

CHAPTER 5

TIME

The Way Children's Ministry Leaders Spend Our Time Does Not Match Our Desired Objectives

What if we built our weekly schedule around the ministry investments most known to form lasting faith in children?

If you were to come to my house, I'm confident you'd notice a couple of details as soon as you stepped in the front door. First, you would see a place designed to feel like home. My wife Katie has done an amazing job turning every house where we've lived into a home. She carefully picks paint colors, we change lighting, I build bookcases, reface fireplaces, or do whatever we can in order to make rooms feel more inviting, and the house feel relaxing and warm. I love it!

The second thing you might notice is how our living room furniture is arranged. We have a sectional and two chairs placed around our fireplace. Why? Because in our home we value conversation and community. I know what you're thinking, and the answer is yes, we also have a TV in there, but it's not the focal point of the room. Our TV happens to be to the side of our fireplace.

The way we arrange the furniture in a room determines how we use that room. We're big readers and in our primary bedroom, we built bookcases and have a small reading nook. Think about the rooms in your home. Think about the furniture you have in those spaces and how it's arranged. Those choices have been made by what you determined to be the most important aspects and activities those rooms facilitate. Maybe your TV is above your fireplace, maybe your kitchen has an island with enough chairs for you and your family to eat at. Whatever choices you made in your own home, you did to fit the priorities of the place.

We can all say the same thing about *time* and how we structure our time to meet certain objectives.

We need to step back and consider doing the same type of intentional design process when we consider how we use our *time* in our ministries. What is taking priority? Have we built our entire structures around one aspect, ignoring other important features of ministry to children that may actually be more impactful and influential?

Perhaps we might have the right principles in place, like having the right furniture choices in a room...but the arrangement is off. Maybe your ministry doesn't need an entire renovation, but small adjustments can compound to make a major difference.

Think about a living room again. If a couch and two chairs were all seated against the same wall, it might be great for watching TV on an opposite wall, but it would be extremely difficult to have a conversation! If you moved and angled the chairs, you would shift your living room from spectating what's on TV to create a community through conversation. As it relates to your ministry to children, you might already have what you need, but you may need to rearrange and make some subtle changes to get better results. Small adjustments to our *time* can lead to major impact through compounding interest! Angle a chair toward a couch and you'll get more conversation. Start giving a bit more time to the relational aspects of your ministry, and you'll begin to see more community and relationship building taking place.

What we will discover in this chapter is we believe as a community that “relational” ministry investments like equipping parents or training volunteers are the most impactful and fruitful ministry investments. Yet, most of our time is spent in “administrative” work, and we spend far fewer hours in actually equipping loving, caring adults to disciple children. It's unanimous—this is grieving us as a community, and we know it's not working.

The answer is not a “complete renovation” strategy. The answer lies in how we make incremental shifts of four percent of our relational ministry equipping time invested to eight percent. Or how do we increase five percent of our relational ministry equipping hours invested to ten percent, or even higher.

First, a little background on how we arrived at this unique moment in time.

Parents as Primary Spiritual Influence on Their Kids

Prior to the early 2000s, unless you were in a seminary cohort or a rare-hard-to-find-children's-ministry-think-tank, this message of “parents are

the primary spiritual influence over their children” wasn’t quite the motto of children’s ministry as it is today. Don’t get me wrong, those of us working in children’s ministry in the early 2000s believed this down to our bones. It just wasn’t the familiar message quite like it is today. So, in recent history, what was it that popularized this message?

In 2003, George Barna promoted the message through his research published in the book *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church’s #1 Priority*. If you happened to be around back then, you remember this was a galvanizing moment. Finally! Someone who gets us! Someone who was able to take what we knew from Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:4–9), plus what we knew intuitively, and added to what we knew experientially—and not to only put it in words, but also to back it up with data. It was a watershed moment for children’s ministry, and we are still experiencing the downstream impact of this movement today.¹

Standing on the shoulders of the 2003 book and research by George Barna came movements, mantras, and methodologies like:

- Church + Home
- Faith @ Home
- The Church-Parent Partnership
- Family Ministry
- Equipping Parents
- Parent Nights
- New Curriculum
- NextGen Ministry
- New Conferences

To be clear, these are each very good and valiant ministry efforts! Central to each of these are two components: 1) Resourcing parents and 2) Equipping parents (we will unpack the nuances that make these two components uniquely distinct throughout this chapter and in chapter 7).

