

Parenting as a Church Leader Watch Party Handbook

Some notes to guide you
through the sessions

Session 1: Connected

Session 2: Prioritised

Session 3: Covered

Session 4: Empowered

Session 1: Connected

Introduction

While there are many blessings of being a church leader family, you can also fear that your children's faith will be damaged and they may turn away from God. It is of course true that your children will be impacted and shaped by your vocation (just as all children are impacted and shaped by their parents' lives); your job, therefore, is to help your children negotiate your family's unique circumstances well.

Research from the Barna group shows that church leaders' children are no more likely to walk away from faith than other people's children. When they do walk away, though, it's for particular reasons, and so during this watch party, you will be thinking precisely about those reasons so you can work out how to manage them well.

All children go on their own journeys of faith and there are no guarantees; but what you are called to do is simply to do the best you can.

The problem: the dance of hats

You have two hats: a church leader hat and a parent hat. The problem is that in ministry, the two roles often seem to coincide. You can struggle to know which hat you are wearing at particular time; you can feel the stress of trying to wear the right hat at the right time and of trying to work out what is the correct balance of hats. You can feel like you are being pulled in opposite directions. But actually, you aren't two different people: you are one person who does both things at the same time, and you can do this because God has called you to both ministry and parenthood.

The Parenting as a Church Leader Watch Party will equip you to be one person, fulfilling your call to be a parent helping your kids flourish while leading a church at the same time.

Part 1: the importance of connection

Our children need to feel fully connected with you. Think about a novice skydiver on their first flight in tandem with an experienced instructor. The thing that makes the novice feel safe is knowing that they are tightly and fully connected to the instructor, because he knows how to make everything work properly. The novice can relax on the adventure knowing they are fully connected to the instructor.

As church leaders you are on the great adventure of ministry and our children come with you. What will help them get through the adventure well is a strong connection with you, because everything flows through connection. Care for the Family's research found that one of the main factors in whether a child picks up their parent's faith is how strong their connection is to their parent.

You therefore need to figure out what helps our children feel connected to you so you can help them flourish through some tough stuff. That includes building connection not just in the happy times but in the actual midst of it all. You need to be the consistent, loving, connected parents all the time.

How do you build connection?

Being present isn't necessarily being connected. You need to build connection, just like you do already with our friends. Ask yourself: are you proactively building connection or are you just around each other right now?

Part 2: Growing connection in the midst of ministry

Develop a language of connection

One of the most powerful things you can do is to build a language of connection with our children so they are able to recognise what they are feeling and have the ability to say you've been really busy this week and I'm feeling disconnected from you because I'm missing our giggle time together. Poor behaviour is often because children feel disconnected but don't know how to remedy that.

Discover what language works for you (eg 'connected', 'velcro', 'lego'd'). Once they have that language you can use it to problem solve how they are feeling.

Gary Chapman's love languages

Identifying which love languages your children have helps you proactively build connection with each one separately. Remember that children's gifts do change!

The love languages are:

- Quality time
- Acts of service
- Gifts
- Words of affirmation
- Touch

Our aim is to create a steady flow of connection then your kids never stop feeling connected to you, even when you are busy with your job.

Some ideas for each love language:

Quality time

Acts of service

Gifts

Words of affirmation

Touch

Coaching our kids through the complexity of church

When you have built a steady stream of connection with our children, it means that you can coach them through the tricky sides of church well. Research suggest the number one cause of church leaders' children walking away from church is their parents not talking about church conflict, because if children are left on their own to figure things out church begins to feel unsafe. If you don't talk about it, your children are left unconnected to the one person who can make sense of it for them.

There are two tools you can use to help you coach children through the tricky areas of church.

Creating Windows

Your kids need windows into what ministry life is like for you and how you manage the tough stuff. Then they can see how to manage it for themselves.

Framing.

Our kids need you to frame, to explain, what's going on so they understand it well and they can understand what's really going on and how you understand it.

Session 2: Prioritised

Introduction

The second thing our children need to flourish is that they need to feel prioritised: valued, important and safe and secure in your affection and love. This involves balancing the different needs of your congregation and your family.

Five things to help our children feel prioritised

1. Build in transitions

One of the main things church leaders' children struggle with is feeling that even though their parent is physically present, they don't have the whole of you because your mind is still on work. Find ways to build in transition times, or habits, that help you shift your mindset, so when you are 'at home' you can be fully present for your children.

2. Quality of conversation

Research shows ('Bored and Brilliant' by Manoush Zomorodi) that if a phone is in the room, it affects the quality of the conversation that takes place. This is partly because if we take a moment to check a text or answer an email, our brain then takes up to 20 minutes to refocus fully. Even if a phone is switched off, it is distracting because as long as it is there, everyone is aware that it is a potential interruption.

