

Some Thoughts on Outreach to Parents of Children in Catholic Schools and Religious Education Programs

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Assumptions We Can Safely Make:

- ❖ Parents love their children.
- ❖ Parents want the best for their children.
- ❖ Parents who send their children to Catholic schools and to religious education programs believe that a Catholic environment and instruction in the Catholic faith are good for their children.
- ❖ Some of the 65% of baptized Catholics who do not attend Church regularly are parents of children in our schools and in our religious education programs.
- ❖ We have a special opportunity for outreach to these non-practicing members because at some level they value the Catholic faith enough to want their children exposed to it. They are making sacrifices of time and money to see that their children learn values in a faith inspired environment.

How can we maximize this opportunity for re-evangelization for parents who no longer practice their faith?

Build a faith-based, family-friendly culture:

- 1) Create an environment and culture that communicates unconditional love and mutual respect among the pastor, administration, staff, faculty, catechists, parents and children.
- 2) Constantly communicate gratitude to the parents for entrusting their children to you.
- 3) Find ways to support and affirm parents in their role of parenting.
- 4) Offer programs in parenting at times that are convenient to parents (provide baby-sitting).
- 5) Include parents in decisions that will effect them and their families.
- 6) Be understanding that family life is “messy” and sometimes even the most organized of parents misses a deadline or two.
- 7) Be compassionate—none of us knows the burdens that some parents carry alone or together, as they seek the best for their children while trying to make ends meet, and juggle job and family and other obligations.
- 8) Teach children respect and gratitude for their parents and grandparents.
- 9) Help parishioners who do not have children in these programs to see their value and rejoice in the good they accomplish.
- 10) Make your parish as “family friendly” as possible.

The bottom line: love that is rooted in faith attracts and heals. Support and understanding are appreciated by everyone. Gentle invitations to become part (perhaps for the first time as an adult) of the community that loves you are hard to refuse forever. But the time for the yes cannot be forced. It is up to us to welcome always and in every way possible. We leave the rest to God and grace.

Some strategies:

1. Pay special attention to parents and children at significant moments
 - a. When new to the school (i.e. kindergarten, first grade, or later)
 - i. Have two people from the parish pay a “welcome to our school or religious education program” visit. Communicate support and answer questions. Leave a memento of the Church (calendar, refrigerator magnet, bookmark, etc.).
 - ii. Make the parish Sunday bulletins available to children whose families “may not have picked one up on Sunday.”
 - iii. Invite parents who have been in the school or religious education program for at least a year to host a “no strings attached” simple social for parents new to the school or religious ed program—help them to make friends who share their values. (Do it at a time when they can attend and provide baby sitting.) Get to know them yourself.
 - iv. Ask every teacher/catechist to call the parents of each student once a semester/year with a brief, positive word about their child. (The benefit in the classroom will be remarkable.)
 - b. Times of sacramental preparation
 - i. Make the parent preparation programs for First Communion, First Confession and Confirmation a “delightful” experience for parents. Help them to enter into the grace of this experience in their child’s life as fully as possible. Help them to pray in this moment. Be prepared and open the door for those who have been away from the sacraments to return or at least make peace with where they are today. Make sure that parents who do need help returning to the practice of their faith know that there are parish staff members ready to assist them.
 - ii. Communicate to parents your clear expectation that they will support and be involved actively in their child’s faith formation through attendance at Mass and participation in the sacraments where possible.
2. Make faith integral to all parent meetings: Open with a thoughtful prayer, allow for simple one on one faith sharing or sharing in small groups on a question like “What I ask from God for my child(ren) each day.” Occasionally provide time for a parent or even a couple who practice their faith to give a little witness about what faith means to them and their family. Keep it simple, genuine and gentle.
3. Special seasons: host a family night to make a family Advent wreath; sponsor a soup and story night during Lent—let the story be how much God loves us. Do something around the rosary in October. These are activities that parents who can’t receive the sacraments can participate in.
4. Offer faith formation sessions for parents who want to “brush up.” Relate it to what their children are learning.

Think of a few ways each year to connect parents, children and faith. Don't create more burdens for families or necessarily more things for them to do, rather do the things you already do with an eye to faith.

It should be clear to parents in all their interactions with the school and the religious education program that faith inspires and underlies all that is done and that that same faith can be a source of blessing in their lives as well.

Find family-friendly, faith-based resources. Two from PNCEA are: The Lenten Family Activity Booklets in *Disciples in Mission* (Cycle B 2009 materials will be available in the fall) and the new brochure by Fr. Anthony Krisak "Worshipping with Our Children" available now at www.pncea.org/store item 6030. Give them to parents.

Pray for your families every day. Teach children to pray for their parents and teach parents to pray for their children. God will work it all out.