

IMMERSE

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Removing the Barriers to Parent Connectedness

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In your ministry, are the parents advocates or barriers for accomplishing your vision for teens?

It's a trick question. Both are flawed ways of working with parents. The role of parents is not to align with your vision for their teens. You need each other, but often there are barriers youth pastors unintentionally set up that keep partnership from happening.

I often hear one of these two statements from youth workers:

1. *"Most of the parents in my ministry don't know where their kids are during the day, and they don't care."*

Parents who've checked out of their teens' lives still have a greater impact on the lives of their kids than you do as a youth pastor. Certainly with an inordinate amount of time and energy of investing in this teen, you can begin to counter this self-defining sense of abandonment. But you are not the cure, and often, absent parents are not the enemies we think they are.

2. *"Parents promote homework and school activities more than youth group activities." Or, "Parents ground their kids from youth group."*

Parents who invest in their kids often feel like a threat to youth pastors. These parents are often extremely focused on their teens' development. They often have a specific idea about the role that youth ministry will play in the development of their teens, and it often contradicts your vision.

For many youth pastors, the goal becomes marginalizing these parents because of competing values. It also lends itself to a parent seminar or two. In the mind of a youth pastor, the goals of the parent are misguided and need to align more with the youth pastor's vision. The next time a parent grounds a child from youth group activities, instead of blaming them for being unspiritual, maybe you should ask, *What value does my activity actually contribute to the spiritual health of teens? Is there an assumption I'm making about the actual value of what this program or activity contributes to discipleship?*

Invested parents typically don't ground their kids because youth group is fun, though this is what it feels like or what they tell us. They ground their kids because they want their kids to be learning. They want what is best for their teens, which is what we want too.

Why do we resist parental involvement? The absent parents aren't absent because they don't care. The invested parents aren't there because they care too much.

In addition, a key problem of involving parents in youth ministry is a misguided value of relationships. Most youth pastors believe their primary job is to build relationships with teens. Creating this environment produces a ministry that revolves around the relationship teens have with the youth pastor. This is a fundamental flaw of most youth staff because, as my friend Mark DeVries likes to say, all paid staff roles are interim positions.

Not only are *you* relationally temporary, so is your vision. Most youth pastors who spend a majority of their time with teens will find themselves disappointed in their legacy (or lack thereof).

However, parents will be around long after you are gone. The more you can engage the vision parents have for their kids and their kids' friends, the more healthy your ministry will become.

You have something important to offer teens. You are uniquely positioned to invest in the lives of parents who, when transformed and engaged, will impact teens for decades to come. If you want to invest in teens, you will invest in parents and see them as part of your ministry. It's still about relationships, but it doesn't revolve around you.

No matter how young you are, parents are people you are called to join in their faith journey and encourage them to live more in the way of Christ.

Most youth pastors do not disciple parents because they see parents as a threat. This is because a few parents *are* real threats. Keep this in mind. You can't disciple people you feel threatened by, and you can't partner with parents when you believe that you know what's best for their kids.

Nor can you build a legacy in youth ministry if you don't invest in parents and have parents invest in teens. Parents are your greatest partners in youth ministry. They are motivated because they have something

personally at stake in the ministry, and honestly, they have more at stake in the ministry than you do. They will impact the ministry in the long run, whether you like it or not. You need each other. If partnership is going to happen, you will be the one who initiates it.

Questions:

- What assumptions have you made about your role as a youth pastor?
- Do you believe that the youth pastor is central to great relational youth ministry? Do you function like you believe this?
- What assumptions do you have about the motivations of parents?
- What are ways that you as a youth pastor are a barrier to great youth ministry with parents?
- Who are two parents you can get to know and begin to understand better this week?