

“Equipping Parents With Essential Soul Care Skills”

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Abstract

Contemporary youth ministry's most urgent calling is not to increase student programs but to support parents in guiding their children. Research and pastoral experience show that parents are the most influential in a child's spiritual development. Scripture affirms this calling, instructing parents to nurture their children's faith and lead their hearts in Deuteronomy 6:1-9. However, many parents admit feeling unprepared for this task, especially amid cultural pressures, rising adolescent mental health concerns, and the pervasive influence of digital technology. In ministry discussions, I often encounter parents eager to disciple their kids but lacking the biblical tools and confidence to do so. This gap presents a vital opportunity for the church to equip parents to shepherd their children's spiritual lives.

To meet this need, a project was launched at First Baptist Church of Atlanta, Texas, to equip parents with practical, biblically based skills for soul care. A curriculum was developed that integrates Scripture, Christian counseling literature, and pastoral experience, focusing on identity development, emotions, and adolescent mental health issues. Thirty parents attended seven sessions that included teaching, case studies, group discussion, and hands-on practice. Participants reported a clearer understanding of their children's needs, increased confidence in spiritual conversations, and a deeper appreciation for the biblical foundation of the training. Parents are now better prepared to nurture their children in both faith and everyday challenges.

The results of this project demonstrate that equipping parents is one of the most effective ways to strengthen youth and family ministry. While weekly programs remain valuable, they cannot replace the daily discipleship that occurs at home. When churches intentionally support parents, they enable them to fulfill their primary calling as spiritual leaders and caregivers of their children's souls. The experience at First Baptist Church offers a practical and repeatable

model, reminding us that the most effective resource in discipling youth is not more activities, but helping parents embrace their biblical role as the primary disciplers of their children.

Introduction

This project was designed to equip parents at First Baptist Church of Atlanta, Texas (FBC) with practical skills in biblical soul care, focusing on counseling, emotional support, and mental health awareness. In the community, access to Christian counseling is limited, and parents often face challenges when guiding their children spiritually and emotionally. The project addresses this need by providing a structured approach for parents to develop confidence and skills in supporting their children's faith and well-being.

The project arose from a pastoral encounter with a student facing intense anxiety about his father's health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although his family had a strong faith background, the student struggled to process fear and uncertainty. Aware of my own limits as a youth pastor without professional counseling credentials, I focused on developing a curriculum based on pastoral counseling and soul care principles to help parents respond effectively in similar situations.

FBC's student ministry operates on a three-part model: ministry to students, families, and the broader church. Many parents actively volunteer as sponsors and Sunday school teachers, creating natural opportunities for involvement. The Young Adult 2 (YA2) Sunday school class, which includes many parents involved in student ministry, served as the setting for this project. Through discussions with YA2 teachers and parents, three key areas were identified: adolescent identity, emotions, and mental health. Students in the youth group also confirmed these topics as areas where they needed guidance and support.

The project was conducted over seven sessions spanning eight weeks. Each session included teaching, small-group activities, case studies, and practical exercises to help parents integrate biblical soul care principles into their daily interactions with their children. Feedback gathered throughout the project indicated that parents valued the biblical foundation and practical focus of the sessions and were eager to apply what they learned at home. This initiative shows how churches can strengthen family ministry by empowering parents to become confident, knowledgeable caregivers of their children's spiritual and emotional health, providing a model that other congregations and groups can follow to support both youth and families effectively.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on biblical counseling, spiritual formation, and pastoral care provided both the theological foundation and practical strategies for developing this project, especially in training parents for soul care. Key authors emphasized integrating Scripture, relational practice, and actionable skills. Moore, in *Care of the Soul* and *Soul Therapy*, highlighted the importance of paying attention to the inner life by slowing down and recognizing spiritual and emotional needs.¹ Benner used shepherd imagery to reinforce Christ as the ultimate caregiver while offering a framework for sustaining, reconciling, healing, and guiding.² Smith's *Embracing Soul Care* linked spiritual life to rest, relationships, prayer, and compassion, presenting a model for everyday practice.³

1. Thomas Moore. *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2016).; *Soul Therapy: The Art and Craft of Caring Conversations* (New York: Harper One, 2021).

