



Exclusive results from Children's Ministry Magazine's State of Family Ministry research

The first rule of any good service business is to "know thy customer." And the better a business knows the customer, the more likely it'll have success speaking the customer's language, meeting the customer's needs, and having the customer return.

Wouldn't you say those are all things we want when it comes to serving families today—and parents in particular? We want to speak their language, meet their needs, and have them return so their families can grow in their relationship with Jesus. It's a worthy goal to partner with parents in the spiritual training of their children.

# Family Ministry

By Christine Yount Jones

Yet do we understand our customer—today's parents? Are we using outdated methods that are doomed before we even begin to equip and communicate with new generations of parents? Or are we on the right path? What if we could get inside parents' heads to discover what they think of our children's ministry efforts? Would they tell us what works and what doesn't? Would parents help us better understand how to partner with them?



These are the exact questions that led us to conduct a research project where we not only surveyed children's ministers, but we also surveyed the parents they serve. In this, the State of Family Ministry release, our exclusive research will provide welcome relief—and a challenge to rethink what we're doing. Read on to see what Children's Ministry Magazine uncovered.

### Expectations: Children's Spiritual Training

Parents and children's ministers agree on the #1 expectation for children's spiritual training: "Children will enter into a relationship with Jesus." In fact 59 percent of parents stated this as their top expectation for their church's children's ministry, while 43 percent of children's ministers estimated this would be their parents' answer. Since children's ministers have a clear perception of what parents want, this is a strong affirmation that children's ministries are on the right path to serve parents.

When it comes to secondary expectations, though, an interesting divergence occurs. Children's ministers listed "children will learn good character development and become better people" as the second thing they'd expect parents to value in their children's ministry. Parents, however, chose "children will have an understanding of biblical principles" as their second choice. Character development was a distant third for parents.

**Bottom Line:** From this study, it's clear that parents want their kids to have a friendship with Jesus and an understanding of biblical

principles—first and foremost. The prevalent emphasis on character development in children's ministry circles needs re-examination.

### Definition: Parent-Partnering Programs

Once again, parents and children's ministers agree—this time on the definition of "partnering with parents to train their children spiritually." The #1 definition ranked by 54 percent of parents and children's ministers was "great classes and programs at church with take-home faith extensions." This is one more strong affirmation that children's ministries are on the right path.

When given five choices, children's ministers' second choice definition was "great home devotion materials with supplemental at-church experiences." Parents ranked the children's ministers' second choice as #4 in their list of five possible choices. Parents' second most-chosen definition was "great classes and programs at church" (28 percent) and then a distant third was "training and celebration surrounding key faith milestones in a child's life" (8 percent).

**Bottom Line:** Children's ministers' second choice is a clear result of the home-centered, church-supported philosophy that many family ministry proponents espouse to help parents be the primary faith-developers for their children. But are parents ready for this? Would they embrace this model? The research would say "not yet." Parents rely on children's ministries to create an irresistible faith-growth environment for their children. Today's parents will partner with the church that delivers this.

## Partnering With Parents

Here's a side-by-side comparison of parents' and children's ministers' definitions of an effective children's ministry that partners with parents to train children spiritually.

### Parent Definitions

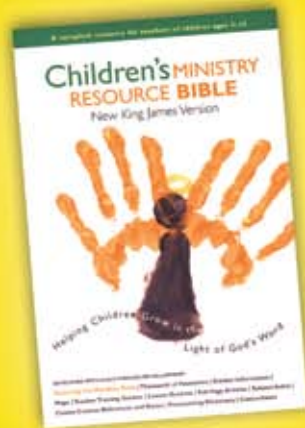
1. Great classes and programs at church with take-home faith extensions **54%**
2. Great classes and programs at the church **28%**
3. Training and celebration surrounding key faith milestones in a child's life **8%**
4. Great home devotion materials with supplemental at-church experiences **8%**
5. Devotion materials that encourage parents to train their children at home **3%**

### Children's Minister Definitions

1. Great classes and programs at church with take-home faith extensions **54%**
2. Great home devotion materials with supplemental at-church experiences **19%**
3. Devotion materials that encourage parents to train their children at home **11%**
4. Training and celebration surrounding key faith milestones in a child's life **10%**
5. Great classes and programs at the church **7%**



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### Tools of the Trade

Since the majority of parents want "take-home faith extensions," we asked, what's working and what isn't?

More than 88 percent of churches use the traditional "take-home handout," and parents rank this a helpful method. Surprising? It was to us. One children's minister had told us that he asked his parents how his staff could make the take-home paper more effective; the parents said to put recycle bins by their children's classroom doors. Yet the parents in this survey perceived the take-home paper as a helpful tool, among others. Parents' top three most helpful rankings: family events, face-to-face conversations, and take-home handouts. (Email communication was a close fourth.)

**Bottom Line:** It's noteworthy that many parents commented that they couldn't rate some of the tools listed as helpful because their church doesn't provide those things. Yet parents look to the church to help them fulfill their role as the primary faith-developers for their children. The high-touch, relational things from the church seem to be most appreciated.



