



Partners in Christian Education

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Sunday School teachers play a vital role in the lives of Christian families. They provide an important link between the church and the home and are in a key position to encourage young families in regular Sunday School attendance.

In a study of three Christian colleges in the Midwest, it was found that "there were significant relationships between the parents' level of church involvement while the student was in pre-school, elementary school, junior high school, and high school and their spiritual well-being."

Spiritual well-being was described as having both a vertical and horizontal dimension. "The vertical dimension refers to our sense of well-being in relation to God....The horizontal dimension refers to a sense of life purpose and life satisfaction, with no reference to anything specifically religious."

The data from this study indicated that the more involved the parents were in church activities, the higher the student scored on spiritual well-being. "Parental involvement in church activities was related to how a student feels about his relationship with God and his sense of satisfaction with his life purpose and direction," the study concluded.

In the same study, it was found that over half of the students in this sample had become Christians by the age of 7 and three-fourths by the age of 13.

The more involved the parents were in church activities, the higher level of intrinsic motivation of the child. This seems to indicate that these parents were selective in their choices of outside activities and did not neglect their home life.

The study clearly indicated that parents are still their child's most influential role models. A parent's example of serving God and others has a powerful impact on his or her offspring.

Rethinking Goals

This is an important study in the light of the crises in our schools and the question of who is providing the moral training for the younger generation. The outbreaks of violence in our nation's inner-city and suburban schools have caused many parents to rethink the direction they are going. Has there been too much emphasis on attaining success and too little on developing character? Christian and non-Christian parents wonder if their children are getting the character education and training they need. Consequently, some public schools have begun using character building curricula in response to parents' concerns.

In light of this growing interest, the church has an excellent opportunity to fill the character-training gap in our culture through Christian education. Sunday School is an ideal setting for pro-

viding the kind of biblical character training many parents are looking for. It provides a consistent, systematic study of God's Word at the child's age level and understanding. The Sunday School class allows time for discussion, discovery, fellowship, and the personal attention children need to flourish spiritually.

Parents=Power

Yet, as has been pointed out, Christian education is most effective when parents are involved in the church. Parents and other family members should be considered for both teaching and non-teaching roles in Sunday School. Their involvement sends a message to children that Sunday School is valuable and a worthwhile investment of their time.

The church, in turn, can also support families by offering Christian parenting classes. This is a much-needed ministry that will strengthen families and increase Sunday School attendance—especially when the classes are offered on Sunday morning. In their book, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, authors Jack and Judith Balswick point out that, "The church, then, is to be a family to families and a source of identity and support for isolated nuclear families." The church can provide assistance for parents seeking to train their chil-

dren in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. At the same time, parents can lend support to their children's teachers. This is a picture of how the family of God ministers to the needs of each of its members. "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Ephesians 2:19, NIV).

How to Involve Parents

The question then for those of us who teach is, "How can we involve parents in their child's Christian education?" One thing we can do is make sure parents understand how important is their role in Sunday School. I recall the weekly visits we made on Saturday mornings in the homes of the boys and girls on our bus routes in Oregon. Even parents who did not attend our church played an essential role in allowing their children to attend and in getting them ready for the bus on Sunday morning. Our brief visits

and a Sunday School flyer informed them of what their child would be learning and the activities they would enjoy. This link kept the children and their parents interested in our Sunday School.

Families who are sporadic in their Sunday School attendance will be more faithful in attendance when they realize the value the Sunday School hour holds for their child. Building a relationship with parents is an important first step for teachers in establishing regular attendance. Keeping parents informed of the activities planned for your class will also increase their interest, and staying in contact with your students will encourage their parents to make Sunday School a priority.

Another way to involve parents is to ask them to contribute something to the class. This could be a simple snack, a special talent, or an experience that relates to your Bible theme. You can ask moms to sign up as room mothers or ask couples to serve as class sponsors. Occasional help

with class projects and parties may be all some parents can contribute, but it will be a link of support that is important to their child. Some parents may want to help you regularly with bulletin board displays, missions projects, substitute teaching, or crafts.

Plan for a special activity at least once a year where parents can get acquainted. This could be a continental Sunday School brunch or an invitation for the children to share a song, puppet show, or Bible skit with their parents. Welcoming parents to your classroom will increase your opportunity to dialogue with them and strengthen the bond of the church to the home.

Whatever means you choose to involve parents, remember to pray for your students' families each week. Let the parents know you are praying for them. Ask God for wisdom in specific ways you can minister to families. God is faithful; as you give to the children each week, He will supply your needs as well.

Questions For Further Study—

1. What one factor helps to increase a child's sense of spiritual well being?
2. List ways in which you could involve parents as partners in your children's church.