



A Youth Worker's Field Guide to Parents

UNDERSTANDING PARENTS OF TEENAGERS

**DANNY
KWON**



FOREWORD BY WALT MUELLER

ON A YOUTH WORKER'S FIELD GUIDE TO PARENTS ...

Parenting well is the hardest job on the planet. Partnering with parents in youth ministry may be the second hardest job. Regardless of your level of ministry experience, Danny's personal stories and practical ideas will help you love and serve not just teenagers, but entire families.

Kara Powell, PhD | @kpowellfyi
Executive Director, Fuller Youth Institute
Fuller Theological Seminary
Co-author of *Sticky Faith*

When you reach the family, you reach the world. Danny Kwon has done an excellent job helping us learn how to partner with parents in youth ministry. His experience and expertise come across on every page. This book will motivate your team to understand that family ministry is not just a program but a mindset. This is an important book for youth workers.

Jim Burns, PhD | @drjimburns
President, HomeWord
Author of *Getting Ready for Marriage* and *Confident Parenting*

Where was Danny Kwon when I was starting out in youth ministry? I noticed something when my kids became adolescents: As a younger youth worker, I tended to think I knew better than (most) parents. Then, when my oldest hit middle school, I knew much more than any youth worker, I knew my child. Danny Kwon is both a long-term veteran of great youth ministry and a careful, self-aware parent—and *A Youth Worker's Field Guide to Parents* will help you to treat parents as partners, not as projects or obstacles. With insight and wisdom, this practical and accessible resource will help any youth worker build bridges with parents as the foundational relationship for a healthy, biblical youth ministry.

Chap Clark, PhD | @chapclark
Professor of Youth, Family, and Culture
Fuller Theological Seminary
Author of *Hurt 2.0*

When I discern what books I'll spend my limited time reading, I ask myself a couple of intrinsic questions: *Do I trust the author's authority? Is this something I need to understand more about now?* Those answers are an enthusiastic yes for Danny Kwon's inaugural book. Danny is a long-time friend and I've seen him work this out in his life and ministry. This is the perfect first book for him. He's a war-tested expert and ferocious learner. His perspective is unique and critical. His advice mixed with humility is gold. I desperately wish this book was available when I started youth ministry.

April L. Diaz | @aprilldiaz

Director of Coaching, The Youth Cartel

Youth Associate, Slingshot Group

Author of *Redefining the Role of Youth Worker*

Working with parents isn't always easy. In writing this *essential* guide to working with parents, Danny has moved the "What's the best approach to working with parents?" conversation light-years forward. I love Danny's book. It's smart. It's insightful. It's practical. The best aspect of this book is the real world connection that Danny makes to youth ministry. Danny is a practitioner—his ideas and advice are vetted in his church. This isn't a book filled with ideas that *might* work in your ministry, it's packed with effective strategies that will *absolutely work*. Read and digest this book. I'm convinced you won't find a better resource than Danny's *A Youth Worker's Field Guide to Parents*.

Tim Baker, MDiv | @ywjournal

Director of Student Ministries, Trinity Episcopal Church

Editor, *YouthWorker Journal*

Author of *The Youth Worker Book of Hope*

Danny Kwon is one of my favorite youth workers and he's the perfect person to write *A Youth Worker's Field Guide to Parents*. His introduction says it all, "I am a parent ... and a youth worker." So few make it to this point in youth ministry: being a parent of teenagers and still mixing it up in the trenches of the youth ministry world. This book honestly is a must read, and I absolutely loved it! It is full of wisdom, truth, and stories that will deeply resonate. In this book you will find a mentor and an empathetic friend. Buy it for yourself, your staff, and for all of your volunteers!