So when it comes to resourcing, if we could use our own trade as a metaphor for ourselves, we’d say this: The take-home paper found its way to the floor of the minivan. A common narrative from many children’s ministry leaders is the church is resourcing the parents, but the parents are not using the resources. Why is this?

As we will see in data in the sections ahead, we have been quick to resource parents, but slow to equip and train them.

Early on in marriage, Katie and I were both in ministry and we didn't even have two nickels to rub together. So, I did what any honorable husband would do, I started delivering pizzas as a part-time job. When I was hired on as a pizza delivery boy, I had to go through a cheesy training (pun intended). The goofy videos. The role playing. It was awkward. Yet, I knew just what to do. I wasn't lacking in clarity. I obtained the information. I saw it demonstrated. I was able to participate in the process of some of the key tasks I was going to be asked to perform. When you get your mind, hands, feet, mouth, and emotions involved, it tends to stick with you.

I think back on this often as I hear a children's ministry leaders grieve the lack of engagement from parents. I find myself wondering, but are they equipped? Do they understand the vision? Has someone modeled this for them over coffee or in a participatory environment? Have we trained them? Have they been able to roleplay in a safe place where they can mess up, laugh, feel embarrassed, yet also learn, "Hey! I can do this!"?

The research shows we know this. We know the most fruitful way to build a children's ministry is to make relational investments into loving, caring adults like parents and volunteers. According to the self-reported data, however, we're just not doing it frequently.

Let's take a look at some of the most insightful findings in all the research we've commissioned.

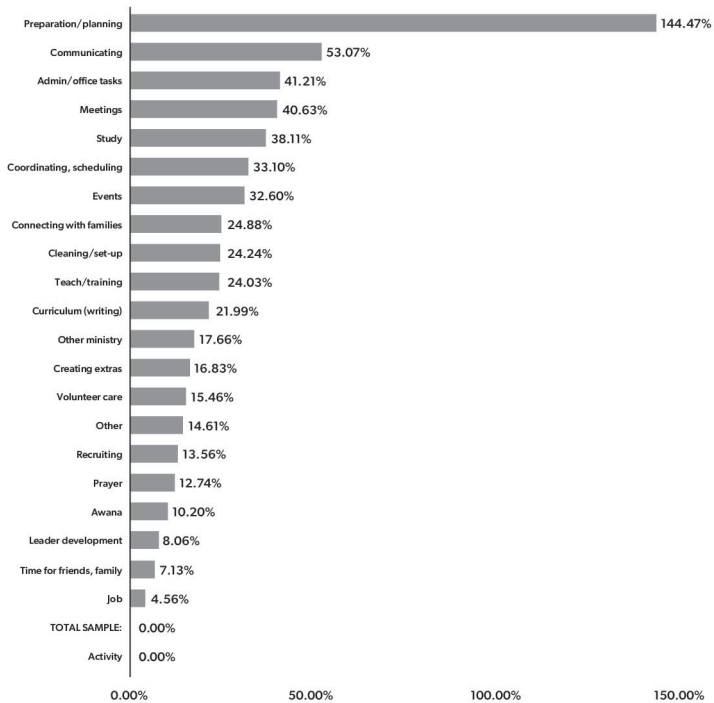
Administrative Tasks Dominate Our Weekly Schedule

This past year, my wife came across a YouTube channel called, *The Behavior Panel*. Have you seen these guys? The channel consists of four behavioral experts whose occupational craft and discipline has to do with studying human behavior like facial expressions, nonverbal gestures, body movement, use of language, tone, mood, etc. Collectively, these guys have consulted with U.S. military, FBI, CIA, celebrities, criminals, and global leaders. On their YouTube channel they analyze clips of high-profile court cases or blockbuster interviews in the media. Clip by clip, they will make the rounds each evaluating a person's body language with the motivation of answering the questions, "Is this person being honest? Or are they being deceptive?" Their job is not to determine if someone is guilty or not guilty—they are simply trying to detect truthfulness or deception based on what we know to be true about human body language. Hint: managers and parents, this channel is a gold mine!

One thing these guys have taught us is the importance of establishing a “behavioral baseline” in terms of each person’s human behavior. Your baseline behavior is you when you are relaxed. Your baseline defines your behavioral reality—your normal posture, normal facial expressions, normal voice tone, etc. Just you, being you. Then, these behavioral experts compare each subsequent clip back to the baseline. It’s fascinating stuff.