2. David G. Benner, *Care of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 26-28.

3. Stephen W. Smith, *Embracing Soul Care: Making Space for What Matters Most*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006).

Kelleman's *Gospel Conversations* stressed theological grounding alongside practical counseling skills.⁴ Welch, in *Side by Side* and *Caring for One Another*, emphasized relational presence and hands-on care, themes reflected in group discussions and peer learning activities.⁵ Additional works, like Kolber's *Try Softer* and Groves and Smith's *Untangling Emotions*, offered strategies for blending biblical wisdom with psychological sensitivity when addressing adolescent emotions.⁶ Fowler's insights on faith development, along with biblical teachings from Deuteronomy 6 and Proverbs 22:6, helped inform sessions on adolescent identity and human development.⁷ Collectively, these contributions reinforced the project's focus on a balanced approach that combines theological conviction with relational and practical applications, shaping the curriculum design, interactive exercises, and discussion prompts.

Biblical and Theological Foundations of Soul Care

For this project, soul care is defined as the compassionate pursuit of another person's growth, restoration, and wholeness through Scripture and the Gospel, within a positive relational environment. This definition influenced both the content and approach of the training sessions. Scripture depicts the soul as the core of human life, identity, and relationship with God. Jesus' ministry of teaching, preaching, healing, and inviting the weary to find rest, as illustrated in Matthew 4:23-24 and 11:28-30, is a model to follow in spiritual formation.

4. Stephen W. Smith, *Embracing Soul Care: Making Space for What Matters Most*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006); and Robert W. Kelleman. *Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2015).

5. Edward T. Welch. *Caring For One Another: 8 Ways to Cultivate Meaningful Relationships* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); and *Side By Side: Walking With Others In Wisdom And Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

6. Kolber, Aundi, *Try Softer: A Fresh Approach to Move Us out of Anxiety, Stress, and Survival Mode—and into a Life of Connection and Joy* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020); and Alasdair J. Groves and Winston T. Smith, *Untangling Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

7. James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer, eds. *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education, and Society* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

Kelleman identifies six theological foundations for biblical counseling: Scripture, the Trinity, creation, the fall, redemption, and sanctification.⁸ Scripture provides the authority for understanding needs and applying care. The Trinity models relational love that parents reflect at home. Creation affirms human dignity and worth, while the fall explains the distortion of desires and relationships. Redemption through Christ restores brokenness, and sanctification reflects the Spirit's ongoing work, which parents support by nurturing spiritual growth. These foundations shape both the content and methods of the curriculum, equipping parents to understand human development, spiritual formation, and their role in guiding their children.

The Role of Parents

Scripture consistently depicts parents as the main disciplers in Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Proverbs 1:8-9, and Ephesians 6:4. Parents are responsible for shaping their children's identity, emotional well-being, and spiritual growth. The project emphasized that effective soul care begins with parents' personal connection to God, engagement with Scripture, and active prayer. Parents were encouraged to apply these principles to their children's development, particularly regarding identity, belonging, purpose, and emotional and mental health.⁹

The literature review highlighted specific practices that shaped the project's methodology. Moore and Smith emphasized the importance of reflection and intentional spiritual routines, which were incorporated through guided exercises and discussion prompts. Benner and Kelleman focused on practical methods for guiding, reconciling, and nurturing, using small-group case studies and role-playing activities for parents. Welch's relational focus influenced the

8. Robert W. Kelleman, *Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2015).

9. Kara Powell, and Brad Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021).

interactive, hands-on approach, helping parents practice walking alongside their children with love and wisdom. These insights directly shaped session topics, order, and teaching methods, ensuring that parents could turn biblical truth into practical, everyday actions.

The integration of theological insight and practical guidance laid a foundation for reaching the project's goal: equipping parents with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to care for their children's souls. The curriculum's focus on identity, emotional regulation, and mental health was based on Scripture, guided by theological frameworks, and supported by practical strategies from the literature. By combining these elements, parents were prepared to serve as the primary caregivers of their children's spiritual and emotional lives, reflecting Christ's example and the biblical call for family discipleship.

