



*A Big Youth Ministry Topic
in a Single Little Book*



THE SKINNY

ON

PARENTS



Mark Oestreicher
with Kami Gilmour



Group



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The Skinny on Parents

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JESUS- CENTERED

Guide your entire ministry toward a passionate Jesus-centered focus with this series of innovative resources. Harness the power of these dynamic tools that will help you draw teenagers and leaders into a closer orbit around Jesus.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Seems that, in a book about parents, I should start by thanking my parents: Dick and Bobbi Oestreicher. As a parent of a teenager and a young adult, I often reflect back to my own teenage experience, and my parents' rules and interactions. Three specific props I would give them for how they parented me as a teenager: They lived their faith actively, they were very fair with rules, and they were intentional about staying relationally engaged with me. Much of what I learned about parenting teenagers is merely a reflection of what I observed.

While I've had some parents in my many years of youth ministry that have been a royal pain, the vast majority of the thousands of parents I've interacted with have been amazingly supportive, helpful, and encouraging. I can't even start to list the best here, but I often (seriously—all the time) reflect on what some of those amazing parents would have done when trying to figure out how to parent my own children.

My wife is the best parent I know. The fact that we have a pretty good relationship with our kids and an above-average level of happiness in our home is dominantly a reflection of Jeannie's grace, insight, and commitment.

— **Mark Oestreicher**

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BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

The book you're holding might be "skinny," but that's because it's all-muscle. This means that Mark Oestreicher and Kami Gilmour have cut away the fat and focused on the "first things" that make ministry to parents in youth ministry powerful and long-lasting. In our Skinny Books series, we've paired a thought leader (in this case, Mark Oestreicher) with a master practitioner (in this case, Kami Gilmour) as a one-two punch. We want you to be challenged and equipped in both your thinking and your doing.

And, as a bonus, we've added an Introduction written by Mark DeVries that explores parent-connections through the filter of a Jesus-centered approach to ministry. Jesus-centered is much more than a catchphrase to us—it's a passionate and transformative approach to life and ministry. Mark's Introduction to parent ministry first appeared in my book *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*, and we couldn't think of a better way to kick off this little book. It's time to get skinny...

—RICK LAWRENCE

Executive Editor of Group Magazine

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INTRODUCTION

I taught my first parenting seminar at the wise old age of 20. Like a spring-loaded trap, I was happy to give this group of unsuspecting parents a piece of my mind, to let them know all the ways they were massively missing the mark with their children.

Today, I see things differently.

I'm a recovering parent of teenagers, and now I see how parents are the easy whipping boy of youth ministry. Too many youth workers (and youth ministry experts) rail against the failures of parents—failure to make their kids come to church, failure to keep their mouths shut when they feel like complaining, and failure to “support the youth ministry” (which often means an unwillingness to go on a weekend retreat when we ask them at the last minute).

As a youth worker who's also a parent, I've got no doubt which is the harder (and more important) job. When I do parenting seminars, I see desperation on so many faces—enough to know that parents of teenagers are exhausted. They're jumpy, anxious, nervous about the new, latest threat to their children's safety (and thus to their own

parental sanity). The sad fact is that the blame game helps neither families nor youth ministries. We need each other.

This is a world that literally dis-integrates teenagers, forcing them into patchwork identities that grow out of disconnected relationships with adults who know nothing of each other. The centrifugal force pulling kids away from a convergent center in which they can develop an integrated identity is so powerful that it is perhaps only in a Jesus-centered faith community that young people in today's world can complete the identity-formation process. They need to hear their name, and therefore their identity, coming from the lips of Jesus. And that will only happen through a constellation of relationships with Christ-like adults for every teenager in our ministries.

One parent told me the experience of parenting teenagers feels like “being a dachshund in deep snow.” I can relate. I’ve learned enough now to know that God never meant for us to do this parenting thing alone, especially parenting teenagers. Here’s what binds us together: We both desperately need Jesus.