One important aspect in our 2022 research project on “how children’s ministry leaders spend their time” has to do with understanding our behavioral baseline. In order to establish this baseline, we asked children’s ministry leaders this open-ended question:

As a children’s ministry leader in your church, how do you spend your time each week? Please list the top items that fill up the majority of your calendar each week.²



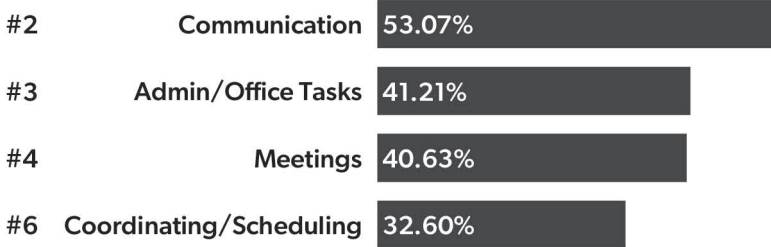
Open end responses coded into categories 1st mention: 555; 2nd mention: 551; 3rd mention: 532; 4th mention: 467; 5th mention: 385

Total sample broken down by order of mention

Preparation/planning – 144.47%

This was such an insightful way to help us understand our baseline—the default way we are naturally spending our time each week. Not, how would you like to spend your time? Or what is the best way you could spend your time? Simply, give me the baseline. Define reality on how your time is spent.

Notice in this open-ended question, we gave the respondents up to five opportunities to respond. The 5by5 Research Agency then went through each of the mentions and coded them based on the meaning of the response. Right away what we observed is that there was a clear top response of Preparation or Planning, scoring a whopping 144.47 percent. How can that be? That’s because each person (remember, multiple mentions) mentioned “preparation or planning” about 1.44 times on average. But wait, there’s more.



In an effort of helping us understand our baseline in terms of “time spent,” we spend the vast majority of our time doing administrative work that involves preparing, planning, coordinating, scheduling, office tasks, communication, and meetings. In Luke 14:28, Jesus Himself gives a nod to administrative and planning work when He says, “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” (NIV). In Acts 6, we observe a division of labor between those who will serve widows through food distribution (administrative tasks) compared to those who are dedicated to prayer and the teaching of the Word.

Without planning, our gatherings would be a train wreck. Without communication, there is no clarity. Your administrative work involves important tasks.

The question in front of us is one of wisdom and stewardship. I'm not questioning whether our time should be used for administrative purposes (nor do I hear anyone else questioning that). It was obvious in Acts 6 that the widows needed served in the distribution of the food, and it's obvious today that our planning and preparation are essential to facilitate our ministries and organizations.

What I am questioning, and what we all need to question is the dominance these items have as they take over nearly every hour of our calendar. Let me illustrate through an embarrassing story.

A few years back, Katie came to me and said, "We haven't been on a date in six months. Why is that?" Being who I am, I quickly resorted to rationalization of this event and that event, this trip and that trip, our two sons' busy schedules, blah, blah, blah. At the end of my explanation, Katie kindly repeated her question. There was no getting out of this, I was guilty. Katie's point was, yeah, yeah, life is always going to be busy. We make time for what is most important.

Remember the "rocks in the jar" illustration? Budgeting the time on our calendar is a lot like that. We place the big rocks in the jar first, then the medium rocks, the small rocks, and lastly the sand fills in all the cracks. I had left the big rock of nurturing and cultivating my relationship with Katie out of the jar. Yikes!

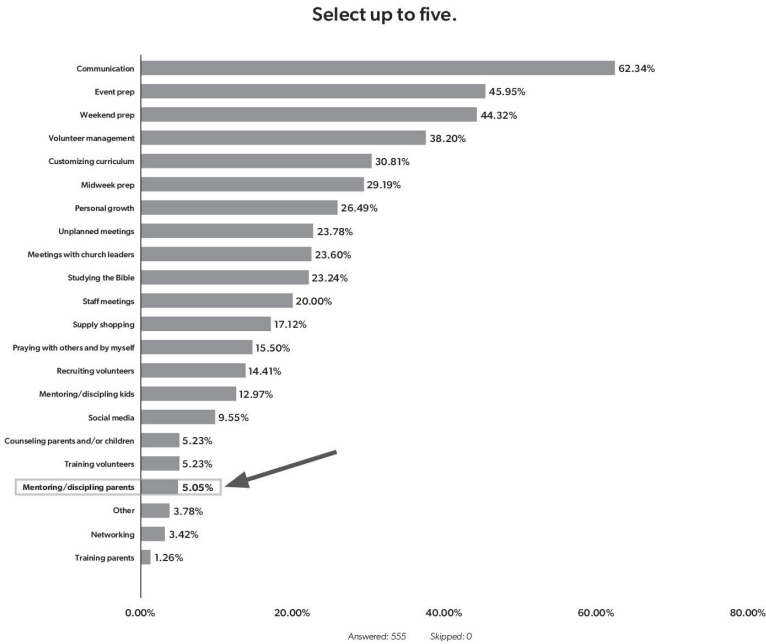
When it comes to children's ministry, I'm questioning, what *should* be our big rocks in terms of time invested weekly? And according to the data, you are asking the same question.