Brock Morgan | @brockmorgan

Associate Pastor of Youth Ministry, Trinity Church

Author of *Youth Ministry in a Post-Christian World*

**A Youth Worker's Field Guide to Parents
Understanding Parents of Teenagers**

Danny Kwon

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The Youth Cartel, LLC
www.theyouthcartel.com

Email: info@theyouthcartel.com

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Walt Mueller

Acknowledgments

Introduction: I Am a Parent ... <i>and</i> a Youth Pastor	19
Chapter 1: Parents Are Not (Always) the Enemy	27
Chapter 2: Parents Come in All Shapes and Sizes	43
Chapter 3: Parenting Is a Struggle	49
Chapter 4: Parents Have Deep Fears	55
Chapter 5: Parents Need (Helpful) Truths	65
Chapter 6: Parents (Might) Misunderstand Youth Ministry	79
Chapter 7: Parents (Sometimes) Blame	85
Chapter 8: Parents Are Busy	103
Chapter 9: Parents Need Love	111
Chapter 10: Parenting and Ministry Require Change	121
Chapter 11: Parents Can Be a Blessing	129
Chapter 12: Parents Are Precious	139
Postscript	145
Notes	149

FOREWORD

“What are you going to do with parents?”

That simple question thrown at me by a seminary professor just a few days before my graduation rattled my young, late-twenty-something youth-worker self. I had taken a short hiatus from local church youth ministry to go to school. Now, I was graduating and heading back to a youth ministry position, this time in a suburban Philadelphia church. Things were about to change.

That simple prompt and the conversation that followed forced me to reboot my approach to youth ministry by taking the scriptures and God’s call to parents—to assume the role of primary spiritual nurturer of children—more seriously. I had left a youth ministry job and gone off to seminary believing that I could do a better job than parents. After all, I was closer in age and much more knowledgeable (or so I thought ... sadly) than their parents. Now, I was leaving seminary knowing that, as a youth worker, my clear calling was to play a secondary role in kids’ lives. After repenting of my earlier arrogance, I launched into this new youth ministry position with the commitment to see myself as a support to parents as they fulfilled their God-given calling.

Those years immediately following seminary were an amazingly fruitful time of youth ministry. I believe God blessed those years by shattering my prior ego and pride in ways that allowed me to see and assume the secondary supportive role he had for me. I worked hard to understand parents and their unique needs, pressures, and challenges. I endeavored to support them by standing behind them, by connecting them with helpful resources, and by letting them know they had an advocate in me. I stopped trying to take on their roles, and

instead simply fulfilled my role by supporting them in theirs. While our ministry had its share of bumps and bruises—and I did make more than my share of boneheaded mistakes—our ministry was marked by a healthy and strong alliance between the home and the youth ministry.

Twenty-five years ago those commitments birthed the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding. Since then, I've been passionate about convincing youth workers that that's the way it's supposed to be. I continue to tell them, "Don't make the same early mistakes I made. You aren't there to supplant parents. You are there to support them."

Hopefully, I've learned that youth ministry wisdom comes with time, firsthand experience, and a willingness to learn from the experiences of others. I'm working hard these days to teach that reality to young youth workers, while sharing any little nuggets of wisdom that I've accumulated over my years doing this wonderful thing we call youth ministry. I've also encountered a growing number of experienced youth workers whose time and effort (and even their mistakes) have yielded some great insights and advice. We all agree ... if we can help the young women and men in youth ministry do things right by sharing what we've learned from doing things both right *and* wrong, then we're actually being good stewards of our years of experience.

Danny Kwon is a long-time buddy whose experience and longevity in youth ministry have led to a growing quantity of firsthand wisdom. He picks brains. He asks questions. He's teachable. He's a parent and a youth worker who has worked with parents. He's learned from his experiences and the experiences of others. Now, he's sharing what he's learned about ministering to and with parents with the rest of us. Danny is one of the many voices of experience we need to hear.

That same seminary professor who asked me the question that forced me to change the trajectory of my youth ministry also shared these words of wisdom: “I’ve worked with teenagers in schools, churches, and parachurch ministry settings, and the one thing I’ve learned during that time is this: In terms of their faith, kids become like their parents. Ministry to and with parents is a non-negotiable.”

