

the DNA *of*

PARENT-TEEN
RELATIONSHIPS

Discover The Key to Your Teen's Heart

GARY SMALLEY &
GREG SMALLEY, Psy.D.



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People's names and certain details of the case studies in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
1. Making the Teen Years Your Best Years	1
2. Honor: The Greatest Principle of Life	13
3. Keeping Anger Levels Low	31
4. Breaking the Dance That Destroys Family Relationships	49
5. How to Argue with Teenagers and Come Out as Closer Friends . . .	71
6. Finding the Best Solution to Any Conflict	89
7. How Democracy Can Bring Responsibility to Your Home	111
8. Strengthening Your Relationship with Your Teenager	133
9. Helping Teens Make Lemonade out of Life’s “Lemons”	149
10. Helping Teenagers Maintain or Regain Their Virginity	165
11. Turning Beliefs into Personal Convictions	187
12. How a Mentor Can Help Teens Maintain Their Convictions . . .	205
13. When Teenagers Walk Away from the Light	219
14. Leaving Home in Honor	237
Study Guide	259
Notes	267

Making the Teen Years Your Best Years

*Any adult who behaved the way that teenagers
behave would be judged as certifiably insane.*

ANA FREUD, DAUGHTER OF SIGMUND FREUD



One time when Greg was a teenager and our family was driving from Arizona to Missouri, we saw a clear example of why it's so dangerous to allow anger to take root in a home. But we also saw how honor can erase anger in a matter of minutes.

Near the New Mexico state line, Greg and I (Gary) started arguing about an unresolved conflict. Norma, my wife, was in the back of the camper with our other two kids, so she couldn't hear us. Greg had taken some money from Norma's purse to buy a video game. She had given him permission to take \$20, but he'd taken \$30. What he called an "advance" on his allowance, I was calling stealing. We had argued about the details but had gotten nowhere. I didn't like the fact that Greg wanted to keep this a secret. But he was upset because he'd returned the extra money and didn't feel his mother needed to know about it. He was also afraid she'd get angry.

The other problem was that I'd been pretty harsh with my tongue. I'd blown up during the original discussion at home and called Greg a liar and a thief. I could tell his feelings were hurt, but I had no idea that anger had infiltrated his heart. At least I didn't know until we approached New Mexico. Then, like a volcano, his anger erupted in my face.

As Greg and I argued once again about telling Mom, the discussion quickly escalated to the point that I had to pull the camper off to the side of the road. Suddenly, Greg jumped out of the vehicle, hopped a fence, and disappeared over a hill. As he ran, I could hear him screaming, "I want out of this family!" Then he was gone.

Teenagers! I thought as I rolled my eyes. Watching all the cars and trucks that I'd passed earlier roar by, I wondered how long this was going to take. "This will certainly put us behind schedule!" I yelled to no one in particular.

Since this was my first runaway situation, I didn't know what to do. Should I wait until he came back? Should I run after him? It was so hot outside that I was leaning toward staying in the air-conditioned camper. However, the rest of the family made my decision when they collectively screamed, "Go get him!"

Now I was really frustrated. Greg was pretty fast. Who knew how far he'd run by this time?

As I approached the fence Greg had jumped over, I noticed a sign that read: NO TRESPASSING! DANGER!

Danger? I thought. *What could possibly be dangerous out here in the middle of nowhere?* So I climbed over the fence and walked to the top of the hill behind which Greg had disappeared. Then I quickly realized what made the sign necessary. Danger was everywhere.

The scene was like something out of the movie *Dances with Wolves*. An entire herd of huge buffalo was grazing down below. The thought passed through my mind that instead of driving to this area in our camper, we should have traveled in a covered wagon. I had been instantly transported back into the Old West.

As I scanned the area for Greg, I discovered that he had descended the far side of the hill and walked about 20 yards into the herd, then suddenly stopped. I smiled as I thought about how his stubbornness had carried him far into the herd but not all the way through. His strong will had given way to fear. Greg now stood face-to-face with a large male buffalo. As they stared

at each other, the buffalo started snorting and stamping his foot, inching toward Greg. I knew very little about buffalo, but that didn't look good.

Greg was searching for an escape route when his eyes found me. His expression turned to one of great relief. We still had no idea how to solve his dilemma, however. I slowly walked down to where he was standing, thinking the buffalo might charge at any moment. Instead, though, he simply snorted a few more times and then walked away. Thankfully, my presence must have confused the great beast.