Project Design and Methodology

This project used a seven-session curriculum to help parents develop both theological understanding and practical skills for providing soul care to their teenagers. The curriculum was thoughtfully designed around Bloom's taxonomy of learning, moving from knowledge acquisition to critical thinking and practical application. Each session included instruction, group discussion, reflection, and homework to reinforce learning at home. Pre- and posttests, participant evaluations, and commitments offered measurable results. At the same time, two external reviewers, a former licensed social worker and curriculum design expert, assessed the sessions and instruction for rigor and clarity.

Participants and Setting

The project involved parents connected to FBC's youth ministry, mainly from the YA2 Sunday school class, with additional parents invited because their children participated in youth programs. Thirty parents participated in the eight-week program, averaging about eighteen per

session. For research purposes, only data from participants who attended at least four sessions and completed both pre- and posttests were analyzed, resulting in fourteen eligible participants.

Pedagogical Methods

Different teaching methods were used to increase engagement and application, such as blended lectures, videos, case studies, group discussions, game-based learning, and guided reflection. Handouts, reflection prompts, and homework supported reinforcement. For example, a Family Feud-style activity based on a student survey helped parents explore youth culture, while case study analyses at the final session allowed participants to practice applying biblical soul care principles to real-life adolescent challenges.¹⁰

Curriculum Themes

The seven sessions followed a purposeful order, moving from foundational principles to practical application, each guided by insights from the literature. The first session introduced the idea of soul care, establishing a biblical and theological basis consistent with Kelleman's focus on grounding counseling in Scripture. The second session discussed the essential components and skills of care, such as empathy, discernment, and reliance on God's Word and the Holy Spirit, reflecting themes from Benner's framework for Christian nurture and Welch's emphasis on relational presence.

In the third session, parents focused inward, exploring self-awareness and outward cultural understanding as essential for caregiving, reflecting Moore's attention to the inner life and Smith's focus on relational patterns. The fourth session shifted to adolescent identity, drawing on Fowler's work on faith development and biblical instructions in Deuteronomy 6 and Proverbs 22:6 to illustrate how parental influence shapes a child's identity in Christ.

10. West Chester University. The Teaching and Learning Center. "Game-Based Learning & Gamification." Accessed January 8, 2024. <https://www.wcupa.edu/tlc/gameBasedLearning.aspx>.

The fifth session focused on adolescent emotions, combining Kolber's insights on emotional regulation and Groves and Smith's theology of emotions with scriptural teaching to help parents guide teenagers through emotional challenges like anger and anxiety. The sixth session shifted to mental health, equipping parents to address issues such as depression and suicidality while maintaining a balanced perspective on pastoral and professional roles. The seventh session reinforced the lessons through case studies from Murray's work on adolescent struggles, along with review and personal commitments, ensuring that parents could apply biblical soul care principles in real-life family situations.¹¹

Evaluation

Assessment occurred on three levels. On the cognitive level, pre- and posttests measured the knowledge participants gained during the sessions. On the affective level, participant evaluations and reflections captured changes in their attitudes and overall confidence in providing soul care. Finally, on the behavioral level, homework assignments, case study exercises, and parental commitments demonstrated how participants applied the skills they had learned in real-life situations.

The project's methodology reflects the dual commitments highlighted in the literature of grounding soul care in Scripture and theology. Additionally, the project offers practical strategies that parents can easily implement. By combining structured pedagogy with biblical insight, the project aims to boost parental confidence and competence as the primary soul care providers for their children.

11. David Murray, *Why Am I Feeling Like This?: A Teen's Guide to Freedom from Anxiety and Depression* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); and David Murray, *Why Is My Teenager Feeling Like This?: A Guide for Helping Teens through Anxiety and Depression* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

Findings and Evaluation

The results of this project show increases in participants' knowledge, confidence, and dedication to practicing soul care within their families. Van Kooten's work was referenced to develop the pre- and posttest. Pre- and posttest data, along with participant feedback and commitments, demonstrate that the seven-session curriculum provided both theological grounding and practical tools for parents at FBC.

