

# First-time parents receive help at Port Neches church

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**By John Hall**

*Texas Baptist Communications*

PORT NECHES—At First Baptist Church in Port Neches, help for first-time parents begins before children arrive.

Ministers make an extra effort to connect with expectant mothers, knowing pregnancy can be a joyous but challenging time of change for first-time parents. Staff members help support mothers-to-be emotionally and inform them of assistance the church provides after birth.

Cassie Hill holds 10-month-old Isaiah during a visit from a One By One Ministries mentor.

Interaction helps expecting parents build trust with church staff members they may not know, said Donna Smith, minister of preschool and children's ministry at First Baptist Church. As a result, parents become more willing to leave their children at the church for Mother's Day Out activities later.

The relationship continues through birth. The congregation presents each new mother a gift basket, and a Bible study class arranges to bring the new parents dinner on several nights.

First Baptist Church is one of many Texas Baptist congregations that believe connecting with first-time parents early is crucial for the parents and the child. The sooner a congregation can help parents focus on the spiritual development of their child, the more likely it is to be a priority.

Most spiritual development should take place at home, said Susan Sosebee, minister to families with children at Calvary Baptist Church in McAllen. That is where children spend most of their time and can be most influenced in their early years. Children learn more in their first five years than young people do while they are enrolled in college, she asserted.

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“The primary goal is to raise your child to walk with the Lord and have them love God with all their heart, soul and mind,” Sosebee said. “And in that love, have them turn around and love others.”

For their part, churches are teaching children biblical lessons from infancy. Some Scripture is read to infants even before they can understand it, but biblical teaching mostly involves modeling faith. Infants learn to trust by being cared for by the same nursery worker every week. They learn God loves them by having people love them.

“You start it with a foundation,” Sosebee said. “It’s like a building. The foundation is the most important thing.”

Churches use a variety of outreach approaches to help parents with childrearing. Calvary Baptist Church in McAllen and First Baptist Church in Port Neches have offered parenting classes that teach adults about child development.

Smith and Sosebee said the classes attract people who either are not involved in the congregation or barely involved in the church. They want more help strengthening their new families.

“It’s really interesting, people who attend those classes ... they want that bond with someone who is going through the same scenarios as what they are going through,” Sosebee said. “They will come and will bond with those people.”

The church, in turn, finds a ministry opportunity. It collects each family’s contact information, and church members can follow up with them. First-time parents from the church can build a relationship with non-churchgoing parents.

Smith has invited groups to her home for dinner, hoping people can bond and support each other.

“I want them to make some sort of connection with other people,” Smith said. “I want them to know Christian people aren’t crazy. They have fun.”

Other congregations are using One By One Ministries in their outreach to parents. In this program, parents are teamed with trained mentors from churches who visit young parents at least once a month for 45 minutes. They commonly meet more than that.

Mentors provide encouragement and practical support for parents who need it, said Linda Hibner, acting executive director of One By One Ministries. Typically, the ministry serves adults who were referred by pastors, pregnancy centers or social service agencies.

Parenthood provides an opportunity for the church to impact generations, Hibner said. Adults typically are more open to receiving help when their life changes. They are willing to listen to Christian counsel to improve the lives of parents and children.

“We feel like there’s an opening, a softening of the heart, when a pregnancy enters someone’s life,” Hibner said.

No matter the approach, ministers say the most important action parents can take is spending time with their children in their early years. Church leaders are trying to make sure that time includes conversations about faith.

“What is really important for new families is ... you have to model your faith for your children,” Sosebee said. “So when you rock your children to sleep at night, you sing little songs about how you love Jesus—Mommy and Daddy love Jesus.”

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.