—Mark DeVries

President and Founder of Ministry Architects



CHAPTER

1

*Trolls,
Death Eaters,
Parents,
and Other
Things We Fear*

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I was leading a mission trip in Mexico with a couple dozen junior highers. A few of the kids had spent one of our last days painting the exterior of the very small wooden house we'd built for a family. And two girls—Erin and Jennifer—had ended up, as painting teenagers are prone, completely covered in paint. I think they had as much paint on themselves as they got on the house.

Erin and Jennifer couldn't seem to get the dried paint off their arms. So, trying to be helpful (but not really knowing what I was doing), I drove to a small hardware store and bought some sort of turpentine or paint thinner. Honestly, I didn't completely know what it was, and my Spanish is very limited. But the girls used it to remove the paint from their arms, and everything seemed fine.

Until the middle of the night.

Erin and Jennifer came to my room and woke me up, crying, explaining through sniffs and overly dramatic groans that their arms itched like crazy. We ran their arms under water for hours. And once again, everything seemed fine.

Until we got home.

Jennifer's dad was livid. Rarely—in 33 years of youth ministry—have I had a parent unleash on me like

that angry father did. He clearly knew more about Mexican paint thinner than I did (he was a scientist, and he schooled me in the difference between the chemical composition of our American paint thinners and what was likely the makeup of the substance in which his daughter had bathed her arms). He said I was irresponsible, and told me I should never be allowed to lead a group of teenagers. He told me that his daughter could have received a toxic level of something-or-other that could have led to something really bad or even death.

👉 A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE *Kami Gilmour*

Safety counts—even in the details! Don't we all know to use latex/water-based paint? If paint isn't coming off skin, it's probably oil-based paint. And oil-based paint has harmful VOCs (really bad things to breathe in) that can cause respiratory distress and long-term damage to organs and central nervous system. Come to think of it, that paint probably had lead in it, too. The whole group was at risk with exposure to the paint—not just the turpentine girls! If I'd been a parent of a kid on this trip and caught wind of that father's anger, I'd be jumping on the panic bandwagon and researching the dangers, worried my future grandchildren would be born with a limb growing out of their forehead or something.

And this dad told me that his daughter—one of my leadership kids, who was a part of pretty much everything we did—would never participate in another trip that I was leading, ever.

I really didn't know how to respond. On one hand, he seemed right about the risk I hadn't been aware of. And on the other hand, I felt embarrassed (this diatribe took place in front of a large group of people). And I felt defensive, thinking, "Aren't you aware of everything I have *done* for your daughter?" I felt vindictive, thinking, "Do you even know what she *thinks of you*?" I was sure he was exaggerating. And hadn't he ever heard that you're supposed to sandwich criticism between praise?

My interaction with Jennifer's father rattled me deeply. And it touched on a reality that I find to be a common challenge for all youth workers (rookie or veteran, paid or volunteer): *Parents of teenagers are wild cards in youth ministry*. They can be your greatest ministry supporters and assets, or they can be your most significant impediments and challenges.

It always bugged me, as a young youth worker, when parents said or inferred that I didn't know what it was like to parent a teenager. But now that my own children are 20 and 16, I can look back and admit, "I didn't know what it was like to parent a teenager."

Sure, I had (and still have) plenty of insight: I'd studied teenagers both in a theoretical sense and an observational sense; I'd read more books about teenagers than any parent I knew; I'd interacted with hundreds (and eventually thousands) of real-life teenagers, many of whom shared their deepest fears and hopes with me in a way they might not with their parents; and I'd observed, interacted with, and intervened with countless parents, in good times and difficult times. I was an expert (as are you, most likely) in adolescence. And I had a deeply informed, mostly correct view of what makes great parents and what makes less-than-great parents.

But I still didn't know what it was like to parent a teenager until I had two of my own. So I'll likely swap hats back and forth in this little book: parent of teenagers, and veteran youth worker with a diploma from the school of hard knocks.

