

The Why & How of Sticky Faith Conversations at Home by Kara & Brad - Group Magazine 201

“Kara, I need to ask for your forgiveness.” I couldn't think of anything that Linda (a single mom of two teenagers in our youth ministry) had done that might require my forgiveness. The last year had been a roller-coaster of emotions for Linda—the high she felt when her son grew like crazy in her relationship with Christ, and the low she felt when her 17-year-old daughter Kimberly got pregnant and quickly made the choice to have an abortion. This double-blow left Linda reeling.

Linda began to cry as she confessed, “For over a year, I have been mad at you for what happened to Kimberly. I have blamed you and held you responsible.”

Gulp.

I had no idea that Linda blamed me for her daughter's choices.

In response to Linda's tearful confession, I hugged her and told her that I forgave her and that I understood. I told her that it's normal for parents trying to survive their kids' killer tsunamis to wish that their youth leader could be some sort of all-powerful refuge. When we can't, parents' disappointment can turn to frustration and even blame.

Yet, as I thought about Linda over the next

few days, I got angry. Not at Linda, but at a church culture that has allowed parents to outsource the development of their own kids to me as the youth leader.

I saw Kimberly three hours every week, off and on, for four years of her life—at most. During those same three hours, I saw a few hundred other teenagers too. How did I, in those three hours, somehow end up being more responsible for Kimberly than her mom, who saw her every day for the first 17 years of her life?

...E SUBVERSIVE TRUTH ABOUT 'STICKY FAITH'

At the Fuller Youth Institute we've spent the last five years closely following 500 youth-group kids as they transition into college—we call this our “College Transition Project.” Our goal is to uncover strategies and truths that will help parents, ministry leaders, and churches to play a targeted role in building a faith that lasts in teenagers—we call it “sticky faith.” Of course, we can point to many factors in our research that are catalysts for sticky faith—but our most intriguing findings point to the role of parents and family.

Truth #1: Parents are usually the most important spiritual influence in their kids' lives. While we believe in the power of adult mentoring (we're both youth ministry volunteers at our respective churches), it's impossible to point to a sticky-faith factor that's more significant than your teenagers' parents.

Following his nationwide telephone survey of more than 3,000 teenagers and their parents, as well as 250 in-depth interviews, sociologist Dr. Christian Smith concluded: “Most teenagers and their parents may not realize it, but a lot of research in the sociology of religion suggests that the most important social influence in shaping young people's religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.” Smith more simply summarized this concept when he spoke as part of a panel discussion at Fuller Seminary: “When it comes to kids' faith, parents get what they are.”

Of course there are exceptions. Your own faith might be vastly different than your parents' faith. Plus, we've met plenty of parents whose kids end up all over the faith spectrum. But parents are more than

an initial launching pad for their kids' faith journeys—they continue to shape them as ongoing companions and guides.

Truth #2: Most parents miss out on opportunities to talk about faith with their kids. We have great respect and affection for the Search Institute, a research center based in Minneapolis that's devoted to helping make communities better places for kids. According to Search's nationwide study, just one out of eight kids (12 percent) has a regular dialogue with their mom about faith issues. The percentage is far lower (5 percent) for dads.

One more interesting stat: Approximately one out of 10 (9 percent) of teenagers participate in regular Bible reading and devotions with their family. When it comes to matters of faith, mum's usually the word at home.

Truth #3: The best discussions about faith happen not just when parents ask questions, but when parents share their own experiences, too. That relatively small group of parents who do talk with their kids about faith tend to default to rote questions that only skim the surface:

- What did you talk about in church today?
- How was youth group?
- What did you think of the sermon?

Depending on the personality and mood of the teenager, responses usually range from a grunt to “the usual.” Not very satisfying for the parent or the kid. But our research shows that asking these questions can pay off. Even more, a sticky faith is dependent on parents also sharing about their own faith. In other words, parents shouldn't merely interview their kids; they need to discuss their own faith journey and all of its ups and downs, too.

PRAGMATICS FOR PARENTS

While the average age of youth leaders is on the rise, many of you are likely not yet parents. Or if you are parents, your kids are not yet teenagers, which is true of both of us. Like you, one of the great benefits of our experience in youth ministry is the hundreds of families that we have closely observed. Regardless of your age or life stage, one of the best ways to cast a vision in your ministry

for family faith discussions is to share stories of other innovative parents—either stories of parents in your ministry or stories of parents like those below.

During the course of our research, our FYI team has been continually impressed with parents' creativity in planting that same DNA in their own families. In most cases, parents are simply weaving faith conversations through the everyday events of life (you're going to have breakfast anyway, right?).

1 Breakfast Dates—One member of our research team, Dr. Cheryl Crawford, talked with one dad of four daughters who took each of them out for a one-on-one breakfast date every week. Yes, that's four breakfast dates every week. And he did that with them throughout middle school and high school.