Danny Kwon has learned that same lesson and, amazingly, he has woven these commitments in and through his long-term youth ministry at a church that is literally a stone’s throw from the church in suburban Philly where I also experienced the great joy of ministering to and with parents. Together with Danny, I pray that this would become your youth ministry story as well.

God bless you on this youth ministry journey!

Walt Mueller

Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Jesus Christ, my personal Lord and Savior. There are no words to describe the centrality of my faith in God in my life. Jesus has been my rock throughout this writing process and for my entire life. Thank you, Jesus.

To my wife, Monica. I love you. You are an amazing wife and without your support and sacrifice, I wouldn't be who I am today. You are an amazing professor and counselor of marriages and families. Every day you help me be a better parent. All of the triumphs and struggles I've experienced as a parent and as the pastor of families and youth, you've walked with me and helped me to love our own teenagers, our youth group, and our parents more effectively. Much of the intellectual thoughts in this book came from our talks in the car, or late-night conversations, or discussing and "borrowing" from the great material you use to teach others. God has blessed me so much through you. You are so humble and pure before God, and your life truly glorifies him.

To my own teenagers—Luke, Noah, and Caleb—who did not even exist in this world when I started doing youth ministry. Thank you, boys, for your sacrifice and patience. You have put up with me through many failures and hardships. Our family life has truly enabled me to be the youth and family pastor for twenty years at one church, as well being your parent and youth pastor. That must not be easy for you. Forgive me if I wasn't the loving father I should have been. I've strived to do my best and worked hard to be a model for you of what it means to give your utmost for God's purposes. I hope you will see this as a model for your lives and live to do your best for God.

To my father and mother, Hyok Su and Hong Ja Kwon, the

best parents ever. As my brother Mike and I have both stated about our father, he was the hardest-working person we've ever known and with a large and generous heart. We owe our lives, devotion to hard work, and any successes we have or will have to his lifetime of sacrifice. Emigrating from Korea to the United States, he lived the epitome of an immigrant's life. He was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago, and now he rests in his final destination in heaven—he is at peace with Jesus. But he is intimately tied to this book. I love and miss you, Dad. And, to my mother, thank you for your love and care for my brother and me. You sat with us many nights as children, checked our homework, taught us concepts we did not understand, and were very patient. You were my first teacher. You taught me about life. You taught me about being a parent. A mother's love truly never ends.

To my cousin Lisa, who served as a personal editor for this work. I could not have done it without you.

To the many youth pastor interns I've have served with and especially those who were with me during this writing process: Joshua Lee, Gieyun Kang, Peter Lee, Walton Lee, and Joseph Kim. My love for youth and family ministry has flourished while observing my fellow partners in the gospel. I hope this book will further our field of ministry and pastoral ministry in general.

To the Yuong Sang Church youth group (YSY) and Yuong Sang Church in Horsham, Pennsylvania. While I have served at a few other places during temporary transitions, I have enjoyed serving YSY and the church as a pastor for twenty years. To all the youth who've been a part of this ministry, I love you. You've made ministry so enjoyable. And you've shown me that life *after* youth group is the most important part of youth group. Similarly, as a church, Yuong Sang has been a wonderful place to serve God. As I've studied churches and

youth ministries as part of my PhD studies, I believe in my heart that the youth, youth ministry, and church I serve is the best fit and calling for me. Likewise, I have learned so much from the parents of our youth.

To my senior pastor, Rev. Yong Kol Yi. One does not survive twenty years as a youth pastor in one church without a gifted servant leader who lives out and models the gospel. We don't always agree, but you have loved and supported the youth ministry and me. And that is so much more important.

