



*Educating
Families*

*Where Spiritual
Formation Happens*



by | Jim Kast-Keat

At its worst a student ministry is a bad substitute for a spiritual babysitter, keeping kids out of trouble by trapping them in a room and hoping for something good to rub off.

At its best a student ministry empowers teenagers to live the best kinds of lives—the lives God made us to live—giving them the starting points they need to change, not only their own lives, but also the whole world around them.

Most of us find ourselves somewhere in between, or at least in constant motion toward the latter and away from the former. *But how do we really move our ministries and students in this direction? Better programs? Louder music? Smaller small groups? In what direction and capacity do we need to put our energies to reach this ideal of better students making a better world? Where does this kind of formation happen?*

The Biggest Shortcoming of “The Program”

A program’s biggest shortcoming is that it ends.

Students come when we tell them to (and sometimes when we don’t), and then they leave (usually), hopefully remembering all the meaningful things we said and they experienced.

I watch students come on a Sunday morning, give them my standard high fives, and watch as they find their small group leaders and other friends. And then a short 75 minutes later, I watch it all end.

Our programs will always end. Whether it’s each night at the end of a program or event, or when a student has moved on and is too old to attend youth group anymore. Our programming only lasts a few years for our students—then their lives continue on without us. So the education of youth needs to extend beyond our programming.

How can the formation that happens once a week continue the other six days?

- ★ Create a “program to go”—something you give students as they leave each week containing a similar structure to your weekly program (segment titles, teaching themes, etc.) and similar content, helping them take concepts and ideas even further on their own.
- ★ Set up a YouTube channel each week for students to create their own videos, sharing their thoughts on the teaching, songs, and other experiences they had together at the weekly program. (You could even show some of their videos the following week.)

Focus on What’s Already There

While students are the “cast members” for our programs, families are the cast members for our students’ lives. As a youth pastor, it’s easy for me to get to know students’ names and relate to their stories, but it often takes a bit more work to get to know the parents who named them, who live with them, and who are (or should be) the main supporting actors and actresses in their stories.

After all, our students often leave one program (ours) for the next (college; work life), but their families are always there. We often put so much energy into a thing that exists for only a short time in their lives; and all the while something bigger, more present, more constant, and permanent has already existed.

During my first church position, most of our students attended another church’s Sunday morning service. I only knew these kids because they came to my program on Tuesday nights. And in a small town, most of them walked from place to place (meaning I rarely saw their parents).

I’d see one student, Billy, two or three times a week, and never once see his parents. If I were to see Billy at the mall I might ask myself, “Who are those two taller versions of Billy walking on either side of him?” I knew so much about him, his dreams, and his life, but I never met the people who (should) know him most, cultivate his dreams, and make up most of his life.

Now I make it my goal to know not only students, but also their parents and their entire families. I even give high-fives to the whole family! I don’t only e-mail students; I e-mail parents, too. (You’d be surprised how many you can find on Facebook!) And when I have the chance to talk with parents at the beginning or end of our program, I take it. When they invite me over for dinner, I say “yes.”

Why? Because my programs will never outlast my students’ families.

Do you know the parents of your students or just your students?

- ★ If you ever drive your students home from events, don’t just drop them off and drive away (after you’ve seen them make it safely in the front door). Walk to the front doors with them and say hello to their parents and the rest of their families. These are excellent moments to connect further with the entire family, especially the parents.
- ★ Send your students’ parents personal e-mails (mass mailings are great, but sometimes having only one name after the word “To:” is a bit more meaningful). Ask them specific questions about their sons or daughters. I bet they love them even more than you do!

The Parents and the Programs

For some parents, student ministry programs are simply one more drop-off and pick-up activity for their sons or daughters. But for others it’s part of a longer and larger line upon which they journey with their children, helping their formation however they can. Some parents just want safe places for their kids; others want those safe places *with them*.

While I’ll always have parents of the former kind, I try and create programs that help parents become more and more like the latter.

Looking back at my time working for my first church, I can see how I may have valued parents...but my programs didn’t. The parents’ biggest (and only) roles were transporting their sons or daughters to and from events—a chauffeur service. I created a culture of dropping off and picking up.

Now we hold special “family-style” gatherings, helping our students and their families see themselves as unique worshiping communities. We begin and end each year with a special parent-day program, inviting parents to reside on the same page as their sons and daughters. We do our best to create programs that work *with* parents as part of their larger journeys together as families.

