than directing and scheduling them. Instead of hyperdirecting their kids, many researchers believe, there's a focus among today's Millennial parents on a democratic approach to family management—constantly canvassing their children for their opinions. "Open-minded"

"empathetic" and "questioning" are the qualities Millennial parents most want for their children.

Parenting and technology

One of the emerging areas of parent education is equipping parents with the knowledge and skills for managing technology in their families. Alexandra Samuel spent two years conducting a series of surveys on how families manage technology. Her findings revealed that parents could be roughly divided into three groups based on how they limit or guide their kids' screen time. *Digital Limiters* raise their children offline and prefer to keep their children away from the Internet. *Digital Enablers* trust their own children online and give them plenty of screen time and access to devices. *Digital Mentors* guide their children online, enjoy spending time online with their children, cultivate their children's digital skills, and foster online learning.

Samuel found that *Digital Mentors*, in fact, may be the parents who are most successful in preparing their kids for a world filled with screens, working actively to shape their kids' online skills and experiences. *Mentors* are more likely than *Limiters* to talk with their kids about how to use technology or the Internet responsibly. They're also more likely to research specific devices or programs for their kids; and they're also the most likely to connect with their kids through technology, rather than in spite of it. (See Chapter Two for more information.)

The American Academy of Pediatrics developed ten tips for helping parents manage the digital landscape—all of which could be content in a parent education program. (For the complete presentation go to: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Tips-for-Parents-Digital-Age.aspx)

1. Treat media as you would any other environment in your child's life. The same parenting guidelines apply in both real and virtual environments. Set limits; kids need and expect them. Know your children's friends, both online and off. Know what platforms, software, and apps your children are using, where they are going on the web, and what they are doing online.
2. Set limits and encourage playtime. Tech use, like all other activities, should have reasonable limits. Unstructured and offline play stimulates creativity. Make unplugged playtime a daily priority, especially for very young children.
3. Families who play together, learn together. Family participation is also great for media activities—it encourages social interactions, bonding, and learning. Play a video game with your kids.
4. Be a good role model. Teach and model kindness and good manners online. And, because children are great mimics, limit your own media use.
5. Know the value of face-to-face communication. Very young children learn best through two-way communication. Research has shown that it's that "back-and-forth conversation" that improves language skills—much more so than "passive" listening or one-way interaction with a screen.

6. Create tech-free zones. Keep family mealtimes and other family and social gatherings tech-free. Recharge devices overnight—outside your child's bedroom. These changes encourage more family time, healthier eating habits, and better sleep, all critical for children's wellness.

7. Don't use technology as an emotional pacifier. Media can be very effective in keeping kids calm and quiet, but it should not be the only way they learn to calm down.

8. Apps for kids—do your homework. Look to organizations like Common Sense Media for reviews about age-appropriate apps, games, and programs to guide you in making the best choices for your children.

9. It's okay for your teen to be online. Online relationships are part of typical adolescent development. Social media can support teens as they explore and discover more about themselves and their place in the grown-up world. Just be sure your teen is behaving appropriately in both the real and online worlds.

10. Remember: kids will be kids. Kids will make mistakes using media. Try to handle errors with empathy and turn a mistake into a teachable moment.

Creating a Plan for Parent Formation and Education

Congregations can equip, resource, and support parents and grandparents to be faith formers of their children, adolescents, and emerging adults by promoting their growth in faith, teaching the skills for parenting for faith growth, and developing their competence and confidence as parents.

Content for parent programming

The first content area is the *spiritual and religious growth of parents*. This content will need to be tailored to the four spiritual-religious identities of parents and to the traditions, beliefs, and practices of the particular Christian tradition. The characteristics of mature Christian faith embraced by highly religious parents (from "The Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry") provide direction for parent faith formation: developing a relationship and commitment to Jesus, experiencing the presence of God in daily life and relationships with others, praying, having Christian moral and ethical values to decide what is right or wrong, serving those in need and applying faith in the world, growing spiritually, and developing a well-informed Christian faith (Bible, Christian beliefs).

