

Sticky Faith: What Can Parents Do To Help Teenagers Have Faith That Lasts

Dr. Kara Powell, Huffington Post-Religion March 7, 2013

Imagine a photo of high school seniors who have been attending a local church in your community. Now take a red marker and place an "X" over almost half of their faces. According to a handful of research studies, those students with a red "X" represent the almost 50 percent of youth group graduates who drift from God and from the church after high school. As a parent or grandparent, what can you do to help teenagers have faith that lasts?

For six years, a team of faculty and graduate students from Fuller Seminary conducted the College Transition Project to find that answer. Conducted by the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), the project included qualitative and longitudinal quantitative studies of 500 Christian youth group members during the first three years of college following high school graduation. The data, as described in a new book called "Sticky Faith" authored by myself and Dr. Chap Clark, suggests that parents:

- 1. Share verbally about their own faith journeys.** Stop lecturing your kids or interviewing them; instead, share organically about your own faith. Use time in the car, recent current events, or dinner discussions as a chance to share how your own faith is growing, or ways that your faith impacts your everyday life. Include both a sense of your present religious experiences and insights as well as highlights of your faith journey in the past.
- 2. Ask their children who they will turn to when they have doubts.** Doubt in and of itself isn't toxic; it's unexpressed doubt that turns toxic. One of the repeated themes in the research was the importance of parents giving their kids space to wrestle with tough faith questions until they pinned down their own answers. Giving permission for independent thought leads to stickier faith.
- 3. Connect their sons and daughters to at least five caring adults.** Kids need to develop a strong personal identity for faith to stick and community helps do just that. When kids know specific adults who are "on their team," they have a web of support to catch them when they fall and keep them connected to faith for the long haul. Using the scaffolding of existing relationships with extended family, neighbors, friends, coaches and teachers, build a 5:1 (or 7:1, or 10:1, or whatever you determine works best for your family) sticky web adult to child ratio for mentoring your kids. Other adults are often able to speak to them in ways you cannot as the parent.
- 4. Reinforce that their faith is bigger than any moral failure or mistake.** The students in the Sticky Faith study tended to view their faith as a list of behaviors, akin to what Dallas Willard calls the "gospel of sin management." Tragically, when students with that view of their faith fail, their feelings of guilt cause them to run from their faith and the church, just when they need them the most. A faith that sticks is one that is based not primarily on behaviors, but on inner life change.
- 5. Talk to high school juniors and seniors now about life after college.** Only one in seven youth group graduates felt their faith was ready for what they faced after high school. As part of practical discussions on issues such as managing money and time, help high school upperclassmen plan a schedule that will include church attendance. 40 percent of college freshmen report difficulty finding a church, so help them make the connection before arrival for a smoother and stickier transition. It's never too early to start building Sticky Faith in your kids.

I am a mother of three and have been serving teenagers in youth ministry for 25 years, but the results of the study have changed the way I view my role as a parent. I am a much better parent because of our research. Every day I interact and talk with my kids differently because of what our team has learned. As we're seeing in families and churches nationwide, it is possible to create a Sticky Faith in teenagers that launches them on a lifelong trajectory of faith and service.