Biggest Ministry Impact Areas Get the Least of Our Time

Picking up where we left off in the previous section, in that same 2022 study, we asked,

Of the activities listed below, which ones would you say
take up the majority of your time and capacity
throughout a typical week?⁹

THE FAITH OF OUR CHILDREN

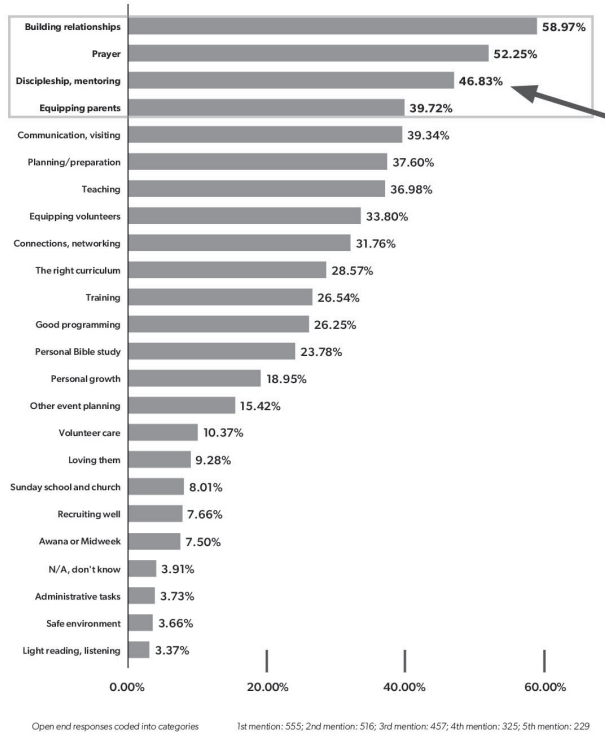


Notice this was not an open-ended question, rather in this question we gave the respondents options to choose from. Once again, the vast majority of the top responses were items like communication, event preparation, weekend preparation, curriculum customization, midweek prep, church leader meetings, and even unplanned meetings.

Regardless of whether it's an open-ended question, or a question with pre-selected options, the story is consistent: Administrative work dominates our weekly schedule. But let's not stop there. Let's push in to understand the areas of our time investment we believe have the biggest ministry impact.

In this same 2022 study, we asked,

Regardless of how you spend the majority of your time,
what are you doing that you believe will have
the most impact on child discipleship?⁴



Just for a moment, think back on what we discussed in chapter 1: Lasting faith is the desired outcome. Reaching kids with the gospel and leading them into a discipleship relationship with Jesus is our heartbeat. As children’s ministry leaders and highly engaged parents, it’s what we are aiming for!

Notice the sharp contrast between the open-ended responses in the previous section where we were simply establishing a behavioral baseline, compared to these responses here. The top four responses that children’s ministry leaders believe have the “the most impact on child discipleship” are:

- Building Relationships – 58.97%
- Prayer – 52.25%
- Discipleship/Mentoring – 46.83%
- Equipping Parents – 39.72%

These are followed closely by communication/visiting (39.34%), teaching (36.98%), equipping volunteers (33.80%), and connections/networking (31.76%). What do you notice about the top 10 open-ended responses?

Eight of the top ten open-ended responses to what has the greatest impact on child discipleship are overtly relational in nature.

Houston, we have a gap. Let's talk more about that gap—especially as it relates to parents.

In this same study, near the end of the survey, we asked this open-ended question, “What do you wish you could do (that you are not currently doing) in any of these areas in this survey to be more effective in discipling children?”⁵ The top two responses were:

- Mentor or Equip Parents – 25.68%
- Equip Volunteers – 20.72%

Coming in at a distant third place was “more resources” (10.45%) and in fourth place was “more time” (8.83%).

