

Research Shows That Spiritual Maturity Process Should Start at a Young Age

Three years of research regarding ministry to children has revealed many surprising outcomes, according to a new book by researcher George Barna. In discussing that volume, entitled *Transforming Your Children Into Spiritual Champions*, Barna indicated that the wealth of research not only changed his personal perspective on the importance of ministering to young children, but also clarified why churches struggle to have significance in our culture.

Adults essentially carry out the beliefs they embraced when they were young, he explained. The reason why Christians are so similar in their attitudes, values and lifestyles to non-Christians is that they were not sufficiently challenged to think and behave differently radically differently, based on core spiritual perspectives when they were children. Simply getting people to go to church regularly is not the key to becoming a mature Christian. Spiritual transformation requires a more extensive investment in one's ability to interpret all life situations in spiritual terms.

Reaching People When They are Young

Barna's research discovered that a person's lifelong behaviors and views are generally developed when they are young particularly before they reach the teenage years. As evidence of this, Barna provided research that showed four critical outcomes.

First, a person's moral foundations are generally in place by the time they reach age nine. While those foundations are refined and the application of those foundations may shift to some extent as the individual ages, their fundamental perspectives on truth, integrity, meaning, justice, morality, and ethics are formed quite early in life. After their first decade, most people simply refine their views as they age without a wholesale change in those leanings.

Second, a person's response to the meaning and personal value of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection is usually determined before a person reaches eighteen. In fact, a majority of Americans make a lasting determination about the personal significance of Christ's death and resurrection by age 12.

Third, Barna showed data indicating that in most cases people's spiritual beliefs are irrevocably formed when they are pre-teens. Upon comparing data from a national survey of 13-year-olds with an identical survey among adults, Barna found that the belief profile related to a dozen central spiritual principles was identical between the two groups. Those beliefs included perceptions of the nature of God, the existence of Satan, the reliability of the Bible, perceptions regarding the after-life, the holiness of Jesus Christ, the means of gaining God's favor, and the influence of spiritual forces in a person's life.

In essence, the researcher noted, what you believe by the time you are 13 is what you will die believing. Of course, there are many individuals who go through life-changing experiences in which their beliefs are altered, or instances in which a concentrated body of religious teaching changes one or more core beliefs. However, most people's minds are made up and they believe they know what they need to know spiritually by age 13. Their focus in absorbing religious teaching after that age is to gain reassurance and confirmation of their existing beliefs rather than to glean new insights that will redefine their foundations.

Finally, the research revealed that adult church leaders usually have serious involvement in church life

and training when they are young. The statistics gathered by Barna's firm among a national sample of pastors, church staff and lay leaders showed that more than four out of five of those leaders had consistently been involved in the ministry to children for an extended period of years prior to age 13. One implication is that the individuals who will become the church's leaders two decades from now are probably active in church programs today.

Families and Churches Working Together

Citing research showing that a large proportion of church-going people dropout of church between the ages of 18 and 24, Barna stated that the research underscored the importance of families, not churches, taking the lead in the spiritual development of children. In situations where children became mature Christians we usually found a symbiotic partnership between their parents and their church, he pointed out. The church encouraged parents to prioritize the spiritual development of their children and worked hard to equip them for that challenge. Parents, for their part, raised their children in the context of a faith-based community that provided security, belonging, spiritual and moral education, and accountability. Neither the parents nor the church could have done it alone.

The studies conducted by Barna's firm concluded that churches experiencing great influence in children's lives were motivated by the realization that children are of special significance to God. Consequently, those churches employed a long-term, multi-pronged strategy that they tirelessly executed to facilitate the spiritual growth of children.

The research showed that at a typical Protestant church, more than four out of every ten people ministered to during the week are children, yet seven out of every eight ministry dollars are spent on adults. Barna was quick to point out, though, that simply spending money on children does not produce great results. The most important resource, we believe, was the amazing amount of prayer for children and parents that was evident at the most effective ministries to children. Some money is required to see serious life change happen, but the more important resource is the commitment of adults to the spiritual wholeness of the children which means sacrificing some of the emphasis upon the ministry to adults.

Book Challenges Prevailing Notions

Barna has presented the results of the research in more than 25 cities around the country so far this year and has been pleasantly surprised by the positive reception the message has received. Most churches are doing the best they can based on what they know. A lot of our findings represent the first hard data that these church leaders have seen showing the relative impact of focusing upon children and have been shocked at the revelations regarding the importance of getting to people when they are young. I have been encouraged that so many churches have been willing to reconsider how they allocate their limited ministry resources in order to maximize their ministry impact.

The researcher admitted that the outcome of his studies produced a significant turnabout in his own views about ministry. Since I became a Christian two decades ago, I have always accepted the dominant notion: the most important ministry is that conducted among adults. But the overwhelming evidence we have seen of the huge impact in the lives of kids and the relatively limited changes in the lives of adults has completely revolutionized my view of ministry. I have concluded that children are the single most important population group for the Church to focus upon. Many churches may not go that far, but I do hope that they will at least consider the research findings and place a greater emphasis upon children.

Such a shift in priorities could well bring about the spiritual renaissance that many church leaders have long been praying for.

Research Source and Methodology

The data described in this release are detailed in *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions*, written by George Barna. The research was conducted from 2001-2003, and included nationwide surveys among adults, among young people, and among church leaders and pastors. The research also included in-depth studies of Protestant congregations that have an enviable track record of producing children who would be considered spiritual champions.

The Barna Research Group, Ltd. is an independent marketing research company located in southern California. Since 1984, it has been studying cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. If you would like to receive regular e-mailings of a brief overview of each new bi-weekly update on the latest research findings from the Barna Research Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna Research web site www.Barna.org.