

SUMMARY: Connect

Key points to remember:

1. Connection is when we intentionally cultivate human relationships that can lead everyone closer to Christ.
2. Connection feels like being seen, known, and loved... like coming home.
3. For modern families, connection (within their own family and with other families) is both something they already value and need.
4. Jesus Himself demonstrated that connection is the first, and also constant part of the process of making disciples. Discipleship doesn't happen without encountering Jesus, and encountering Jesus rarely happens without real human connection.
5. Having connection builds trust, and gives us space and permission to invite and accompany others closer to Jesus.

Practical ideas to help parish leaders and staff connect with parents and families:

In general, parents don't want to do anything that feels like they've wasted their time. Offering something they already value (time together with their kids, a meal, service experience, etc.) helps them know that we're trying to honor their time and offer them something valuable.

1. **Family-Friendly Liturgies & Activities:** Ensure liturgies and activities are designed with families in mind, focusing on being inclusive and accessible for all members.
 - a. Homilies and reflections geared toward kids, tweens, teens, and families (in content and length) with a clear take-away
 - b. Music that is meaningful and singable, perhaps even available on Spotify and iTunes so they can listen and pray with it at home, too
 - c. Keeping prayer times short enough to maintain attention spans, but long enough to be meaningful
2. **Get To Know Your Families:**
 - a. As part of registration, ask parents about their family dynamics and how they connect faith with their family life.
 - b. Ask about secular family interests, try to "connect" those with similar interests
 - c. Ask parents specific questions about their children's strengths, fears, and needs, and conduct mid-program evaluations to gather feedback and improve offerings.
 - d. Consider interviewing families, either one at a time or several at a time over a meal, to get to know them personally and develop rapport
3. **Personal Follow-up:**
 - a. Reach out personally when they miss a session and extend grace

- b. Always follow up on concerns, questions, offers to help

4. Efficient Use of Time:

- a. Avoid using on-campus time for tasks that could be handled virtually (e.g., emails, explainer videos).
- b. Ensure meetings are productive by relegating procedural information to other formats.

5. Transparent Communication:

- a. Explain the rationale behind your approach to parents, that you desire their families to experience life-giving, life-changing faith, and acknowledge that while things may not be perfect, improvements are ongoing.
- b. Welcome feedback and partnership.
- c. Clearly and consistently communicate dates/ details/ expectations/ offerings

6. Help Parents Feel “Seen”:

- a. Provide name badges for parents to facilitate connections with staff and volunteers, and to reinforce that the activity is for them as well as their children.
- b. Offer adult snacks/ beverages during community building events so that parents feel “seen”
- c. Be cognizant of local school calendars and schedule accordingly

7. Praise and Flexibility:

- a. Regularly praise children to their parents
- b. Be flexible in your approach, and maintain eye contact to foster engagement.

8. Help Families Pray Together

- a. offering intercessory prayer as a family is powerful.
- b. Offering tactile prayer (writing down petitions, gratitude lists, lighting candles, etc.) helps to engage kids of all ages
- c. Use lighting to help set a mood for a sacred space

9. Respecting Family Challenges:

- a. Be sensitive to the specific challenges families face, including racial or cultural dynamics, and engage in meaningful, empathetic conversations.
- b. Offer options as much as possible

10. Integration and Interaction:

- a. Look for opportunities to integrate ministries, maximize downtime for interactions, and actively listen to parents’ needs.

11. Scheduling and Content:

- a. Develop schedules that acknowledge the demands of busy family life, offer age-appropriate content, and create easy, family-friendly environments. For

example, offer a meal as part of the program, don't try to do too much in one event, make sure there's an option that recognizes young children's early bedtime, offer prayer experiences that allow kids to move and wiggle, etc.

12. Welcoming Environment:

- a. Ensure all families feel welcomed, with a special focus on providing child care and programming for younger families.
- b. Explicitly welcome kids and families from the front and on signage.
 - i. Saying (and meaning) things like, "you're allowed to get up and move, if you need to."
 - ii. Offering comfortable chairs in the narthex for families who might choose to spend some time there with a fussy or busy child
 - iii. Offering board books and faith-themed coloring pages for small children
- c. Provide things like reflection pages for older children and adults and coloring pages for smaller children as a way for everyone to process what they're hearing and then share that with each other

13. Create Parent Advisory Team:

- a. invite parents from all over the spectrum of faith to offer suggestions and guidance. This helps parents/ families in general to feel represented, and helps parish leaders to have a finger on the pulse of real families in their parish.
- b. Can meet with regularity or as needed, or even just as a sounding board here and there

Practical ideas to help family members connect with one another, and families to connect with other families:

1. Catechesis & Small Groups:

- a. Offer catechesis in peer groups instead of family groups sometimes, so that everyone can learn, process, and share in developmentally appropriate ways.
- b. Offer a short, large group teaching and then break to peer groups to process

2. Offer Meaningful Experiences: Parents already value spending time with their kids.

Create opportunities for them to do *meaningful* things together and facilitate conversations to help them process those experiences together.

- a. Do not assume that parents feel competent or comfortable talking about faith with their kids; help them do that by facilitating from the front.
- b. Prayer, fun, and service are great ways to offer this. Not everything has to be a "lesson;" they'll learn from praying, playing, and serving, too.

- c. Pray and play events: order pizza and have families bring sides/ desserts if they can. Play trivia or lawn games or minute-to-win-it, and afterward teach everyone and then lead them in a particular prayer practice: the Rosary after writing down specific family intentions for each decade; a family Litany of Saints with family-favorite Saints included; we did something about the Sacred Heart once; lectio divina, etc.

3. Be Intentional About How Engagement is Offered:

- a. Offer service and community building events and “staff” them with people who love Jesus, desire to be part of the mission, and are trained to help cultivate connection.
- b. Place families/ parents/ children/ young people into consistent small groups with consistent facilitators/ mentors/ catechists so that they can build relationships over time
 - i. Consider using information you know about the families to place them together -- both of these families are transplants from other states, all three of these families just had babies, etc.
- c. Example: Develop parish "Houses" based on values for families to build connections through friendly competition.

4. Interactive & Inclusive Activities:

- a. Organize fun, community-building activities such as bowling, mini-golf, and service projects, where people can interact, work together, and discover shared interests.
- b. Offer opportunities for peer ministers to develop intentional relationships.

5. Service:

- a. Modern families already value service. Incorporate service experiences for families to do together, and peer groups to do together, such as holiday gift-giving for the homebound, cleaning the church, or baking cookies for shelters. Encourage family involvement in these projects to connect with the broader community.
- b. MEANINGFUL service is all about context: not just doing a project, but helping participants understand who is being served, and what this service has to do with the love of Jesus.
 - i. We love (Him and others) because He first loved us, and families win when we help them connect those dots through explicit reflection facilitated from the front both before and after the service experience.
 - ii. Praying together as part of a service experience invites the Lord to move in hearts, and models for participants that serving others really is part of the way we live in relationship with the Lord.

6. Parish Events & Social Offerings:

- a. Create spaces for connection through social gatherings like food truck nights, community Christmas tree lightings, and pre-dance dinners.
- b. Identify authentically warm, interpersonally-intelligent disciples to serve as greeters and minglers to help people feel included.

7. Creative Intergenerational Catechesis:

- a. Engage families in creative modes of catechesis like scavenger hunts, that encourage parents and children to work and learn together.

8. Monthly Activities & Rituals:

- a. Host monthly playdates, Masses by grade, parish clean-up days, liturgical celebrations to foster community and involvement.
- b. These events can be for faith formation families and the entire parish family/ intergenerational community