To Marko and Adam of The Youth Cartel, thank you for letting me speak my heart and for giving me the opportunity to write. More importantly, you've given a voice to many people who don't always have the opportunity or platform to share—even though all of their voices need to be heard. The Youth Cartel is truly a revolution.

Finally, once again, thank you, Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

I AM A PARENT ... AND A YOUTH PASTOR

You just don't understand. You're not a parent of teens.

—Parent A to Youth Pastor B who doesn't have teenage children

As a young youth pastor, I hated it when parents of youth group students said this to me. It offended me greatly. It annoyed me. It made me angry. After all, I was the pastor of their teenagers, dedicated to my job, and spending countless hours serving their children. I even tried to minister to and love these parents, guiding them on their journey, and helping the church partner with them. And ultimately, I tried to help them be the best Christian parents ever!

Today, as a parent and youth pastor of three teenagers, my perspective on this has changed ... but it also *hasn't* changed. Hence, this is *not* a book about the church or youth workers changing their entire perspective on youth ministry and working with parents. Nor is it necessarily a “how to work with parents” book. In fact, I believe I was always sincere in my dedication to my job, my ministry to teenagers, and the endless hours I spent with my students. I have been and will continue to be up front about loving and ministering to parents, guiding them on their journey with their teenagers, helping the church partner with them, and enabling parents to be the best Christian parents ever. None of this has changed.

What *has* changed is my perspective on parenting and raising teens, because now I too am a parent of teenagers. Consequently, how I do youth ministry and how the church works with parents has also changed. For me, raising teenagers is the most difficult job I've had. All those thorny issues that I, as a youth pastor, face with church leadership, senior pastors, challenging parents, and other families' struggling youth is

nothing compared to the physical, spiritual, and mental battle of raising my own teenagers. And let me say this for the record: I have great kids, a comfort that other people attest to constantly. In addition, my wife has been a family and marriage counselor for years, providing our family with the distinct advantage of a go-to therapist right under our roof. Finally, there are five interns who work with and serve our youth group who my boys can turn to with their struggles whenever they need help from a grown-up besides mom and dad. But even with all this remarkable support, raising my teens has still been the most difficult challenge I've ever faced.

Another experience that has helped shift my perspective on youth pastors and parents is that for the past eleven years we have had a youth ministry leadership development program for seminarians, allowing them to serve in our church as youth interns—like the ones who help mentor my own teenagers—during their three to five years of seminary. Through this program, I have seen from a parent's perspective the positives and negatives of younger “youth pastors” dealing with students and especially their parents. It has forced me to think about what I hope the youth pastor, youth ministry, and church of my own teens would understand about me as a parent and what I, as a parent, would want from the youth pastor, youth ministry, and church. Similarly, it has impacted my approach to youth ministry within our church and how we connect with parents of teenagers. We can call it family ministry, intergenerational ministry, or youth and family ministry. The Orange movement has become a movement toward this model, and Fuller Youth Institute and its Sticky Faith movement have promoted a great deal of partnerships with parents of teenagers as well—all of which we have followed in our church in some way so that we are ministering to parents and not just their teens.

Because ultimately, nothing will prepare parents for raising teens, and incorporating them into the scope of our ministry

can be a lifeline for many. A recent *New York Times* article stated that “raising teenagers tests the sturdiest adults, even and perhaps especially on good days.”¹ As churches and youth ministries, we need to understand the complexities and difficulties of being a parent of teenagers. Frankly, I see parents of younger children or infants, and I want to laugh. I envy them. I rebuke them. (Just kidding.) I just want to tell these parents that if they think infants or young children are hard, they have *no idea* what the teen years are going to bring. (And again, I’ve been told I have “good” teens.)