The pretest results indicated that many participants already had a basic understanding of biblical principles related to soul care. For example, most correctly agreed that faith influences human growth, that soul care is biblical, and that Scripture commissions parents as the primary spiritual caregivers for their children. However, some responses showed uncertainty, especially regarding the sufficiency of Scripture and whether parents can effectively handle issues like anger, anxiety, and depression.

On the posttest, improvements were evident across nearly all measures. All participants correctly identified the biblical foundations of soul care and consistently rejected the idea that children develop in the same way or that celebrities are the most influential role models. Scores on several Likert scale questions also showed significant progress. Confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture increased from 4.1 to 4.6, and familiarity with biblical approaches to handling emotional and mental health concerns notably improved. Parents' self-reported confidence in providing soul care to a child with depression rose from 3.6 to 4.2. Although still modest, there was also a slight positive shift in participants' willingness to recognize the importance of referring to professional counselors when needed, reflecting a more balanced understanding of pastoral and professional roles in care.

Beyond the quantitative data, qualitative feedback highlighted the personal and relational impacts of the sessions. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of communication skills, incorporating Scripture into daily family life, and the reminder that their influence as parents is crucial in shaping their children's faith and identity. Several parents mentioned that the biblical foundations provided reassurance and clarity, while the practical exercises gave them tools they could immediately use at home. One parent shared how reframing after-school conversations with her daughter, which was an exercise inspired by the session on emotions, led to fewer conflicts and a stronger bond. Others committed to more intentional prayer, greater attentiveness to their children's struggles, and creating family discussions based on God's Word.

Although the true and false questions showed limited change, the experience indicated that Likert-scale or scenario-based items would better measure growth in knowledge and confidence. Nonetheless, the combination of data and testimonies suggests the project's overall success: parents gained a clearer understanding of their role as soul caregivers, developed more confidence in applying biblical principles to real-life challenges, and committed to practices that go beyond the classroom into family life. These findings highlight the potential for intentional parental training to strengthen youth ministry, emphasizing both the importance of equipping parents and the practical strategies churches can implement to support families in nurturing their children's spiritual and emotional well-being.

Discussion and Implications

Theological Reflection

Soul care should be grounded in a Christian perspective with a solid theological foundation. The central doctrines guiding this project included Anthropology, Christology,

Bibliology, Ecclesiology, and Pneumatology. These doctrines influenced the development of each session and were evident throughout teaching and discussions.

Anthropology

Human nature, identity, and spiritual formation were central to the project. In Session Four, I emphasized that children and adolescents are made in God's image and are deeply affected by sin, highlighting the need for reconciliation with God. Deuteronomy 6 reminds parents to serve as spiritual leaders in their homes, and soul care equips them to engage in meaningful conversations that foster evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual growth.

Emotions were discussed in Session Five, emphasizing the connection between the body and soul. Children express emotions before their brains are fully developed. Parents should approach spiritual conversations with care. Scripture offers teachings about emotions and guides healthy expression. For example, Matthew 5:21-26 and Ephesians 4:26-27 encourage believers on how to handle anger. Parents learned how prayer, Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and spiritual disciplines can help regulate emotions, enabling them to support teenagers dealing with anger, anxiety, and depression.¹²

Christology

Jesus exemplifies the ideal soul caregiver, fully human yet fully God, as described in Hebrews 4:15. His interactions, especially with those on the margins, demonstrate attentive listening, compassionate guidance, and Spirit-led communication at the right moments. In Session Two, parents studied John 4:1-26, reflecting on how Jesus engaged the woman at the well and how He modeled soul care. These insights helped parents learn how to connect with their children effectively and biblically.

12. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. 4th ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018).

Bibliology

Since soul care can be defined in many ways, I developed a Scripture-based definition for the project: the compassionate effort to nurture another person's growth, restoration, and wholeness through Scripture and the Gospel, within a positive relationship. During the sessions, parents were encouraged to personalize Scripture, especially regarding identity formation, making the Bible central to both their own and their children's spiritual growth.