Let's start with a goal in mind. In the olden days of youth ministry, most youth ministry trainers and books would tell us that we need to learn to work with parents. But the subtle (and sometimes overt) message was: *We know you are called to work with teenagers, but most teenagers have parents, so you have to at least be aware of them.* Maybe that's merely my revisionist memory, but the most positive perspective I remember hearing in those days was that we had to "understand teenagers as part of a family system" to be effective. The message was: If you

don't know that a teen is from a messed-up home, you'll be limited in your impact.

But that mindset, and the approaches to ministry that we developed in those decades, is as riddled with holes as a zombie's sweater. Most (maybe all) of our practices of youth ministry had nothing to do with parents. At best, we tended to be intentional about communicating enough to keep ourselves out of trouble and oil the moving parts of our ministries (like, we communicated when we'd be home from camp, because we didn't like waiting around with that one teenager whose parents were always late).

I'm not trying to say that every youth worker was antagonistic to parents: Many of us just held the tainted and faulty working assumptions that our jobs and callings were limited to teenagers, and that parents were sort of beside the point. There was another ministry in the church for the adults.

But research and theological reflection and some honest dialogue (and the host of aging youth workers who are parents of teenagers themselves) are recalibrating our view of parents. Instead of asking didactic questions like "are parents good or bad?" we've been collectively putting on new lenses when we view parents.

➤ A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE *Kami Gilmour*

The majority of parents won't know what didactic means, so maybe skip vocabulary like that in everyday conversation.

Here's what I've observed as a fairly universal truth in youth ministry, with beautiful variety in how this truth is worked out in context:

Great youth ministries are passionate about helping parents—the key influence on teenage faith—succeed in their God-given roles.

With that goal in mind and that ministry lens in place, all youth workers—volunteer and paid, rookie and pro, childless or parents themselves—can and must be aware of a handful of realities. Some of these are perspectives to employ, while some are truths I've learned (more from parenting teenagers than from my practice of youth ministry).

PARENTS ARE NOT THE ENEMY

It's rare that I have ever heard a youth worker express these actual words: *Parents are the enemy*. But as I interact with youth workers, I find that our practices often reveal an underlying sense of this unspoken belief.

Parents are the biggest influence on the lives of teenagers—a fact that research has proved again and again. Yet interactions with parents can be one of the trickiest areas for a youth worker to navigate well.

Great youth ministries are passionate about helping parents—the key influence on teenage faith—succeed in their God-given roles. That’s the foundational message of *The Skinny on Parents*, which will lead you toward a place where you focus a little bit more of your energy on resourcing, equipping, partnering with, and empowering parents.

Parents are not the enemy. Ignoring them will diminish the impact of your ministry. Most parents struggle with fears but also want help. And you can come alongside them to partner in helping teenagers fully step into a life of faith.

This book is filled with practical ideas that will energize your ministry to parents and families. And if you as a youth worker provide help in a way that allows parents to feel more equipped and confident, then everyone wins: families, teenagers, and your youth ministry!



MARK OESTREICHER (Marko) is a veteran youth worker and founding partner in The Youth Cartel, providing resources, training, and coaching for church youth workers. The author of dozens of books, including *Youth Ministry 3.0*, Marko is a sought-after speaker, writer, and consultant. Marko lives in San Diego with his wife, Jeannie, and young adult and teenage children, Liesl and Max. Marko’s blog: whyismarko.com.



KAMI GILMOUR is the prodigal daughter of two youth worker parents, and is still apologizing for the antics of her teenage years. She’s married to Tim, and the mother of three teenage kids and two young adult stepchildren. Kami is also the Families Champion at Group, and director of Lifetree Family, a ministry that helps families strengthen their relationships with Jesus and each other. She blogs about finding faith in the chaos of parenting at LifetreeFamily.com.



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