We later found out just how dangerous buffalo can be. We heard that if they're frightened, they can run through a wagon load of people in seconds, scattering their remains. Hearing this disturbing news caused the hair on our arms to stand straight up!

When we were out of harm's way, Greg and I stood on the other side of the fence and resolved our conflict. I asked him to explain why he'd run.

"It really hurt when you called me a liar and a thief," Greg choked out, not looking at me. "I know what I did was wrong, but it really killed me to hear you say those things. Having them brought up again today only made it worse. I just wanted to forget the whole thing happened."

Hearing his pain, I realized my sarcasm had deeply hurt my son. I wanted to say I had just been kidding, but he needed to hear me say I was sorry. So I asked him to forgive me for attacking him as a person. Then I put my arms around him and held him for a few seconds. When I could tell he'd forgiven me, I said, "Watch out—the buffalo is right behind us!" He jumped about three feet into the air, and then we laughed about our adventure.

Although Greg had been in the wrong for taking the money, I had been equally wrong for flippantly calling him names. The anger that had developed in his heart had started to cause serious damage. But once I asked him to forgive me, the bitterness melted in his heart, and he was able to seek forgiveness as well. When we got back to the camper, Greg and Norma had a long talk. Our other two children, Kari and Michael, asked what had happened, and I simply said, "It's a long story. Greg will tell you later. In the meantime, let's just say that it will be a while before Greg wants to visit the buffalo exhibit at the zoo!"

As Norma and I were reminded through that experience with Greg, it's so important to *increase honor and decrease anger* in the hearts of our teenagers. (Seeking forgiveness for the wrong we've done is one of the most

honoring things we can do for one another.) In fact, doing those two things is the key to making our kids' teen years our best parenting years. What is it about increasing honor and decreasing anger that is so important in creating a healthy home? One word: *Safety*.

Creating a Safe Environment

People are designed to hunger for intimacy and deep connection. God designed us to connect with others and experience relational intimacy, especially in the key relationships within our families. This basic desire for intimacy can feel like a deep yearning.

If you are like us, you long for relationships in which you feel completely safe. You want to feel free to open up and reveal who you really are, share your deepest thoughts and dreams, and know that you will be loved, accepted, and valued—no matter what.

Yet, many of us—especially teenagers—struggle with various aspects of intimacy because it requires openness, and openness makes us vulnerable.

*Increasing Honor +
Decreasing
Anger = Safety*



We're not quite sure what others will say or do or how they'll use what they learn about us. This is why a lack of desire to connect—or an avoidance of intimacy in general—usually is an attempt to avoid feeling hurt, humiliated, embarrassed, or just plain uncomfortable.

As a way to lessen the risks involved, we come up with many strategies to try to connect without getting hurt. We put up walls and try to project an image we think people will approve of so that when they look at us through the camera lens, they like what they see. We may keep parts of ourselves closed and protected. We may ignore or deny how we actually feel. We may get angry or demanding as a way of distracting ourselves, or our family members, from our own vulnerability. There are a whole host of options we may use in an attempt to avoid relational risks. Unfortunately, these strategies usually limit the quality of the intimacy in our relationships because it's hard for people to get close to us if we're hiding behind a thick wall or a mask.

In spite of the risks, the potential benefits of an intimate relationship are many. Intimacy creates the ideal opportunity to: love deeply and be loved; experience a significant sense of belonging; have a clear sense of purpose in

life; have the ability to make a major difference in another's life; and have a way of fully expressing the best of who we are. As a result, we will look for ways to create that experience.

In order for intimacy and deep connection to occur, hearts must be open. This is why 1 Peter 1:22 says, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" (NIV).

For a moment, think of all the ways we try to create intimacy in our marriages. We learn about each other's love languages and emotional needs. We create romance by buying flowers and cards. We have candlelight dinners. We go on date nights with our spouse. We attend relationship conferences and read marriage books. We join small groups and talk about our marriages. While on some level these things appear reasonable, in reality they are unnecessarily difficult strategies due to our inherent resistance to the dangers of emotional vulnerability.

An easier approach is to focus significant time, attention, and energy on creating an environment that feels safe—physically, intellectually, spiritually, *and* emotionally. As mentioned, people are, by nature, inclined to want to be open and connect with others. Logically, openness can be understood as the default setting for human beings. No state of being takes less energy to maintain than openness that involves being yourself and just relaxing. Maintaining defenses, walls, and fortresses takes tremendous energy. Working to get people to see you a certain way, by projecting a certain image, or trying to get them to like or accept you also requires significant energy. Simply expressing who you are and "being" does not. As a result, when people feel truly safe they prefer to be open and use their life energy to live and create and enjoy life.

