AN ANNUAL STRATEGY FOR FAMILY MINISTRY FROM GROW STUDENTS CURRICULUM

When it comes to parents, let's be honest — we could all do a better job of engaging them, caring for them, and including them in our ministries. For some of us, sometimes even just acknowledging their existence would be a good step forward. As youth pastors, family ministry is a really important part of our jobs! That's because every teenager belongs to a family and is being parented by at least one adult (who may or may not be their biological parent).

Engaging and supporting parents is essential, but there are two mistakes we often make when it comes to parents.

- **We forget parents exist.** When we try to lead teenagers without ever engaging their parents, we limit our ability to connect with or support that parent's teenager.
- **We get frustrated by parents.** Sometimes we might disagree with a parent or wish a parent was doing more to disciple their teens. Sometimes we might be annoyed that parents won't return our messages, or turn registration forms in on time, or take their teens to church, or let them go to an event we're really excited about.

But instead of getting frustrated because parents aren't meeting our expectations, what if we reevaluated our expectations of parents? **What if we stopped *expecting* parents to ...**

- Know everything we think they should know?
- Care about what we care about?
- Agree with us?
- Support what we're doing?

What if instead of *expecting* parents to trust us, we tried harder to *earn* their trust instead?

Not every parent will naturally trust us or our ministries, be interested in a relationship with us, or even want us or a volunteer to invest in life of their teenager. And that's okay! Instead of being frustrated by that, what if we asked the question, **"How can I earn that parent's trust?"**

There is no one right answer to that question, but here's a place to start: **we can earn parents' trust by consistently and strategically investing in and engaging with them.**

No matter how new or how seasoned you are at family ministry, we hope this strategy we're about to unpack will give you a framework for your parent strategy that you can replicate and improve year after year. With this Annual Parent Strategy, you'll learn a system for investing in parents in seven different ways throughout the year.

If you're familiar with Grow Curriculum & Annual Strategy, some things in this post might sound familiar to you. That's because everything we do in Grow Curriculum is based on the strategy we're about to break down for you! **But don't worry if you've never used Grow in your ministry before. You can still steal our strategy!** Take the ideas you find helpful, ignore the parts that don't quite fit your context, and combine them with the unique language, vision, and strategy of your church.

Okay, are we ready? Let's get started!

7 WAYS TO INVEST IN FAMILIES

1. PARENT EVENTS

An event is **any environment that gets parents connected with your ministry, with their teen, or both.** This might include an Open House for new families at the beginning of the year, a Parent and Small Group Leader Breakfast to connect parents with your ministry,

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a Parent Workshop to give parents practical training on parenting their teens, and events that get parents and their teenagers spending time together.

Here's how this could look on your ministry calendar each year:

- **AUGUST:** Open House
- **OCTOBER:** Parent & Small Group Leader Breakfast
- **JANUARY:** Parent Workshop

And if you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created all the event guides and resources you'll need to make these events happen!

2. PARENT MEETINGS

Parent meetings can be one of the least fun parts of ministry — for you and for parents, too! That's because a lot of parent meetings tend to be full of information that could have been sent in an email. But when done right, **parent meetings can be a really effective part of your ministry strategy!** Parents need information and training at key points throughout the year, and a meeting is often the best way to deliver it. That's why it's so important to schedule meetings with parents throughout the year as needed.

Before the beginning of each school year (but after you've already planned out the rest of your ministry calendar) take a look at your annual calendar to determine when you may want to meet with parents. Consider ...

- When will you have new influxes of families who will need an **orientation to your ministry?**
- Do you have any **big events** that parents will want to connect with you about before and after?
- What kinds of situations might require **a meeting you can't plan ahead for?**

When you're deciding how often to meet with parents, don't go overboard, though. You want to schedule enough meetings that parents have all the information and help they need but not so many that they feel overburdened by your ministry schedule and requirements. **Save your in-person meetings for the really important stuff: the times when you want to teach, discuss, and connect with parents.**

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created meeting guides for these kinds of situations already. But whether you use Grow or not, here's how this could look on your ministry calendar each year:

- **AUGUST:** New Parent Orientation Meeting
- **JANUARY—JUNE:** Parent Meetings about upcoming mission experiences, summer camps, weekend retreats, or VBS
- **AS NEEDED:** Meetings to address crises or transitions impacting your community

3. PARENT DISCUSSION GROUPS

When we think about training and leading parents, we probably picture environments where we (the pastor or church leader) are doing the training and leading. **Sure, you've got a lot of wisdom to share with parents, but have you ever considered that parents have a lot of wisdom to share with each other — and with you?** That's where these Discussion Groups come in.

