

Reaching Parents

Janet Schaeffler, OP

- 1) **Know your families!** Take every opportunity to know your families ... and never assume anything. Don't fall into the trap of thinking all children come from "traditional" families. Be aware of stepparents, adoptive parents, single parents, and other adult guardian situations. When designing brochures, newsletters, etc., consider using generic graphics rather than "two parents, two children."
- 2) **Shared Prayer.** At the beginning of the year, designate one of the faith formation sessions for each age level as "Shared Prayer" with their families. Invite the families to join with their child the last 40 minutes of the session for a prayer service, then refreshments which gives the children/youth a chance to introduce their families to their catechists. Be sure the prayer service involves the families in ritual, e.g. a blessing of one another.
- 3) **Guest teachers.** Get to know the skills, interests, and talents of the parents in your program (as well as other parishioners). Often there are many people who have knowledge, interest, skills, service in the world and/or parish ministerial involvement that is directly related to the themes being studied by the children/youth. Invite them to become part of your program as a one-time guest teacher, or even "permanent" helper.
- 4) **Mentoring families.** Often, in a large parish, it is difficult to get to know every family and help to make each feel welcome and connected. Invite some of the families that you do know who have been around and active for a while to become "mentoring families." These families could then be paired with new families in the parish/program to help them learn about the practical policies, where things are, who's in charge of what, etc. Even more importantly, they could invite the new family to accompany them to liturgy, to special parish liturgical services, and catechetical program events.
- 5) **Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.** Parents are the primary educators; the parish is a co-partner with them.
 - Take every opportunity to keep parents informed of how you're sharing/teaching our faith throughout the program.
 - Use every chance to help parents continue to grow in their faith.

(Every opportunity /every chance = notes, phone calls, parent newsletters of what's happening, parent conferences, church bulletin, parent resource centers, website, faxes, gatherings, parent bulletin board, emails, open house, family newsletters as well as parent newsletters (ideas of things to do at home), invite parents/families to come to any catechetical session, parent

support groups, e-newsletters, emails, postcards, home visits, parish library, parent library, orientation meeting, etc.)

- 6) **Visit families.** This may take time, but what benefits it will reap! Let them know you're coming to: perhaps tell them about a new family opportunity the parish is offering, but then ask them how things are for them, what they need from the parish, the catechetical program, and most of all, spend a few moments praying with them – in a simple family way, modeling how every family can pray together. (Don't forget to remember things that are important in a family's life and send a card, make a phone call: a new baby, illness, special anniversary, death, etc.)
- 7) **Fun activities.** Plan activities where all a family has to do is show up – and, then have a good time (what a great memory of “church”!). Picnics, winter picnics inside on the floor, unibirthday parties, family night at the movies, gatherings for various holidays, holydays, national events (Super Bowl, etc.), pot luck dinners, ice cream socials, family softball games, etc.
- 8) **Home Ideas.** Most families want to pray together, develop rituals, and share their faith together. They are always desirous for new ideas and suggestions. Share with them ideas related to the themes their children are studying, the liturgical year, our national holidays and observances, the everyday occurrences of family life, etc. Make them attractive; keep them simple, practical and involving.
- 9) **“Homework” for Parents.** Involve the parents/families as the children\youth continue their reflection/learning on their catechetical sessions. The children can “interview” their parents, such as, “When do you pray? Who do you pray? Why do you pray?” when the session is on prayer. Periodically, families can be asked to watch a specific TV program, or one of their choosing, and be given a list of questions to analyze the program (or the commercials) according to Gospel values, Jesus' lifestyle, or a specific theme currently being studied.
- 10) **Be positive and affirming.** Always show respect for parents and tell them all the good that they are doing. Often our culture doesn't support them; it constantly tells them what they're doing wrong. And although they want/need to keep on learning – and we can help with that – positive affirmation is the best motivation to keep on. Remind them that holiness is already within their family life – God's love and presence is there and shouted in the ways they love, care for, forgive each other, etc. Our role is not to bring God to families; God is already there. We just need to help them become more aware of how much God is there; how close God is; the many ways God is always there.
- 11) **Help parents connect.** There used to be front porches. Catholic parents used to live next door to each other. There was such support because a Catholic atmosphere exuded everywhere. Provide times and places for parents to be together to have conversations about parenting and family spirituality. One natural time: while children are in their catechetical sessions (instead of sitting out in their cars).

- 12) **Bring all together to learn.** Most things in our culture seem to separate families into their own age groups, for events, for their various functions. Several times a year, host intergenerational learning festivals. One method of structuring these events is through learning centers. Have various centers set up throughout the parish area, each one hosting a different activity related to the theme for which everyone has gathered (Advent, care for creation, sacraments, called to serve, etc.). The ideal is that the learning center activity does not end, but leads to something that can be continued at home, incorporated into family life. At the same time, don't limit these learning festivals just to families with children. Invite singles; couples whose children have grown; grandparents -- the entire parish.
- 13) **Reflection booklets.** "Publish" parish Advent/Christmas and/or Lent/Easter booklets with short reflections and things to do for each day of the season. Invite different families from the parish to write the reflection/thing to do for each day. They can be based on the Scripture readings of the day or the designated feast.
- 14) **Evaluate.** Invite parents to evaluate for you the effects of the year's program for themselves and their children, as well as any special programs or events they participate in throughout the year. Questions that might be included:
- Three adjectives that describe my child(ren)'s experience in the religious education program are: _____.
 - Three adjectives that describe my feelings about the religious education program are: _____.
 - A new insight I've had about my faith this year is:_____.
 - Ideas for family sharing and prayer come to you in many ways (newsletters, brought home, emails, bulletin, etc.). Are you able to use them? How?
- 15) **Call.** Make a goal for yourself to place a phone call to five parents each month. Ask for their ideas. Listen to their concerns ... certainly about the program, but about their own family, the needs of families today, and how today's parish and catechetical program can best support and empower families.

Janet Schaeffler, OP

www.janetschaeffler.com

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