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PUBLISHER AND EDITOR

Robert G. Davidson

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Linda S. Davidson

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Mark Davidson

EDITORIAL STAFF

Elaine M. Ward

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Doug Adams

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FEATURE

FUN-DA-MIDDLES

by Marian Fritzeimer

Her voice quivering, a mother of a thirteen-year-old shares, "Shawna's run away from home again this week. My husband and I don't know where she is or what's happened to her. Neither of us can sleep." Through her broken words, she hears muffled encouragement from other parents, both single and married. Although the parents' ages range from the early thirties to the late fifties, their children's ages are constant—one or more are adolescents. Occasionally, even a grandparent raising a grandchild joins in.

Parents come together every Sunday with tears and laughter for an adult class called "Fun-Da-Middles." Though plenty of sorrows are shared, we chose our name to reflect the philosophy that regardless of our teen's choices, we're going to experience our children's puberty, or what we refer to in our house as the "happy hormone" years with some fun.

"This group makes raising teenagers a lot easier. We have three teenagers and it's great sharing the secrets, joys, and trials of parenting teenagers," claims one father.

You may wonder, just why we started a ministry for parents of adolescents? Adult classes for new parents, parents of pre-schoolers, or even elementary school are common, but in many churches, the support for parents of adolescents dwindles.

When a pastor approached my husband and me about teaching a class for parents of pre-school children, I made a funny face at my husband. We're so far removed from the pre-school years, neither of us has a desire to go back. We quickly made a counter offer.

"What about a class for parents of junior highers?"

And so our adventure began. Here are the steps we used to begin "Fun-Da-Middles."

Form a Leadership Team

We easily recruited a leadership team of five couples since many parents strongly felt a need for the class. Even if you don't know many parents of teens in your church, search your outdated pictorial directory or ask a pastor for suggestions. We brain-stormed, chose topics, determined a class format, and advertised.

Plan a Social Start!

A month later, a kick-off celebration, complete with bright table cloths and matching balloons launched the class. We chose round tables for facilitating conversation. What began as a class for parents of junior highers,

evolved into a class for parents of early adolescents and teenagers.

The Food!

Various people signed up to provide weekly treats. For many, the treats were breakfast! As people arrived, they mingled, ate, and chatted. The most difficult part was when the emcee tried gathering everyone and getting them semi-quiet.

Round Table Discussion

After announcements and introductions of new guests (who received a package of "Fun-Da-Middles" cookies) we facilitated the highlight segment, "Q & A" or the question and answer time. To begin Q & A, we simply opened the class for questions. When situations were too personal, questions were written anonymously on 3" x 5" index cards.

Parents simply offered round table type discussion sharing ideas that worked for them. As we helped children become adults through trial and error, (both theirs and ours!) these ideas became valuable parenting tools. A wonderful benefit was the variety of parents' ages. The parent of a seven-year-old senior offers great encouragement and wisdom to a parent of

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FUN-DA-MIDDLES

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an eleven-year-old sixth grader just beginning the often bumpy road of puberty. We strongly encouraged honesty without being critical of one another or others' children. Participants learned that parenting adolescents is a daily challenge, even on a good day!

What Parents Say

A key component that ran throughout the class were the relationships and networking with other parents. One parent appreciates, "The openness of sharing in different areas. My husband and I didn't really know any other parents of adolescents. Now we have a network and support system."

Another adds, "The fact that other parents are dealing with the same problems makes the class closer."

A single-parent believes what makes the class special is, "A chance to share problems and solutions, and encouragement that comes from realizing that we're not the only ones with problems."

A mother of two daughters explains, "Just sharing the problems we have, helps us cope with our families each week. My marriage is stronger and closer than ever from reading the books which are recommended in class."

Class Schedule and Topics

Although our class met year round, we began each fall with a four-week series on adolescent development, including physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects. This popular series drew new parents and provided an overview of the adolescent adventure.

Sometimes we offered a topical series for four to six weeks; other times topics changed from weekly. Fortunately, my husband and I didn't teach every week. Other class members taught on aspects they experienced.

For example, a father taught a rite of passage series about getting a driver's license. This eye-opening class entailed surviving driving with your teen, insurance dilemmas, paying for endless expenses, and handling controversial issues, like car accidents or drinking and driving. Occasionally we divided the group by men's and women's topics.

We also used panels of "older" parents from the church for valuable insights. Two successful panels on dating guidelines and helping teens choose and pay for college were popular.

Periodically we provided written class evaluations requesting suggestions. Although a wider range of topics was our preference, our class predominantly liked focusing on parenting adolescents.

Network With Youth Department

Classes were sometimes held with or in conjunction with the youth department. When our church featured a four-week pro-life focus, we had the same lessons as our teens: "The Value of Life," "The Truth About Life," and "The Debate Over Life," culminating with "A Celebration of Life" when teens and adults met together for a baby dedication.

Additional Components

Other aspects of "Fun-Da-Middles" included occasional book reviews, a good video, or a sing-a-long with guitar accompaniment. Periodically, some of our teenagers presented special music or an opportunity for class involvement in short-term missions project.

Brunches

About every six to eight weeks, we scheduled a potluck brunch featuring quiche, fruit salads, assorted breads, juice, and coffee. On brunch days, there was no formal teaching, but fantastic learning took place as parents shared with one another. Some of the best

parenting ideas originated from sitting next to someone who'd been where we were going.

Benefits to Youth Department

Before the class began, parents felt intimidated and unsure of how volunteering would affect their teens. The youth pastors and staff shared about their programs and needs and taught a series. We recruited adult volunteers for the youth department by maintaining close contact with the youth pastors. Many eagerly volunteered when they felt a personal connection to their adolescent's ministry. They knew exactly what was going on in the youth program and how they could become a part of it.

Periodically parents raised questions about activities or specific issues. When we sensed concerns, a youth minister shared the philosophy behind the decisions. This open communication fostered a supportive and cooperative environment between parents and youth workers.

Benefits to Pastoral Staff

If you're not convinced of the program's benefits, here's one more perk. Each year during October "Pastor Appreciation," we uniquely honored one youth pastor (and spouse). We wrote notes of thanks and encouragement, gave a gift certificate for dinner and an evening away, free child care, and a gift.

The thoughts of one parent best summarizes why parents kept coming to Fun-Da-Middles. "I like the moral support, encouragement, different suggestions and viewpoints of the unique problems of adolescents and their parents. It has changed the way I look at communication within the family."

Marian Fritzeimer is a high school teacher and author of Through the Tears: Caring for the Sexually Abused Child (Broadman Press). She resides in Modesto, CA.