When people are together in a state of openness, intimacy naturally occurs. It doesn't necessarily require work or effort. It may or may not include words. The mistake many make—knowing that they want to experience intimacy and that openness is required—is to either throw open their hearts (which can be reckless) or to try to create intimacy by talking or some other activity. Either focus makes getting to true intimacy harder than necessary. The easier approach to intimacy is to focus on creating a safe environment for yourself, your spouse, and your children. When each person feels safe, you will be naturally inclined to relax and be open, and intimacy will simply happen.

Focus on Creating Safety

Let us say it again: *When people feel safe they are naturally inclined to open their hearts.* Safety will help you create a climate in which you can build open relationships that will grow and flourish. It will help you build relationships in which you and the other person will feel cherished, honored, and alive. It will set a soothing tone that will allow you to feel relaxed in your relationships.

If that sounds like paradise, maybe it's because Eden was a supremely safe place. Adam and Eve felt no fear there. Before their sin, they enjoyed an amazingly intimate relationship with God, themselves, and each other. The couple felt so close to one another that God described them as "united into one" (Genesis 2:24). Nothing came between Adam and Eve—not insecurities, not sharp differences of opinion, not even clothes! They were completely open with each other—no walls, no masks, no fear. Their relationship blossomed.

Ideally, your home should feel like the safest place on earth.



completely open with each other—no walls, no masks, no fear. Their relationship blossomed.

In your quest to have the "best of the best" in your marriage and family, we want to encourage you to make creating safety with your teens a top priority. Start this process by answering some basic questions:

1. 0–10 (with 10 being the most safe), how safe is my marriage for my spouse and me? For our children?
2. How have I made it unsafe for my spouse? For my children?
3. How do I make it unsafe for me?
4. What do I do in response to feeling unsafe?

When your teenager knows that you are committed to creating a safe environment, you begin building a foundation for a great relationship. Ideally, your home should feel like the safest place on earth.

How do you make your home feel safe—like it's the safest place on earth? By increasing honor and decreasing anger.

Increasing Honor and Decreasing Anger

We (Gary and Greg) feel so strongly about this subject that we decided years ago to write this book together. When we first wrote this book, I (Greg) was not long out of the teen years myself, so many of the changes and challenges

were still fresh in my mind. And in the hope of helping you to be a better parent to your own teen, I'm willing to discuss in these pages some of my problems and victories during those turbulent years.

In addition to recounting our family's experiences, to help provide the best information possible, we're going to offer what we've learned from surveying more than 5,000 former teenagers at our monthly seminar. We asked those adults to tell us two primary things:

1. *What were the best things your parents did for you during your adolescence?*
2. *What do you wish your parents had done differently?*

We have been stunned by the answers we got to these two questions, and we've sprinkled the results throughout the book.

For now, we'll tell you that both our experience and our research indicate that increasing honor and decreasing anger in the home are the two main principles in raising healthy teenagers. Talk about simplifying the struggles of adolescence! We're convinced that if these two things are dealt with daily, parents and their teens will find a much more satisfying life together, and teens will be much more open to their parents' advice. Also, a lot of the pain and heartache often associated with the teen years will be avoided.

In fact, increasing honor and decreasing anger make up the foundation of all healthy homes and relationships. Honor fortifies love; anger kills it—if left unresolved for weeks, months, or even years, anger becomes an acid that eats away love and maturity in teens as well as adults.¹ That's why everything we discuss throughout this book will run through these two themes. And that's why we want parents, teachers, coaches, doctors, youth ministers—anyone touching the lives of teenagers—to know about the great importance of honor and anger.

The Times Are Changing!

Adolescence. The word alone sends chills up the backs of many parents. It may seem like just yesterday that you and your teenager had a great relationship, one that didn't seem so confusing or frustrating. We're not suggesting that everything will become terrible as your son or daughter moves into adolescence. Every child is unique and will respond to the teenage years differently. What we can guarantee, however, is that things *will* change.

One reason adolescence can be so difficult for parents is that for the first

12 years you are accustomed to a certain type of relationship with your son or daughter. Then, sometimes even overnight, so many things can change. Unfortunately, we often resist change by either ignoring what's taking place or trying to continue using the same old habits. But failure to adapt to change usually leads to disaster, as the following story illustrates.

For many years, up into the late 1960s, Switzerland dominated the world of watchmaking. Most people who wanted a high-quality watch bought a Swiss watch. Over the next decade, however, the Swiss dominance eroded steadily. By the early 1980s, Switzerland's market share had collapsed to less than 10 percent. In an instant (historically speaking), it was no longer the market leader.