2 Dinner Questions—On nights our (Kara's) family has dinner together, we have a tradition of sharing our “highs” and “lows” of the day. Because of what we've learned about sticky faith, we've added a third question: How did you see God at work today?

The first time we added this question to our conversation, our seven year-old said quickly, “But I can't answer that question.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because I don't have a job.”

Once we explained that we meant, “How did you see God working today?” she realized she could be part of the discussion. Often our kids don't have an answer to this question, and that's okay. In fact, more important than the kids answering that question is that they hear Dave and I answer that question every day.

3 TV as a Catalyst—A year ago we met Eileen, a mother of two teenagers who decided that when her kids have the TV on, she will sit and watch it with them, but she's the one holding the remote. During or after scenes that show something sexual or related to drugs or alcohol—or anything controversial or provocative, for that matter—Eileen will hit the remote's pause button, ask her kids questions, and share her own thoughts. At times Eileen finds the best question to ask her kids is simply, “What should that character have done?”

We asked Eileen if her kids ever roll their eyes at her questions and commentary: “Sure, at times they do. But sometimes we get into good conversations. Like all parenting, I'm planting seeds.”

4 Subversive Haircuts—The intentional effort, time, and thought parents have to pour into conversations with their kids doesn't end when they graduate from high school. Recently we spoke with Rowena, whose college-freshman son lives on campus at a university 30 minutes from their home. When Rowena calls his cell phone, he's often headed into class or on his way to lunch so he never seems to have much time to talk. His occasional moodiness doesn't help.

But he does need regular haircuts. He likes the barber who cut his hair through high school but he doesn't have a car at school—so he can't drive himself 30 minutes back home. So this busy mom of three makes an effort every month to pick up her son at school, take him for a haircut, and then drive him back.

At first her husband objected, “This is silly. He's a college student. He can get his own haircut.” But then Rowena explained that it wasn't about the haircut. It was about the 30-minute car rides to and from the barber they had together—just the two of them. It's during the car rides that she gets the best glimpse of how her son is doing. And it was during a car ride that he mentioned that he'd started attending Campus Crusade for Christ on his campus. The 30-minute car rides give her son time to unpack his life.

5 Prayer Catalysts—If the parents of your teenagers haven't already been talking about their faith, their attempts to ask specific questions will likely feel awkward and forced. Encourage parents just getting started to try a simple question that many parents have found helpful: How can I be praying for you? Whether it's by text, email, phone, or in person, many parents have discovered that their kids' answers to this question have helped them learn more about their lives than anything else.

CAN-OPENER IDEAS FOR PARENTS

When we share with parents the importance of having good conversations with their kids, often one of them will sheepishly raise their hand and ask, "What do you do if your teenager doesn't want to talk to you?"

Every teenager goes through seasons when they don't want to talk to their parents. What varies is the length and intensity of the season. The longer and more intense the season, the more creative the parents in your ministry need to be.

One mom desperately wanted to have meaningful conversations with her 16-year-old son, but he was completely uninterested. The last thing he wanted to do was spend time talking with her. But he did love movies. So she began scanning movie trailers, studying which ones might be the most interesting for her to see with her son and, therefore, give them something to talk about afterward. When those movies hit the theaters, she would offer to take her son. He almost always accepted, and they would usually have pretty good conversations on the drive home.

We can't assume that just because kids say they don't want to talk to their parents that they really mean it. We'll never forget hearing the story of Jin, a pretty rough 17-year-old whose single dad sent her to a Christian school in hopes that it would "straighten her

out." Whether it was because her friends were going or because Jin started warming up, she signed up for the school's spring break mission trip to Guatemala. Jin ended up sitting next to Joe on the flight—he's the school's campus pastor. For the first few hours, Jin was her normal tough self. She put on her earphones and mostly ignored Joe. He tried to ask her questions about her family but Jin summarized her relationship with her dad by saying, "I asked him to leave me alone, and he has."

Throughout the mission trip, the Lord worked in Jin and she softened. By the end of the trip, she confessed to Joe through her tears, "I wish my dad had not done what I asked. I wish he hadn't left me alone."

Jin, so do we. ☹️



Kara is executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute and an assistant professor of youth and family ministry at Fuller Seminary in California. She's also a track leader at our Simply Youth Ministry Conference (youthministry.com/conference). Brad is the Institute's associate director.

Questions for thought

- Are you influencing your teen's spiritual life? If so, how?
↳ Is your influence positive or negative?
- Do you take opportunities to talk to your teen about faith?
- Do you share your own faith journey and experiences with your teens?
- Have you shared your own faith struggles?
- Can you use any of the ideas listed from other parents?
- What unique and creative ways can you find to use to reach your teen?