The second content area is *developing the faith-forming skills of parents*. This would include developing an authoritative parenting style, understanding the characteristics of each life cycle stage (see Chapter Five), and developing skills for sharing faith with the young. The practices identified by Marcia Bunge can serve as the basis for parent programming—engaging parents in learning how to read and discuss the Bible with interpretations; participating in community worship, family rituals, and traditions of worship and prayer; participating in service projects;

exposing children to the spiritual gifts of music and the arts; appreciating the natural world and cultivating a reverence for creation; educating children and helping them discern their vocations; and fostering life-giving attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and marriage.

The third area is specific *knowledge and skills for parenting* the young and building strong families. Based on the research from the Search Institute on Developmental Relationships (Strategy 7) and in this section we can identify important themes for parent education.

- Expressing care, love, affection, and support for children.
- Balancing time and commitments, managing stress.
- Practicing healthy relationships.
- Disciplining children and learning discipline practices.
- Creating a warm, caring supportive family.
- Setting boundaries and high expectations for children.
- Managing technology and media use.
- Challenging children to grow and continuously improve.
- Providing support to help children complete tasks and achieve goals.
- Sharing power with children so that their voice is heard and they share in making decisions.
- Expanding possibilities and connecting children to opportunities for growth.
- Developing emotional communication skills.
- Developing positive parent-child interaction skills.
- Learning to respond consistently to their child.
- Developing the skills and practices for agile parenting.

Guides for developing parent programming

1. *Address diverse spiritual-religious identities of parents.* Parent formation needs to be responsive to the needs, interests, concerns of parents and families in each of the four spiritual-religious types—Engaged, Occasional, Spiritual, Unaffiliated. There is no one-size-fits-all model of parent faith formation that will work today.

2. *Have parents practice new skills with their own children during program sessions.* This is one of the CDC's conclusions about important characteristics of effective parent education programs. This is in contrast to training programs where no practice takes place or where parents are asked to role-play with another parent or the group leader.

3. *Give parents a plan.* Reggie Joiner and the Think Orange team emphasize how important it is to give families a plan. "When parents show up at church, they are often asking silent questions that we must answer; questions they don't even know they're asking. To begin looking at parents through a different filter, imagine that every time a parent walks through the door, he or she is asking you to do three things:

- *Give me the plan.* Most parents are parenting reactively, yet many of them desire to be proactive. They want a plan that will give them a system of support, consistent influence, and a steady flow of relevant information. In essence, what they need from the church is a partner.
- *Show me how it works.* Parents need to be influenced as much as children do, and they desire to be engaged in the process in a way that prompts them to take the best next step. Church leadership has the potential to challenge them collectively and give them a network of families to connect with personally.
- *Tell me what to do today.* If we are going to truly partner with parents, we have to give them specific instructions or resources to use this week. Sometimes parents have a lack of vision, but often they just don't know where to start. Give parents a map and a schedule (Joiner 2010, 89–90).

4. *Address the levels of partnership with parents.* Every parent is a partner with the congregation and faith formation, but they may be partnering with you at different levels. These four levels help clarify how parents are already part-nering so you can move them toward a strategic goal. It is important to *act like every parent will do something.*

   - *Aware:* These parents are concerned about a particular situation or development. These parents are outside the church but open to it, and they're interested in becoming better parents because they genuinely care their families.
   - *Involved:* These parents have a basic or entry-level relationship with the church. Even if it's just bringing their young people to church, these parents are taking steps to influence their young people's spirituality.
   - *Engaged:* These parents are committed to partnering with the church. They are growing in their relationships with God and assume some responsibility for spiritual leadership in the home. They represent a wide spectrum of diverse stages of faith and experience.
   - *Invested:* These parents proactively devote time and energy to partnering with the church. They understand and value the strategy of your ministry. They are in community with Christians and can help in key leadership roles and encouraging other parents (Joiner 2010, 87–90).

   Not every parent will be invested. The goal is to help those who are *aware* and *involved* to at least become engaged. Aware and involved parents have a lot of untapped potential. Congregations need to help them become more engaged parents.

5. *Design programs that engage parents in the learning experience.* Parent programs need to have content that is relevant to parents and processes that help

parents learn and want to participate in new learning. Here are several tips for designing and leading effective educational experiences for parents.