The premise of a parent discussion group is pretty simple: invite a small but diverse group of parents (about ten people) connected to your ministry to join you for coffee and dessert (or chicken wings and soda) so they can share some of their biggest wins, struggles, and lessons learned.

We recommend scheduling at least two discussion groups each year: **one in the middle of the year and one at the end of the year.** On top of your pre-scheduled Discussion Groups, you may also want to host an impromptu Discussion Group during pivotal moments for your team, like **during a ministry transition or during a crisis.**

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created discussion group guides for these kinds of situations already. But even if you don't use Grow in your ministry, here's how this could look on your calendar each year:

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- **JANUARY:** Mid-Year Parent Discussion Group
- **JUNE:** End-of-Year Parent Discussion Group
- **AS NEEDED:** Discussion Groups to address crises or transitions impacting your community

4. PARENT TOOLS

You probably do quite a bit to train, encourage, and inspire parents to be better parents. You probably give them great ideas, share helpful resources, and give them tips on how to disciple their teens. But you know what? Sometimes, in order to do their jobs well, parents need more than just words. **They need a physical, practical, tangible tool they can take and use.**

When it comes to the tools you give, you'll be most effective in equipping parents and caregivers when you **establish a predictable annual rhythm** — something strategic instead of random. That means every year (especially at the beginning of the year), parents should know a little bit about how your ministry intends to help and serve them throughout the year. If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created a few of those recurring resources for you already, like ...

- A **parent handbook** to help them understand your ministry's philosophy, strategy, and policies.
- An **annual parent survey** to help you better understand how to help and communicate with parents.
- **Parent tip videos** and **video scripts** to give parents a practical piece of advice each month (or however often you decide to send them).

Having a set of tools that you adjust, redesign, and repeat each year will keep your ministry on track and help parents stay engaged all year long.

As you go throughout your year, you will probably discover your parents could use a few tools you didn't foresee. Maybe a parent even gives you a great suggestion for a new tool during one of your Parent Discussion Groups. **Whenever you create an annual plan, remember to stay flexible.** Ideas, needs, and problems will probably come up as you go, so be ready to create or find new tools for families whenever you need them.

Here's how this could look on your ministry calendar each year:

- **EVERY YEAR:** Provide a Parent Handbook and Annual Parent Survey at your Open House or in your parent resource area
- **EVERY MONTH:** Send Parent Tip Videos and helpful resources in your monthly parent emails

5. PARENT CONVERSATIONS

We're big believers that **meeting face-to-face with parents and caregivers is pretty important** — not just for them, but for you and your ministry, too. It's important for *parents* because they need to know you care about them ... and spending time listening and talking to them is a great way to communicate how much you value them. It's important for *you and your ministry* because it will give you an opportunity to evaluate how well your ministry is doing when it comes to supporting families, and then improve.

The premise of a face-to-face conversation with a parent is pretty simple: you need to be ready to have open, honest, and direct conversations with parents whenever they arise. During those conversations, you'll be asking **questions that will allow you to give feedback as well as ask for it,** so you and that parent can build a better partnership.

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know we've created four different Conversation Guides to help you navigate four very different kinds of conversations:

- The **Family Crisis** Conversation Guide will help you provide support to a family during a time of personal tragedy or trouble.
- The **Behavioral Problems** Conversation Guide will help you address a teenager's issues that concern you with their parents or caregivers.
- The **Parent Questions & Concerns** Conversation Guide will help you respond well when a parent comes to you with questions or negative feedback.
- The **Parent Recruitment** Conversation Guide will help you learn about a parent you hope to integrate into your volunteer team.

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While you can't plan ahead to put these kinds of conversations on your calendar, you can put together the resources you need (like the conversation guides Grow Curriculum provides) well in advance!