3. The stress of flexibility

While being a church leader can mean we have the flexibility to adjust our schedule to turn up at school or take our child out for lunch, our children also feel the stress of that flexibility. To them it may feel that at any point you might be called away from them because the church is calling. Even if that doesn't happen often, the unpredictable hours can feel like you are being constantly pulled away.

4. The competition of needs

Church leaders' children can conclude that because you have a large group of people to look after, many of whom have serious needs, their need to see you, to play with you, just to hang out with you is insignificant in comparison. They can internalise that as meaning 'I'm not as important as the church' or they can become resentful because it becomes about the rivalry of my needs vs the church's needs and they lose. They may also feel that they are in direct competition with God for your time.

5. Working from home

Working from home is hard! We need to create good boundaries and structures so our children are able to manage the tension of us unreachable in another room.

Questions Rachel answered

I'm a curate and really don't have much say in what my day looks like. I love the idea of creating a culture of flexibility in my family, but I don't see how I can do that?

We have a 12 year old and build in times to spend with him – but they're never the times he wants to spend with us! Instead he always wants time when we're not free.

When I'm leading under 5s my toddler always wants to climb on my knee and gets upset when I say no.

As a youth minister, how can I avoid a competition of needs when I'm saying to my child I'm going out to help other children, sometimes even in their school?

My teenage daughter is always so generous in allowing me to minister, she always insists the job comes first and never objects to her time with me being taken away – but I’m not comfortable with this. What can I do?

When I’m leading stuff at church with children, I never pick my own kids for anything and find the discipline thing tricky. How can I be fair to my children in this situation?

We have three kids. How do you manage to make sure each one of them feels prioritised?

Session 3: Covered

Introduction

Church leaders' children are very exposed. It's like they have a massive spotlight on them when they are in church. The congregation's love and interest can mean they feel like everyone's watching them and has an opinion. But there are things we can do to cover them, to protect them from that scrutiny, giving them security in their private lives and the choice to make relationships on their own terms, thus allowing them to be a child in the congregation rather than the church leader's child.

Part 1: protecting our children from exposure

When we meet new people, we gradually reveal information and get to know each other before deciding what sort of relationship we want with them. Because your children come attached to you, they don't get a chance to build relationships with congregation members from scratch, and they don't have control over the information that is shared about them. We want to cover them, guard them from the spotlight, so they are free to make and build healthy, trusting relationships.

- Think about how much information you give out about your children from the front, on the church's website and on social media

- Think about how you answer questions about your child's personal life

- Don't tell stories about your children in sermons!

Part 2: navigating confidentiality

As church leaders we hold a lot of confidential information which our children may overhear or find out about. Children can't manage the tension of hearing secrets but not knowing what to do with that information and may not be able to keep the secret. Hearing confidential information about people they know – without necessarily having all the details – can adversely affect how they view the individuals as well as church.

- Be strategic about debriefs

- Guard people's privacy and be wise about how you expose your children to information
- Lay the groundwork for how you deal with other people's information
- Anonymise your stories
- When they have confidential information, follow up with them so they don't feel burdened by it

Part 3: congregational expectations

Whether we know it or not, the congregation will have expectations of church leaders' children. There are things we can do to help your child not feel burdened by these expectations.

- Constantly talk about permission and give children permission from you just to be a kid in church

- Be aware of you so your responses are steady

- Remember you don't have to be the perfect parent

Questions Rachel answered

We've got all sorts of people in and out of our house a lot: meetings, people calling round. How do we keep our 2 year old and our 4 year old feeling safe at home?

Our five year old son likes wearing dresses and does wear them to church. The congregation have been very good, but I'm worried that if he goes back to wearing trousers there'll be comments. How can I protect him when what he's doing is so visible?

I love the idea of the village raising the child, but it can be tricky when the congregation want to jump in and help us parent our child. It can feel very critical, we feel very judged; it feels like we are in a giant spotlight.

We know that the congregation will want to talk to our kids more than the other kids. Do you have a good way for us to help protect them from lots of conversations they don't really want?

In terms of congregational expectations, is it helpful for my children to be involved in serving in church?

Session 4: Empowered

Introduction

We long for our kids to find their own deep relationship with God. When we empower our children to go on their unique faith journey we free them to have their own adventure with God. The tools taught in the first three sessions won't only help them flourish in church but will also help preserve their normal faith journey as an ordinary member of the church.

Part 1: helping our children meet and know God in everyday life

Embrace being a parent: you have thousands of hours a year with them, rather than the two hundred or so hours they spend in church. God set up children's discipleship to have family at its core. It's not about more church: it's simply sharing your life with God with them and journeying alongside them as they work things out for themselves. For simple tools to help you do this, check out parentingforfaith.org/tools.