Now, the measure of “good” for me is character. A professor of mine once said in a class on counseling teens that your character is who you are and what you do when no one is looking. He applied it to teens, noting the dichotomy of how a teenager acts when their parents are around and when they are not around. I have expounded on this idea to say to teens I minister to that how you act, respond, and carry yourself when you’re in a non-structured environment (e.g., outside of school) where there are no consequences or discipline/detentions for your actions. When no authority figures are looking, that is who you truly are. This isn’t a foolproof methodology to judge a teenager’s character, but in my experience as a parent of teens and as a youth pastor, I get to witness adolescents when their parents aren’t around, when they aren’t at school, and often when they don’t know I’m observing them. And these observations can tell me a lot about someone’s character, but they can also tell me a lot about parenting.

Now, please note, these observations do not necessarily lead me to assume bad parenting or rotten teenagers. These observations do not necessarily imply that parents are absent or neglectful—although at times they can raise red flags that warrant my attention. However, as I do observe and work with teenagers, these observations have shown me that raising teenagers is grueling; that even the best parents cannot control

how their teenagers are growing and developing. So what would it mean to parents if their churches and youth ministries could acknowledge how difficult this journey they are going through really is?

Over the next chapters, my hope is that greater empathy and sympathy can be nurtured for parents in our youth ministries. My hope is that deeper and more intentional partnerships can be ignited between parents of teens and the church. My twenty-year tenure at my present church has shown me that working with parents can be taxing. However, understanding the journey of parenthood has made my ministry to parents far more effective, powerful, and joyful. Moreover, understanding them as parents who are in the midst of a difficult job, rather than offering simplistic answers to difficult issues they face in raising teenagers, has made youth ministry so much more fruitful.

It's ironic (now that I am a parent of my own teens as well as their youth pastor) that my new question when planning any mission trip, church retreat, youth group activity, midweek program, Sunday school, or youth group gathering is not "*If I were a parent would I send my teenager?*" but rather if I would, in reality, send *my own* teenager. The guesswork and the "If I were a parent . . ." questions are gone. Now, this may not be the best criterion for programming—nor is it the only rationale for how I shape our student ministry philosophy, how I gauge a youth group event, or how I coordinate youth group activities. However, as I have come to understand the church and youth ministry more and more from the perspective of a parent, I do think differently about how youth ministry is executed. At times, it has probably made me more cautious and prudent, but it's also made my vision broader and sharper. All the pizza and fun games are still important, but they are seen through the lens of a greater importance, perhaps as a means to an ends.

Similarly, as I'm nearing my mid-forties and twentieth year at my church (my twenty-fourth year in youth ministry), the way I see parents is very different from the way my team of seminary interns in their twenties view parents. Likewise, the way other youth pastors in their twenties want to minister to teens and the way I want my own teenagers ministered to are often at odds. This disparity isn't necessarily a negative one but, in fact, has provided the church and our youth ministry greater opportunities to meet the needs of teenagers and their parents.

Over the course of this book, my purpose is to help churches, youth workers, and even parachurch youth ministries understand the lives and hearts of parents of teenagers. I'll admit it isn't a theological treatise on parents or parenting, nor is it a thorough scientific study on parenting. I've been trained both theologically and in social science research, so I do know the insides and intersection of these two fields of study. Rather, as I continue on my own journey as a parent of three teens and a youth pastor for over twenty-four years, I wanted to share my insights about the parents of teens and what I (and perhaps other parents) wish their youth workers and churches understood about parents of teenagers. Perhaps then churches and youth ministries could work with teens and their parents more effectively, with greater hope and with greater compassion.

I can tell you from my years of youth and now family ministry, the hardest part of youth work for me has been dealing with parents in spite of my love for their teenagers. When it comes to teens, I love their passion. I love their energy. I love seeing their journey of faith and seeing that God can use me and our youth ministry to be a part of their journey. But, to be honest, working with their parents has been the most trying and difficult part of my job.

A youth pastor friend once called me a "unicorn" because I've

ministered in my church for two decades. I was tickled and kind of proud of that line, because youth pastors staying in one church for that amount of time just don't exist—much like unicorns. And the truth is, while a typical youth pastor might move on from a given church in a relatively short amount of time for a lot of reasons, it's almost never about the teenagers but *is* often about the parents.