More time.

On a Monday morning when we glance ahead at our schedule, we see a week packed with planning, preparation, events, coordination, and administrative tasks. We value this work. It's important. At the same time, our eyes glance over to that one lone coffee appointment with a parent and we long for more relational opportunities to engage with loving, caring, adult child disciple-makers.

As children's ministry leaders, we know that the most fruitful way to disciple children is to relationally equip and mentor volunteers and parents. According to how our time is spent, however, our church culture and system is simply not wired that way.

Let's take a look at exactly how much relational time we are getting with parents—with the intention of training, mentoring, and equipping them to disciple their own children.

The Gap Between Our Message and Methods

Let's face it, this whole chapter is a gap analysis. It's a gap analysis between:

What we say is important to us:

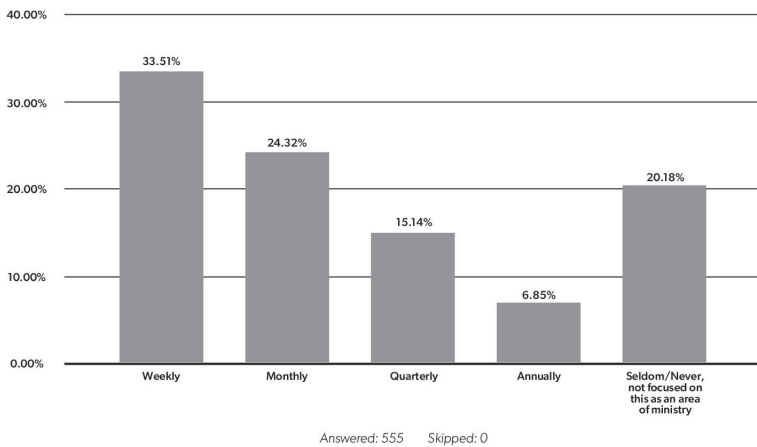
Parents are the primary spiritual influence over their children.

How we spend our time:

Mostly administrative and few hours spent equipping parents

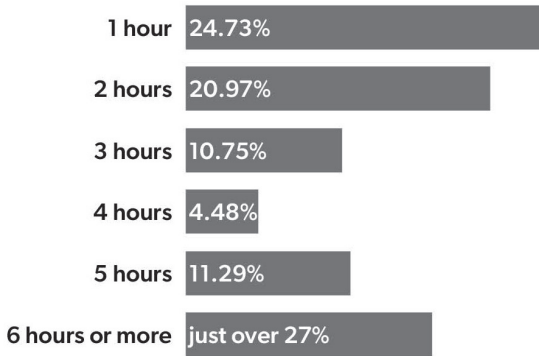
It’s been 20 years since George Barna’s book and research was published that helped popularize the narrative *parents are the primary spiritual influence over their children*. It’s a fair question to ask, how have we equipped them to steward their influence with their children? How have we trained them to maximize that impact? In this same 2022 study, we asked:

How frequently are you focusing specifically on equipping parents to help them disciple their children in any way?⁶



The first thing our team noticed was that one in five of those in children’s ministry seldom or never spend time equipping parents to disciple their children. When we asked this segment why they do not spend their time equipping parents, the top three open-ended responses were, Not an area of focus (27.43%), Uninterested parents (21.24%), and Time restraint (16.81%).⁷ What we see here from this group is that for one in five churches, equipping parents is not a part of their plan, they are spending their time on other areas, and even if they were to spend their time on this, they believe parents are just not going to step up.

Let’s now drill into the segment of children’s ministry leaders that are the *most frequently* engaged in equipping parents—those who report spending time equipping parents *weekly*. We asked them, “On average, how many hours per week are you engaged in equipping parents?”⁸



This group only represents one in three children’s ministry leaders and when it comes to equipping parents, they are the high performers among us. They are the most engaged at equipping parents on a weekly basis, and the majority of this segment (just over 55% of this group) are spending 1–3 hours per week equipping parents to disciple their children. From here, it drops off swiftly.

- *Monthly*, most do so 1–5 hours a month.⁹
- *Quarterly*, most do so 1–6 hours a quarter.¹⁰
- *Annually*, most do so 1–4 hours a year.¹¹

It’s time for us to sit back and take a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale. Again...