Part 2: coaching our children to engage with church

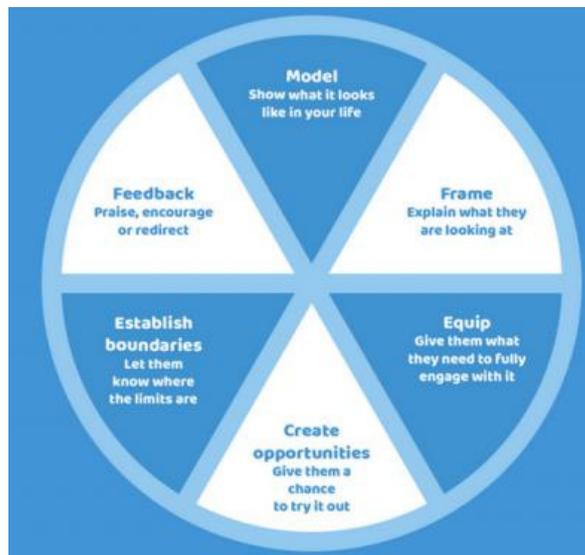
Our children's relationship with church is important. Church isn't the centre of their discipleship but how they engage with it is important because it is an extension of their discipleship.

- When your children leave home what do you want them to feel about church?

The five values of church:

- Drawing near to God
- Radically loving
- Spurring each other on
- Finding purpose as part of the body of Christ
- Pursuing the Spirit

When a child isn't engaging with church, you can explore what they are struggling with and help them explore other ways to engage by using a tool called the six-stage circle, which helps you proactively disciple your children in an intuitive way.



1. Model
2. Frame
3. Equip
4. Create opportunities
5. Establish boundaries
6. Feedback

Problem solve as a parent first, not as a church leader: don't change your church to suit your child, but problem solve as any parent would.

Part 3: building our children into the body of Christ

- Start with their passion
- Treat them like a congregation member
- Give leaders permission to lead your children

Questions Rachel answered

What do you do when you have to drag your kids along every week because they have no choice, and they're interested and questioning but say they don't believe?

We lead a small church where there are no other leaders and very few children and our son is the oldest by quite a bit. So at the moment youth group's in our lounge, with us leading it, and we've talked with him about how this isn't ideal, it's just what it is for the moment. We're aware that our kids being at church may well be a catalyst for other families to join, but we also don't want his journey to be negatively affected so we have said that if there's a youth group elsewhere he can join it.

I know that some people advise that it's good to make your kids go to church, to create a family culture of going regardless of what they think. But if your kid's 14 and says they really hate church, is this the best thing to do?

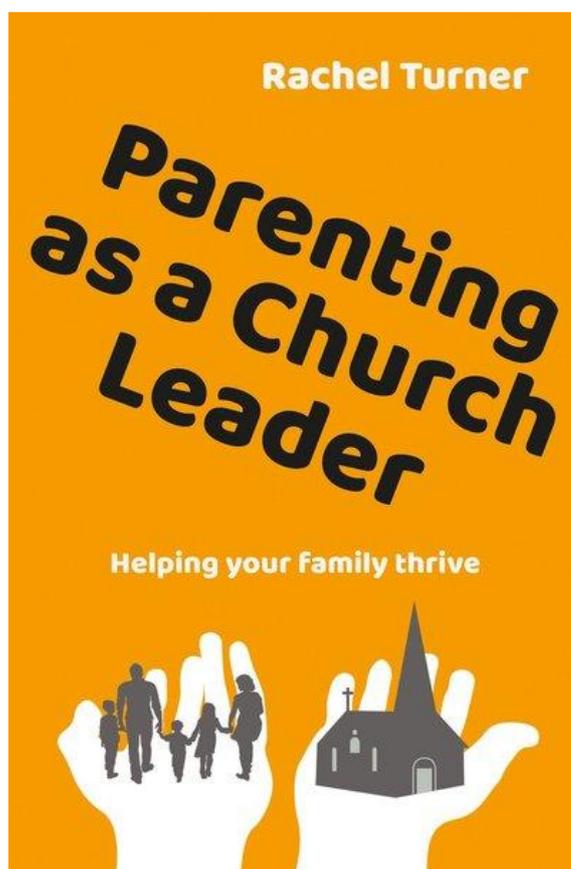
We're in a little church, the kids only get me or my husband teaching them as I lead services and he does all the Sunday school. We're finding it hard to transition my 13 year old to stay in church because he says it's for adults and so he's staying out with the kids even though he's far too old for it.

How much do you protect your children when you're having a really really bad day at church?

Thanks for joining us

We hope and pray these sessions have been useful to you.

To explore further, you can buy the book *Parenting as a Church Leader* by Rachel Turner, available from BRF online. We also have a section on our website dedicated to supporting you in parenting as a church leader, check it out at parentingforfaith.org/topics/parenting-church-leader.



If you, or your church, would like to donate to Parenting for Faith, you can do that at brf.org.uk/donate-parenting-faith. We are so grateful for each and every contribution, which enable us to keep producing resources like this watch party, and making them freely available.

We look forward to connecting with you again soon.