- Create a supportive, caring environment for learning. Greet parents, provide time for them to get acquainted with one another, and encourage mutual support during and after the experience.
- Actively engage parents in the learning. The amount they learn will be in direct proportion to how much they put into the experience.
- Let parents be the experts. Show that you value their knowledge and experience by giving them opportunities to contribute to the learning experience.
- Tie the learning activities around the parents' experiences and values so they know "this is for me and about my family."
- Focus the content on real needs, issues, and concerns, not just on content that parents ought to know. If, for example, you want to help parents teach their child/teen about healthy concepts of right and wrong, first identify the ways this connects with parents' needs or concerns regarding moral values, then develop the experience to reflect those concerns.
- Include information and skills parents can put into action immediately. Such application reinforces and helps parents internalize what they learn.
- Demonstrate how to use skills and practices during the program so that parents have a direct experience of how to use the skills or practice at home.
- Provide resources that parents can use for their own personal growth and with their family. Consider developing a parent website with resources and links to websites to enhance and expand the learning experience.

6. *Use a variety of environments and methods to engage* all *parents,* anytime and any-where, in a variety of settings—independent, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, church–wide, in the community, and in the world. The seven environments provide a way to offer a diversity of programs in different learning environment as well as to offer the same program con-tent in multiple learning environments—all of which provides parents with more options to participate and broadens the scope of parent formation and education offerings. (See Chapter Seven for descriptions and examples of each environment.)

7. *Use online platforms and digitally enabled strategies* by blending gathered com-munity settings with online learning environments. Utilize the abundance of digital media and tools for parent formation and education—to engage parents anytime, anyplace, and just–in–time—and extend and expand faith formation from physical, face–to–face settings into their daily lives through digital content and mobile delivery systems.

Online platforms for parents (websites) integrate the content (programs, activities, resources), connect people to the content and to each other, provide continuity for people across different learning experiences, and make everything available anytime, anywhere, 24-7-365. Digital media tools and resources—social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more), webinars and online learning, video conferencing, videos, audio podcasts, and much more—provide more features in designing parent programs, more methods for delivering programs, and more ways to connecting parents to each other.

Blended learning models provide ways to integrate online and face-to-face learning in a variety of ways, from online programs with minimal interaction in physical settings to programs in physical settings that utilize online content or extend the program using online content. There are least five ways to blend online and gathered. (See Chapter Seven for descriptions and examples of these five ways.)

- ○ Gathered program using online content from websites, podcasts, videos, blogs, and other social media.
- ○ Gathered program with online content that extends and deepens the experience with additional resources for learning.
- ○ Online and gathered programming in one design with substantial program content (that people would have experienced in the gathered setting) in an online platform using digital media (print, audio, video, apps, websites) that parents can experience at their own pace and time in preparation for a gathered session that emphasizes interaction, demonstration, practice, and application.
- ○ Mostly online learning program with occasional opportunities for interaction in a gathered setting, web conference, or other formats.
- ○ Fully online learning program that provides a variety of ways to learn independently, with a mentor, or a small group that that makes available a variety of resources, such as online courses, activities, print and e-books, audio podcasts, video programs, and content-rich websites.

Ideas for parent programming

Using the content and guides for creating a parenting plan, congregations can curate and create parent programming—activities, resources (print, audio, video, digital, online) that applies to all parents and that is specific to the life cycle stages: young children, older children, young adolescents, older adolescents, and emerging adults. These ideas can be used with all three components of empowering parents and grandparents to be *faith formers* of young people: 1) promoting their growth in faith, 2) teaching the skills for parenting for faith growth, and 3) developing their competence and confidence as parents. All of the ideas below can be targeted to specific life cycle stages: young children, older children, young adolescents, older adolescents, and young adulthood.

1. *An online parent website* or a parent component of a family faith formation website can provide parents online learning experiences (workshops, webinars, courses, audio podcasts, video programs) to help them be faith formers. A website can provide parents with resources in all three content areas in a variety of media: print, audio, video, apps, games, links to selected parent websites, and more. The website can also extend learning from gathered parent programs. The website can include original programs created by the congregation and curated programming from other sources. Digital initiatives, such as the website or webinars, provide a way to reach a wider audience of parents in the community. A great example of a website designed for parents is ParentFurther (http://www.parentfurther.com).

2. *Parent programs*—in gathered settings (large group or small group) or online (webinars, online courses, video programs)—can be created and curated using the content suggested in this strategy. Parent programs can be organized in partnership with other churches and community organizations.