Ecclesiology

Parents felt supported by others, recognizing they weren't alone in facing parenting issues. Conversations and shared prayer created a sense of community, reflecting 1 Thessalonians 5:11 and Ephesians 4:12. The sessions emphasized that soul care is most effective when done within a caring local church environment, where relationships, encouragement, and accountability flourish.

Pneumatology

The presence of the Holy Spirit was evident throughout the sessions. Parents experienced conviction, encouragement, and guidance during discussions, demonstrating the Holy Spirit's role in shaping both understanding and practice of soul care. The Holy Spirit also fostered relational connections among participants, exemplifying the Spirit-filled community the church strives to build.

Personal Reflection

This project began because a student was afraid of losing a parent to COVID-19. That conversation revealed my own limits in counseling and prompted me to focus my doctoral studies on Pastoral Counseling. I recognized the importance of ministers providing biblical soul care while being mindful of boundaries related to professional licensure. Getting certified in

adult and teen mental health first aid through the National Council for Behavioral Health provided practical guidance and helped me maintain ethical ministry.

Creating the curriculum helped me combine theological principles with practical application, preparing parents to address issues like identity, emotions, and mental health in their children. I found that parents benefit from clear guidance that links Scripture to everyday challenges, such as adolescent anxiety, depression, and anger. They responded well to collaborative activities like Family Feud and case studies, which appeal to different learning styles and encourage discussion. Participant feedback also highlighted areas for improvement, such as choosing videos that are easier to understand and simplifying content for a deeper look at key topics.

Another insight was the gap between knowing Scripture and applying it. Parents expressed a need for help in personalizing biblical truths. For example, one parent committed to writing her child's name before identity verses to make them more relatable, while another used the same approach. These moments highlighted that teaching parents to model and adapt faith to their lives is just as important as instructing their children.

I also developed a deeper understanding of emotions, especially anger, anxiety, and depression. Sessions on these topics gave parents biblical strategies and practical tools. Since the youth involved in the ministry identified these as personal struggles, these skills were particularly relevant.

Curriculum development provided a valuable learning experience. Designing lessons that cater to various learning styles, striking a balance between theological depth and practical activities, and incorporating collaborative tasks have all enhanced my teaching abilities. Parents appreciated the biblical foundation, research-backed methods, and real-world relevance.

Finally, the project identified areas for future growth. Suggestions for expanding the curriculum and training included topics like sex, gender, and adolescents transitioning into young adulthood. Future sessions could also support families in remaining relevant through different stages of development.

Implications

The project demonstrated that equipping parents in biblical soul care enhances family and youth ministries, increases parental confidence, and fosters a supportive church community. It highlights the importance of grounding parent training in Scripture, Christ-centered theology, and practical application, while showing how youth ministry can extend beyond students to include and empower parents. The lessons learned and feedback collected provide a framework for improving curriculum design, teaching methods, and long-term ministry impact.

Conclusion

Churches play a vital role in helping parents nurture their children's souls. This project emphasizes both the need and desire for such guidance, demonstrating that parents can be empowered to provide effective spiritual care when equipped with practical tools based on Scripture. Parents learn through case studies, interactive activities, and hands-on exercises to turn biblical principles into actions that support their children's identity development, emotional growth, and mental health.

A strong theological foundation is essential, setting Christian soul care apart from secular approaches. Parents responded positively to teachings that connected Scripture with modern challenges, emphasizing Christ's example, human nature, and the Holy Spirit's work. These elements helped parents recognize that their own spiritual growth is vital for effectively guiding and caring for their children.

Equipping parents fulfills a biblical mandate and strategically invests in the next generation. Family ministry should go beyond youth programs by deliberately including parents as primary disciples and caregivers. Parents who nurture their own relationship with Christ—through prayer, Scripture, and community—are better equipped to shepherd their children with wisdom and compassion.

This project shows that churches can combine theological insights with practical methods to strengthen family life. By focusing on supporting parents, the church encourages spiritual growth, healthy relationships, and emotional well-being in both parents and children, helping them live a thriving life in Christ.

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