How do you invite parents into your programs?

- ★ Send out a weekly e-mail to your parents, but include more than just dates, times, and costs of events. Share with them what you’ll be teaching and what their sons or daughters will experience that coming week. Give them questions to ask their sons or daughters or activities to do together, taking the things you introduced at youth group even further and deeper in their formation and creating a culture where the program is only the beginning of an even larger and longer conversation.
- ★ Hold a special “study hall” for parents and students together. Not only will this create space to teach integral aspects of faith and development to students, but to parents also.

Prioritizing the First and Second Voice

One night after leading a student band practice, I was driving home Brad, a sixth grader. Brad has one older brother who he says is hilarious and always dreaming up crazy ideas (as all older brothers appear) and one younger sister who’s annoying in every possible way (as all younger sisters are). As we neared his house Brad began talking about being the middle child and already feeling the pressure to measure up to his older brother.

“Will I be funny like him? Will I have as many friends as him?” I looked at him and said, “Brad, the only thing you ever need to be is Brad.” He thought about it for a moment and then said, “I like that. Just be Brad.”

What I said to Brad was nothing new. It was simply a second voice, affirming and giving new resonance to the first voice of his parents. The strength of a program, a small group, and any youth pastor is the ability to be a second voice. Instead of saying everything fresh, they support what parents are already saying. In this way, coffee shops, car rides, and any time between youth pastors and students become sacred moments to say the things students have been hearing all along, only in new ways—ways that hopefully will help the words from both the first voice (parents) and the second (us) sink in even deeper and truer.

Are you aware of and intentional with your “second voice” in students’ lives?

- ★ Hold a parent forum. Create space to listen to the first voice students hear. Listen to what they say, and then talk to your students as a second voice, affirming and giving new resonance to the first.
- ★ Ask your parents, “If I could tell your son or daughter one thing, what would you want it to be?” Then do it with words, actions, and shared experiences.

Who’s Empowering Whom?

While I’ll always do everything possible to create the best possible programs and experiences for students, all of it exists as a first step and trajectory toward empowering the formation and discipleship of students to continue with parents and families.

I can create the best possible programs, equip small group leaders to journey with students, and spend countless hours eating ice cream, drinking coffee, and playing four square with students, but if I overlook parents I miss the largest chunk of students’ lives. Programs end; small groups disintegrate; but families remain.

Therefore the family, led by parents, should be the disciple-making unit. Our programming should support and empower parents (instead of just the other way around). What are you doing to empower parents in their sons’ or daughters’ formation and discipleship?

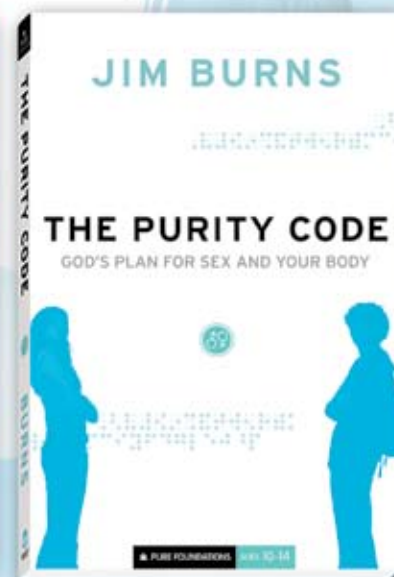
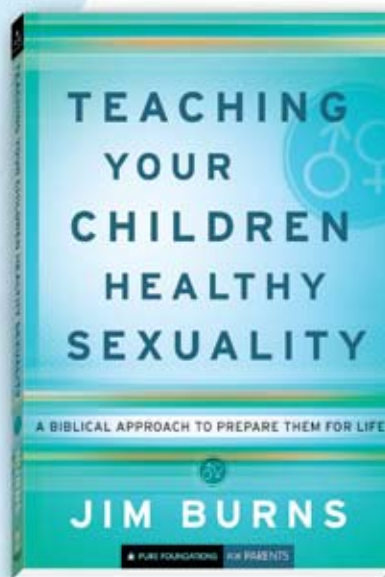
How are you equipping families to live the best kind of lives together?

- ★ Invite parents on your team. Let them help plan and implement the ideas and have them tell you if and how they’re working.
- ★ Create events just for parents. And let parents speak to and teach one another. Whether or not you feel you can (or should) teach them how to be the best kind of parents, you can create space for them to discover this for themselves. 🌱

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