   • Develop a progression of parent workshops, webinars, or courses through the life cycle as children and adolescents enter a new stage of life—birth, parenting young children, start of school, parenting older children, parenting young adolescents, parenting older adolescents, parenting emerging adults.
   • Incorporate parent formation and education into congregational events that already engage parents, such as parent preparation programs for baptism, first communion, or confirmation. They can be incorporated into the celebration of milestones (see Strategy 3).
   • Provide targeted programs of theological and biblical formation for parents and grandparents in a variety of learning formats to make it easy for them to access the opportunities: independent (online), mentored, at home, in small groups, in large groups, or church-wide. Incorporate a parent component into an adult faith formation program so that the specific needs of parents can be addressed.
   • Add a parent-only component to family-intergenerational learning programs that addresses parent faith formation or skills development while their children are participating in child-focused activities. Gather the groups together for a shared experience to put into practice what they learned.
   • Add a parallel parent experience to the existing children and adolescent program where parents can gather occasionally for a targeted program while their children are in age-specific programs.
   • Add a parent component to vacation Bible school in the evenings or online.
   • Provide online faith formation for parents using college and seminary programs and organizations such as ChurchNext (https://www.

churchnext.tv), which offers hundreds of short online courses in spiritual and faith enrichment.

3. *Laboratory experiences* that immerse parents in hands-on experiences—with or without their children—can teach knowledge and skills for faith forming and parenting. A family-centered worship experience can be an opportunity to teach parents about worship, reading the Bible, and how to do these things at home. A church-wide service day can be an opportunity to teach parents about the biblical basis of service and how to integrate service into family life. A church year seasonal celebration can be an opportunity to teach about ritual and how to celebrate rituals and church year seasons at home. These immersion experiences can be supported with online content for parents and for the whole family.

4. *Parent mentors* can provide guidance and support for parents and the whole family at each stage of life. Every congregation has mentor resources in the grandparent generation who are actively engaged in church and bring decades of parenting and family life experiences. Congregations can identify and provide training for mentors (mentoring skills, understanding today's family, learning how to access online resources and activities, and more). Developing relationships between parents and mentors can begin with birth/baptism. Mentoring can be life-cycle specific with mentors who focus on children or adolescents. Churches can also identity mentors (spiritual guides) who attend to people's spiritual life, guiding them in growing in their relationship with God and learning more about the Christian faith.

5. *Life cycle support groups for parents*—in gathered settings (church, home, community) and in online groups (such as a Facebook parents group)—provide opportunities for parents with children in the same age group to talk about parenting, get information and encouragement, discuss family life issues and challenges, and more. Congregations can also sponsor support groups for divorced parents, parents in blended families, parents of children with special needs, and other affinity groupings. An example of a life cycle support group is MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers). Go to their website to learn more: http://www.mops.org.

6. *A parent catechumenate*—developed around marriage, baptism, first communion, and or confirmation—recognizes that milestones events can be "moments of return" for married couples and parents. These milestone events are an opportunity for people to consider or reconsider the Christian faith and to encounter Jesus and the good news. The *Catechumenate* of the early church, now restored for the contemporary church, provides a guided process moving from evangelization (inquiry) to catechesis (formation) to spiritual discernment (during Lent) to a ritual celebration of commitment (baptism-Eucharist-confirmation at the Easter Vigil) to post-baptismal faith

formation (mystagogy). The catechumenal process offers a multifaceted formation process: participation in the life of the faith community, education in scripture and the Christian tradition, apprenticeship in the Christian life, intimate connection with the liturgy and rituals of the church, moral formation, development of a life of prayer, and engagement in actions of justice and service. The journey from inquiry through formation to commitment and a life of discipleship within a faith community is a process that can be applied to all types of situations and settings for people of all ages.

Congregations can create a "catechumenate for parents" around key milestones—engaging parents in a multifaceted formation process alongside the preparation of their people. This formation process could be an introduction to the Christian faith for some and an enrichment program for others. It would include all of the elements of the catechumenate adapted for parents and could take place over a twelve-month timeframe. In addition to faith formation, workshops could be included that focus on skills for parenting for faith growth.

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Online Resource Center: Reimagine Faith Formation

Articles, models, strategies, and resources for family faith formation can be found in the "Family" section on the *Reimagine Faith Formation* website developed by LifelongFaith Associates: www.reimaginefaithformation.com.