6. PARENT COMMUNICATION

When we think about connecting with parents, we often think about in-person conversations or family-focused events. But if we want to keep our vision in front of families all year long, we have to think about connecting with them in a different (and more consistent) way. That's where communication comes in. Whether you prefer to communicate with families through email, texting lists, social media posts, or phone calls, the point is that you **stay in touch with parents and caregivers consistently.**

At the beginning of each year, do a quick survey of your parents and care-givers so you can ask about their favorite ways to be supported and communicated with. Do they want emails? Text messages? A private Facebook group? Good ol' snail mail? **When you understand how parents prefer to communicate, you can create a more effective communication strategy.**

Regardless of how you decide to communicate with parents, we recommend making monthly parent emails the core of your communication plan and then using other methods (like texting, a private Facebook group, or other social media channels) to repurpose that content. We even created Grow Hubs, a communication platform for youth ministries, to help you communicate with parents more effectively.

If you're using Grow Curriculum, you know all of these resources are already provided for you — but if you're starting from scratch, here's how this could look on your ministry calendar each year:

- **EVERY YEAR:** Survey parents about their communication preferences.
- **EVERY MONTH:** Send an email that will serve as the core of your communication.
- **EVERY WEEK:** Use social media, texting, Grow Hubs, and any other method of communication families prefer to re-communicate the information you sent in the monthly email.

7. PARENT CELEBRATION

In ministry, we probably already have strategies for celebrating volunteers along with the teenagers they lead. But what about the adults parenting those students? When we celebrate parents, guardians, and caregivers for who they are and the investment they're making, we're extending the same love and care we give teens to their families!

And as a bonus, these celebration opportunities will give parents new reasons to stop by your ministry in person rather than just dropping their teen off in the parking lot. Be sure to make the most of these extra face-to-face ministry opportunities! **We suggest celebrating parents and families with something fun every month.**

When it comes to celebrating the people who are parenting the teenagers in your ministry, **there are so many small things you can do each month** to let parents know they're cared for. Every month, we recommend doing a few things:

- **SAY HAPPY BIRTHDAY:** Do you know your students' birthdays? Do you know their parents' birthdays? If you're collecting that information when new families register with your ministry, use it to celebrate them! You don't have to do anything elaborate — a text, social media shout out, or a card should do the trick. But to make sure you actually remember to do it, put a reminder on your calendar to check for upcoming birthdays on the last week of every month.
  - **When it's a parent's birthday,** send them a birthday text, email, or card from your ministry! (If you're using a texting or email service to manage your communication, these can even be pre-written, scheduled, and automated!)
  - **When it's a teenager's birthday,** send their parents a text, email, or card from your ministry with a personalized message about what you love most about their teen. Celebrating their teenager is one way you can celebrate them as parents too!

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- **CELEBRATE A HOLIDAY:** Sure, you know the obvious holidays, like Christmas and Easter and Halloween. But do you know about Unicorn Day? Or Paper Airplane Day? Each month, choose a weird holiday to have fun with parents (or help them have some fun with their families) all year long. These celebrations could include some combination of:
  - **Food,** because food is a whole love language.
  - **Fun,** because helping parents have fun with their teens or with each other is an easy way to honor them.
  - **Encouragement,** because parents need to know you see their hard work — and you're there to support them.

And, of course, if you're using Grow Curriculum, you know all of these resources are already provided for you. You just need to use them!

AN ANNUAL FAMILY STRATEGY

Okay, maybe this seems like a lot to do, but it doesn't have to be! Like you, we know that our time each week is limited, and no one has endless hours to spend on parent engagement or ministry to families. That would be nice! But it's just not reality.

But here's the good news: there is a way to structure your family mi**nistry strategy so that you do** the least amount of work for **the biggest impact.** That's what the Grow strategy is all about.

In case you missed it, check out this article about planning an entire year of ministry. It'll show you how all seven of these methods for investing in parents might look on your annual calendar, alongside an annual strategy for your:

- Teaching
- Discipleship
- Weekly Environments
- Events
- Volunteers

We've said this before, but we've got to say it again! These ideas we've talked about are nice ... but **these *ideas* only become a *strategy* when you put them on your calendar and turn them into actions.**

When you have an annual plan to turn your ideas and goals into a strategy, you'll make a much bigger impact.

So whether you use Grow Curriculum or not, **we hope you'll steal our strategy!** We developed it over lots of years of ministry, with input from lots of church leaders and lots of trial and error. Take it, tweak it, and make it your own. We really hope it helps you be just a little more awesome at what you do this year!



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