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## Protecting God's Children for Adults



Vol. 5 No. 1

## Parents Who Don't Quite "Get It"

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*(Required Adult Training Bulletin for January 2006)*

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One of the most frustrating situations for parents comes up when working with other parents who just don't "get it." They aren't bad or uncaring parents—they just don't seem to know that having the right equipment, being on time for school or for practice, or being picked up on time at the end of practice are very important to children.

Parents who are actively involved in the lives and activities of their children find themselves filling in the gaps in care provided by these other parents. They bring extra water to practice, stay late to make sure no child is left alone waiting for parents who can't seem to get there on time, and to offer rides or whatever else the child needs to participate.

Although these parents would continue to give generously in order to make sure the child's needs are being met, they also know that this is not the best solution. Children can see when their parents are neglecting their needs. And, eventually, they realize that they have become a charity case. In addition, in today's climate, a well-meaning parent who devotes too much attention to another parent's child can become suspect—even under the best of circumstances.

So, how do well-meaning parents support needy children and, at the same time, educate the needy children's parents about what their children need without seeming preachy or self-righteous?

As teachers, administrators, coaches, and religious educators know all too well, there is no easy answer to this question. Events for parents are not generally well attended, and those parents who come are the ones who are already actively engaged in school and other activities. This is true for both churches and public and private schools and other organizations.

In addition to having tools for creating effective conversations with parents about what's missing in their participation with their child, it is important to find a way to engage the parents from the beginning. One way to start the process is by inviting parents to come together to talk about issues and to brainstorm policies and solutions. This can lay the groundwork for any future conversations about these issues.

There are certain elements that can impact the effectiveness of a gathering of parents and children and lay the foundation for a fruitful relationship.

#### **Come together for a meal or a performance from the children.**

Food shared at a community event, or performances by the children are most likely to assure that parents and other members of the family attend the event. Getting them there is the first step to engaging and educating them. Potluck suppers, pizza parties, and spaghetti dinners are great ways to bring families and communities together.

#### **Assign families to tables.**

Take the time to make sure that families get to know each other. Assign tables so that families who are actively participating in school or church activities share tables with new families or those who seem to have trouble getting it right.

#### **Set up table discussions for dinner.**

Create some non-threatening questions for discussion that invite parents and children to participate. For example, ask when is the best time to get homework done or which after-school snacks are best, and let everyone have his or her say on the matter.

#### **After the meal, provide other activities and babysitting for the children.**

Set up a supervised area in which to show a video to the children or set up games for them to play. Provide quality babysitting services for younger children so that parents have time to discuss some of the issues that need resolution. These activities should be planned to last for no more than one hour.

### **Instruction and discussion with parents.**

Use the time to provide parents with important information about the school or church activities and to engage parents in interactive discussions to address relevant issues that might arise over the course of the child's participation in the activities or programs. For example, a facilitator should set up the format for discussion by asking each table to select a spokesperson that will report on the table's discussion and suggestions. Then he or she should pass around a question box and each table should choose one question. Questions in the box should include all the issues that are of concern to parents, such as:

- "How important is it to be on time?"
- "Besides uniforms, shoes and sports equipment, what should every child have at practice and games?"
- "How do we deal with parents who consistently arrive late to pick up children?"
- "What is the most important thing about this activity as far as the children are concerned?"

**Make sure the questions are worded in a non-threatening way while encouraging the parents to get to the heart of the matter and deal with some difficult situations that arise.**

Each table should draw a question out of the box and discuss it for 10 to 15 minutes. At the end of the discussion, each spokesperson shares the question discussed and the conclusions drawn by the discussion. If time allows and there are questions yet to be discussed, continue the activity one more time.

### **Collect the children and go home.**

After no more than one hour of instruction and discussion among the parents, complete the evening and send everyone home.

### **Bottom line:**

A meeting of this type lays the foundation for how the program, activity or school year will be successful. In the wake of this discussion, many parents will do a better job of supporting their children in activities and programs. After participating in the discussions, they will realize that there are some gaps in the care they provide for their children and they will find ways to fill the gaps. However if, from time to time, they fall back into old patterns, the meeting can be used as a context for having a conversation that makes a difference.

We realize that no "meeting" is going to provide all the answers to the problem of parents who just don't "get it." However, it is a great way to start the conversation in a non-threatening atmosphere that allows parents to come together and get to know each other. Next month, in part two, we will talk about what to do when old patterns of behavior show up. We will look at

how to have that conversation that “makes a difference” without causing upset or without feeling or appearing arrogant or self-righteous.

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**1) In the community meeting and group discussion format suggested in this month's training bulletin, what is the ultimate objective of the meeting?**

- A)  To get 100 percent of participating children to bring their parents to the meeting to ensure that all parents will follow all the rules all the time.
- B)  To get neglectful parents together with caring parents so that, hopefully, some of the good habits of the caring parents will "rub off" on the neglectful parents.
- C)  To have a group discussion before the "season" begins so you can identify the neglectful parents based on their responses during the group discussion, know who they are from the very beginning, and be better prepared to deal with them in the future.
- D)  To start the conversation about appropriate support of children in their activities in a non-threatening atmosphere that allows parents to come together and get to know each other and to provide a context for having any necessary future conversations that may make a difference.