### Taking Faith Home

Here are parents' responses when we asked them to rank the tools they find most helpful to train their children spiritually.

1. Family Events
2. Face-to-Face Conversations\*
3. Take-home handouts
4. Email communication
5. Parent training seminars\*
6. Faith milestone celebrations\*
7. CDs\*

\* Less than 40% of churches use these methods, which limits parents' ability to evaluate their helpfulness. Specific usage rates: Face-to-face conversations (35%), Parent-training seminars (25%), Faith milestone celebrations (34%), and CDs (16%).

### Faith at Home

Since children's ministries invest in the take-home handout to a large degree, we wondered whether parents actually use them weekly. We also wondered if children's ministers had an accurate perception of weekly usage.

Almost 36 percent of parents say they're actually using the materials with their children weekly. That meshes with children's ministers' perception of parents' usage. In fact, 75 percent of children's ministers estimate that take-home materials are used by less than one-third of their parents on a weekly basis.

**Bottom Line:** Herein lies the classic challenge between what people say they do and what they actually do. Parents want help training their children spiritually, and while parents rank the take-home paper as one of the top-three most helpful tools, reality doesn't match their perception. According to their responses, parents aren't using the take-home paper to the degree that they say they value it. Our challenge is to figure out how to effectively equip parents so reality does match perception.

### Communication

Around 75 percent of parents say their church's children's ministry is doing "very well" or "pretty good" communicating with them. Less than 50 percent of children's ministers give themselves the same good marks. This might be indicative of a divide between how children's ministers think parents want to be communicated with—and how parents really prefer communication to come their way.

An overwhelming 76 percent of parents today prefer that communication comes via email; only 50 percent of children's ministers ranked this as the top choice. After that, the phone and handouts are necessary communication devices with very low rankings, but the least favorite modes of communication are Web sites and snail mail.

**Bottom Line:** Our research shows that children's ministers need to come into the digital era AQUIKAP (as quickly as possible). Parents prefer you communicate by email, Twitter, or texts. How is your church adapting to new communication styles?

### Children's Ministers' Report Card

So how well do parents think children's ministries are partnering with them to train their children spiritually? Not surprisingly, parents have a much higher estimation of how well children's ministers are doing than children's ministers have of themselves. More than 79 percent of parents say their church is doing "very well" or "pretty good." That's an A and B! Children's ministers, though, give themselves a C in this area, with more than 40 percent saying they're doing an "average" job. An additional 20 percent would score themselves still lower.

The dichotomy is even wider when asked, "How well does your church partner with you to create a weekly faith conversation at home?" Of parents, 24 percent say "very well" and another 37 percent say "pretty good." Less than 4 percent of children's ministers answer "very well." 35 percent scored this area as a D or F in terms of effectiveness.

**Bottom Line:** You want the truth? There's an atmosphere of condemnation and accusation in children's ministry today. Many "experts" shout about children's ministers failing families, and sadly, some have begun to believe it. So what do we do? Go back to the #1 rule: "know thy customer." Interestingly, in both the above questions, parents are almost six times more favorable toward children's ministries than the children's ministers themselves. Give yourselves an A+!

### Parents' Report Card

How well are parents doing at training their children spiritually? We wanted to find out what parents



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## Program Report Card

(based on highest scores possible)

### Rankings

Parents rank how much they value the following elements of their church's children's ministry.

1. Safe and fun environment
2. Spiritual growth opportunities
3. Age-appropriate materials
4. Relationships with other kids
5. Consistency in teachers
6. Service opportunities
7. Family events
8. Celebrating faith milestones
9. Social events
10. Parent seminars

think children's ministers in their churches believe about them—and what children's ministers actually think. Turns out, parents are much more positive than the ministers.

More than 54 percent of parents perceive that their children's minister would say they're "doing a great job." In actuality, only 11 percent of children's ministers would agree. A whopping 78 percent of ministers chose the second option of three: "Parents need more help."

**Bottom Line:** Perhaps it's time to give parents a break. How can we as primary encouragers of parents in their quest to train their children become their biggest fans?



The bottom line is, children's minister, you're doing a great job! Parents are grateful for what you do week in and week out. They recognize that you bring a level of faith-building expertise to their children's faith journeys that they couldn't on their own. They look to you to believe in them, cheer for them, equip them, communicate with them, and walk alongside them to help their children have a growing relationship with Jesus! **cm**

*Christine Yount Jones is executive editor of Children's Ministry Magazine.*



## Find Your Own Path



Why not take your own snapshot of parents to learn how your ministry can celebrate where you're succeeding and improve areas that need help? Use our online guide to conduct your own research. Just go to [childrensministry.com/current/survey\\_2009](http://childrensministry.com/current/survey_2009). You can find more in-depth details on this research, as well as research on the children's ministry, youth ministry, women's ministry, and volunteer ministry at [group.com/church09](http://group.com/church09).