

Family Devotions for ‘Deer in the Headlights’ Parents

by Dr. Dean Blevins



I teach family ministry at a seminary and occasionally in a local church. Often when I meet with parents to talk about their family’s journey together in discipleship, I get a “deer in the headlights” look of panic at the mention of family devotions. Sometimes I catch them checking for a quick, inconspicuous way to the door. Other parents come off so inflexible in their practices that they appear to not want to learn anything new for fear they will discover some deficiency in their devotional principles. Whether the desire is to run for the door or build a wall of defensiveness, the reaction is really the same – a deep panic in regard to the topic at hand.

Why do parents often melt into their chairs?

Why do parents often melt into their chairs when confronted with the question of parental responsibility in nurturing the spiritual lives of their children or spouse? Disobedience? Laziness? Detachment? Are parents in our churches really so distracted that they do not care about the spiritual health of their children? Are adults so self-absorbed that the very person they have pledged their life to in marriage doesn’t matter?

I don’t think so. Some of the people most concerned about this topic and about their family’s devotional life often serve as Sunday School teachers and workers in the church. Yes, they care about other people’s children; so why do these leaders panic when it comes to their own children? Could it be that the church has actually failed them in the way we talk about and model discipleship?

Let’s be honest. Sunday School teachers and pastors in North American churches often risk arguing that “we” have the responsibility to raise children through our ministries. For generations, we have brought children to church by bus and by car. We then deposit kids in Sunday School classes, children’s church, and youth group, expecting the church do the real work of discipleship. Today, suddenly the very children who arrived in the bus ministry find themselves as parents who are being told they need to be raising their kids through family devotions, often with no guidelines on what those practices look like. No wonder they panic.

How can we help parents overcome the panic?

So, how can we help parents overcome the panic? God desires that church and family work together through the Holy Spirit to model Christlikeness throughout our lives. The best way to start requires building on our strengths – both in the family and through the church. We need to help families identify first what they are doing well, help them celebrate what God is accomplishing, then determine what they need to add and design a plan that is “doable” for a family. Starting with this approach focuses on the strengths, rather than deficits within families.

Similarly, we can find places in the church where families grow in their faith through intergenerational living and learning through worship, meals, ministry, and intergenerational classes. We can then discern other

opportunities and resources that both support parents and model discipleship in and among families. Using this approach allows families and congregations, parents, and teachers an opportunity to work together in connecting with each other and even with others in their communities.

Both parents and congregations need to move beyond a “deer in the headlights” mentality when thinking about ministry to and through families. Starting with strengths and finding out where God is already working provides an important first step to a longer journey of resourcing families as they join together in discipleship.

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