

All in the family: Don't isolate youth in 'youth programs'

by [Pamela Smith McCall](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

What kind of relationship do you want to have with your teen in five years?" Tim Tahtinen, youth leader at the United Methodist Church of Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, likes to pose that question to parents and then add, "What's your plan? I have a plan that works."

Instead of segregating youth from their parents in a "youth" program, Tahtinen says, churches should focus their energies on putting parents and youth together in family-based youth ministry. He wants to make use of the power that parents have to nurture and influence their teens toward maturity in faith.

Tahtinen's family-based program grew out of Faith Incubators (FINK), a Lutheran organization started by Rich Melheim. Melheim began Faith Incubators after a tragic experience as a youth pastor. Two young men he had pastored through high school committed suicide after their first year in college. The tragedies convinced Melheim that he had to do something differently—that the Pied Piper method of youth pastoring wasn't working anymore. He needed "more help, a better network of care. A relationship with him [as youth pastor] wasn't enough."

Melheim knew that parents were more committed to their children than anyone else could be. He decided to give a gift to parents—more time with their children to build strong relationships. If he could foster sharing between the two groups, he reasoned, he could "build commitment and relationships brick by brick."

He developed a confirmation curriculum that keeps parents and teens together, then an educational curriculum called Total Sunday School (TSS). Instead of isolating teens from the rest of the church community, TSS places each teen in a small group of people of different ages. It extends the popular concept of building relationship and accountability through small groups, but emphasizes the inclusion of young people.

FINK has sold licenses for use of its curriculum materials to 2,000 churches in Lutheran, United Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian denominations. “FINKthink” material, for example, presents itself as teaching “head to heart” instead of “head to head.” FINKthink is “community instead of classroom,” and “opening up the kid instead of the book.”

FINK parents are expected to show up and participate with their teens in everything from teen-style praise and worship to Bible studies and personal sharing to camping trips. According to youth pastor Debbie Streicher at Abiding Presence Lutheran Church in Burke, Virginia, teens don’t mind having their parents present—as long as other parents are on hand too.

Another organization that is promoting family ministry is the Youth and Family Institute at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. David Anderson, director of faith formation, says the main focus is the “wholeness of the church as the body of Christ.” The concept of family is larger than the traditional nuclear family. “No matter what the type of family, it can be included in this ministry,” Anderson emphasizes.

He and other youth leaders are basing their work on research reports from the Search Institute of Minneapolis focused on faith formation. Search has endorsed the notion that families, particularly parents, are the primary source of faith development.

Youth pastor Mark Devries of the First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, author of *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, believes that the long-term effectiveness of youth ministry depends upon families. He’s convinced that any youth program that has long-term effectiveness is doing family-based ministry “whether they know it or not.”

Devries notes that evangelicals have been slow to adopt family-based ministry, perhaps because they don’t want to return to routines that bore teens, “like sitting in pews with their parents.” Mark Watson of El Montecito Presbyterian Church in California suggests that leaders of megachurch youth ministries are reluctant to try family-based programs because they have had phenomenal short-term success with their age-specific programs and are reluctant to change that formula. Many leaders believe they must keep the teen programs filled with plenty of “teen-specific” entertainment.” But DeVries claims that when teens graduate from these youth-

centered ministries, they often graduate from God as well.

Youth leader and writer Mike Yaconelli explains that he is reluctant to adopt the family-based approach because there aren't enough parents available who place their faith high as a top priority for their children. They are in favor of Christianity, he says, as long as they think it is going to make their kid into a nice person. But as soon as it becomes genuine Christian faith, they start to worry. This generation of parents is ambitious for its children, and can't let anything get in the way of their future "success."

Rick Harmon, who works with a family-friendly youth group in Vandalia, Ohio, has fewer reservations about the family approach. The family is already fragmented," Harmon says, "and then we bring them to church, the one place we expect to bring families together, and we separate them." That does not happen in his church. Harmon tells parents, "I will never try to take your place."

At a Wednesday night youth happening called Oasis, Harmon leads a lively group of 40 teens and 16 parents as they sing songs of praise and worship, pray, listen to a straight-talking sermon, then play a game. Two youths and one adult link arms in a back-to-back circle, then lower themselves—with groans and laughter—to the floor. The winner is the first team to stand up on a count of three—without breaking the link. Later, everyone celebrates a birthday with chocolate cake.

"Having parents at Oasis makes it more fun, depending on the parents," says Ryan Garber, 13. "The parents who come are really cool," he adds with a smile.

Jordan Sharp agrees. "When you go on trips, all the parents start acting like kids. But if there's a problem, they make sure it gets solved. If people aren't getting along, they make it better."

Fred Barber, Ryan's father, says that if the kids sense acceptance from someone, even someone much older, the barriers break down. Kids can tell if you really care about them, he says, as one of them tackles him from behind.

Mark Watson at El Montecito Presbyterian is not surprised by this response. He believes that the idea that teens need to separate from parents has been modified. "Now it is recognized by psychology that if parents drop out, kids will default to a personality that is really not them. They'll find their identity in being a cool kid, in a generic stereotype identity. Parents have been taught to step back, and they need

to change that thinking.

“The easy way to create a group is to make an enemy—being against something is the easiest way to form a movement. But if the parents and church staff are working together, it makes a real difference. There’s a safeness to it.”

Youth leader Janie Tinklenberg, who invented the popular WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bracelets, agrees. “If you isolate parents from their kids, you are working against the kids,” Tinklenberg says. “They care about one thing—relationships.” And they need the affirmation from relationships with parents and other adults. Their primary relationship should be with Christ, she adds, but that will come as they mature.

David Anderson, at the Youth and Family Institute, thinks mainline and evangelical churches have all “slipped” in reducing parents to chauffeurs and time managers. He says it’s time to stop giving in to the social trend of specialization. Youth pastors are not meant to be the experts in the spiritual life of other people’s children. Youth ministries must be redesigned to help parents do the wholistic job that they must do in order to be effective.

“What are our youth ministries passing on to our youth?,” these leaders are asking. If we want to pass along the Christian faith, then parents must be reflections of that faith *and* spend time with youth. Youth leaders are saying, Let’s step back a little, and make use of what God has given us to help pass along the faith. Let’s put parents and the congregational family to work with our youth.