Ok, let’s think together about the logical flow of what we’ve just consumed together in this chapter. First, we believe that forming lasting faith is the desired outcome of children’s ministry. Second, the children’s ministry community has adopted the mantra of “parents are the primary spiritual influence over their children.” Third, we believe the most impactful use of our time (to disciple children) is to invest relationally in equipping parents and volunteers who are on the front lines of discipling children. Finally, fourth, we spend the vast majority of our time in administrative tasks and very little relational time in equipping parents.

Like a trellis to a vine, so much of our administrative work provides real value to our ministry. Yet, we grieve the fact that only a small fraction of our time is spent in what we believe is the most fruitful work at discipling children—which is relational investments in equipping loving, caring adults who can disciple children.

The question in front of us is one of wisdom and stewardship. If we want to maximize forming the faith of our children, what would be the wise thing for the church community to do? How can we steward our time most wisely to form the faith of our children?

Relational Compound Interest: Moving From 5% to 10%

I'm not an expert on compound interest. However, I know enough that when it comes to retirement investing, slight percentage increases combined with a longer duration of time invested can yield exponential growth and impact. Let's say I'm investing five percent of my income into a 401k. Even increasing that investment to seven percent or ten percent over the course of 25 years, 30 years, and especially 40 years will yield significantly higher returns over time.

The answer to attaining more relational equipping time with parents and volunteers is a "non-negotiable slight percentage tweak" to our calendar (time investment). For those who are investing in their retirement, they set aside the seven percent, the ten percent, or the 15 percent investment *first* (it can even come out of your paycheck pre-tax). This is a non-negotiable, first priority kind of decision.

In a similar way, sort of like the illustration where we put the big rocks in the jar first, we solve our shared problem that we've discussed in this chapter by making the "non-negotiable decision" that we will invest (x increased) hours a week in the relational equipping of parents and volunteers per (week, month, quarter, year). Then we build the rest of our schedule around this. What could this look like?

Taking the data segments from this chapter, it could look a bit like this below for those who invest in relational equipping of parents weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually:



Much like how our retirement percentage comes out of our paycheck first (pre-tax), blocking this time on our calendars needs to be non-negotiable. We put this on our calendar first, then everything else must work around this. Why? We have a wisdom and stewardship issue. Wisdom is telling us that this investment of our time is the most fruitful way to steward our gospel and discipleship impact to shape the future of the church.

Having been in the realm of children's ministry and child discipleship for over 20 years, I've concluded that if we don't make increased relational equipping of parents and volunteers a non-negotiable in how we spend our time, we will continue to share the "parents are the primary" message but in terms of action, few will be trained and equipped.

Parents need inspiration and vision.

Parents need equipping, training, mentorship, community, and experience.

Parents need to be discipled.

If we cling to our existing culture and system, it's unlikely we will see much change.

Discussion Questions:

1. What distinct role does the church (pastors, kids ministry leaders, volunteers, etc.) have in discipling children in the church community? What distinct role do parents (and caregivers) have in discipling the children within their care? Are these roles and responsibilities clear within your church community?
2. Does your church community have the awareness that most people come to Christ between the ages of 4–14? Does your church community have the awareness that worldview is largely shaped in most people by the age of 13?
3. What's your baseline? How do you spend your time each week? What takes up the majority of your time?
4. Just like you would prioritize your tithe (giving) first or your retirement investing first, what would it look like to schedule out relational equipping on your calendar? Weekly? Monthly? Quarterly? Annually? How might this help you and your church to cast vision with parents and to equip them to disciple their kids?

5. When you do (or will) meet with parents, what are the best formats or methodologies for relational equipping? Casual one-on-one visits over coffee? Small group informal discussions? Formal trainings? Big events? Or some combination?

Endnotes

- ¹ Also check out George Barna's follow-up to this book called *Revolutionary Parenting: What the Research Shows Really Works* published in 2007.
- ² Research Project Eight commissioned by Awana, *5by5 Research Agency* (Nashville, 5by5 Research Agency, 2022), 103.
- ³ Research Project Eight, 104.
- ⁴ Research Project Eight, 105.
- ⁵ Research Project Eight, 129.
- ⁶ Research Project Eight, 106.
- ⁷ Research Project Eight, 111.
- ⁸ Research Project Eight, 107.1.
- ⁹ Research Project Eight, 108.1.
- ¹⁰ Research Project Eight, 109.1.
- ¹¹ Research Project Eight, 110.1.