Nevertheless, while working with parents has been the toughest part of my long ministry tenure at my church, it is actually coming to understand them that has helped me persevere over the long haul. Now as a parent of teens myself, my love and compassion for the journey of parenting enables me to embrace moms and dads all the more in youth ministry. And ultimately, it serves as a means to minister and love their teenagers more, which is, after all, why I remain in youth ministry.

Finally, let me say again to be clear that while parenting my own teenagers is hard and that dealing with parents has been one of the most difficult struggles for me in doing youth ministry, *I have the deepest love and empathy for them.* Well-known comedian Jim Gaffigan once said something like this: “If you complain about how difficult something is, it's because you're trying to accomplish something that *is* difficult.”

And in thinking soberly about my journey in youth ministry and working with parents, it may indeed be something difficult that I'm complaining about. I've been trying to accomplish something difficult but remarkable with the parents of teenagers in our youth ministry, which is loving their teenagers and hoping to see Jesus in their lives during and long after they leave our youth group.

CHAPTER 1

PARENTS ARE NOT (ALWAYS) THE ENEMY

It's hard to absorb how much childhood norms have shifted in just one generation. Actions that would have been considered paranoid in the '70s ... are now routine.

—Hanna Rosin

We have a very fruitful and wonderful meeting with the seminary interns of our youth group every Wednesday. It's a great time that starts with one of us sharing some wisdom from Scripture then each of us sharing our life situations and struggles in the context of prayer requests. We have come to realize that this is one of the most precious times of our week. It has become a time of truly spurring each other on. It is a partnership of accountability as we strive and press on in our struggles and daily lives.

After this ideal start we get to the “business” side of our meeting, and sometimes this is where it can get kind of ugly. Admittedly, I've often been the gang leader of this ugliness. The reflection upon our students' lives isn't the ugly part. In fact, it's a time of joy, care, and concern, as we discuss the life situations of our students in the youth ministry. We talk about who is struggling with what, who we need to hang out with and visit, who we haven't seen in a while, etc.

But discussing our students naturally leads to talking about their parents, and this is where it can go from helpful talk to gossip to ugliness. I used to call this “work product,” the term lawyers use to describe the material collected for trial that is discussed behind closed doors and never disclosed in the courtroom. But perhaps our meetings and discussions could actually be called “righteous” or “glorified” gossip, with the primary gossip being about parents.

We share the difficulties and struggles we've had with parents. We talk about outrageous requests they've made. We vent about how parents expect us to raise their teenagers. We get angry when they don't trust the youth ministry or don't send their teenagers to youth group. Overall, it seems as if sometimes in those moments we're actually making parents the enemy.

As I was talking about this book and its title with another youth pastor friend Moses, he joked that the real issue is understanding parents who *act* like teenagers. I thought it was humorous and have to admit that sometimes it's true. Perhaps that's because we unfairly expect more from parents. We expect them to be the mature and wise adults, in particular those in the church and those who send their teenagers into our youth ministries. After all, they are actually the ones tasked with raising responsible young people who love Jesus. But why does it seem like some parents are really immature in their faith? Why aren't some of them sending their kids to youth group if they are so frustrated by their behavior? Why do some have kids who aren't even attending church at all?

We have a fantastic, large, and well-run summer mission program in our youth ministry. In fact, over a hundred students participate annually in at least one of the four summer trips, and I believe this speaks to the overwhelming interest and participation in our youth ministry. Our mission trips also highlight the valuable and important discipleship and character-building our youth ministry strongly believes in, and this has been the real fruit of these trips—which is perhaps not always evident right way, especially to parents.

Unfortunately, though our numbers still sound great, our youth ministry has actually seen a slow but steady decline in participation in these mission trips. In recent years, we have seen four students drop out at the registration deadline because they