What caused this huge turnaround? The Swiss ran into a change in the way watches were made. In the past, all watches had used mechanical components like gears, bearings, and mainsprings. But then the industry turned to electronics. Suddenly, high-quality, dependable, and less-expensive watches could be bought from the Japanese and others. In less than 10 years, the "secure" Swiss watchmaking future was greatly diminished.

The irony was that the situation could have been avoided if only the Swiss had realized the kind of change they were facing. The Swiss themselves had invented the electronic quartz movement. Yet when their researchers presented this revolutionary technology to the Swiss

Both our experience and our research indicate that increasing honor and decreasing anger in the home are the two main principles in raising healthy teenagers.



manufacturers, it was rejected. In no way could this battery-powered, electronic device be the watch of the future, the watchmakers concluded. So they allowed their researchers to showcase this "inferior" invention at the World Watch Congress without a patent. A Japanese company took one look, and the rest, as they say, is history.²

For the past 12 years, you have become a "market leader" in the field of parenting. We hope you've become an expert at understanding the needs and desires of your child. But the times are changing as your child enters adolescence! Your teenager will face much transition, which we'll discuss throughout the book. As a parent, you need to keep from making the same mistake the Swiss made when faced with major changes. Instead of rejecting this new phase and trying to parent in

the same manner you always have, you'll want to learn new ways to relate to your teen.

We're not suggesting you disregard what has worked in the past. But you can learn new methods that can meet the specific needs of your teenager. You may already be doing many of the things we'll advise. If so, great—keep doing those things. You might also have found methods that work that we will not discuss. That's great, too. We know there are countless ways to parent a teen effectively. What we'll offer are those things that worked for our family. Our main desire is to help you understand the changing needs of the adolescent and develop appropriate parenting skills.

Not only is this a time when your children are changing, but it's also a time when you're changing. This can be a traumatic period for everyone in the family. Below are some of these “quartzlike” changes that can affect both parents and teens during adolescence:

Parents:

- Marital dissatisfaction is greater when the kids are teens than when the kids are infants or adults.
- Many parents go through an identity or midlife crisis. Homemakers, after having spent years raising their families, may want something different, like a job or more education. Also, some fathers realize their careers have not brought happiness. They might want a career change, education, hobbies, cars, or a girlfriend.
- Economic burdens increase.
- Many parents at this stage feel that their physical attractiveness is in decline.
- Caring for aging parents becomes a major responsibility.

Teenagers:

- Friends become very important.
- Dating relationships develop.
- Acne may cover their faces.
- They get jobs.
- Rebellion is a possibility.
- They're more concerned about what they wear.
- They develop a taste for loud music.
- They want more independence.
- Peer pressure is a major influence.

- Premarital sex is a temptation.
- Drug or alcohol use is another temptation.
- They're becoming separate individuals.
- They tend to have an optimistic outlook on the future, seeing the time available to them as unlimited.
- They're reaching or have reached their peak of physical attractiveness.
- Identity crises are common.

As you can see, these can be dramatic changes for both adolescents and parents. Some of the changes parents experience, such as a decline in physical looks, are going in the opposite direction for teens, who are as lean as they'll ever be as adults. This is just one of the many reasons why conflict with parents increases when children first hit adolescence.³ Also, parents' marital happiness hits its lowest level during the years when they have teen children.⁴

When parents enjoy each other and are happy with their relationship, they're more likely to spend pleasurable time with their teenagers and to emphasize family teamwork.



To deal with these changes, one of the best things parents can do is to work at keeping their marriage strong. The stress and tension of raising a teen can intensify any marital problems. When the couple feels unhappy in their relationship, the child is usually affected as well. Parents in conflict tend to express less concern and warmth toward their teenager and utilize stricter-than-usual discipline, creating increased emotional hardship for the child.⁵

Even when there's little conflict between parents, the overwhelming demands of providing such things as transportation and money, and of monitoring a teen's activities, can cause parents to neglect the marital relationship. This is why couples are more likely than usual to divorce when they have teenage children. But when parents enjoy each other and are happy with their relationship, they're more likely to spend pleasurable time with their teenagers and to emphasize family teamwork.⁶

It's also imperative for parents of teens to strengthen their personal relationship with God. This seems obvious, but the fact is that the same pressures that threaten the marital relationship tend to deprive parents of time with God as well. Regular time spent cultivating closeness with Him needs to be made and kept a high priority.

Your relationships with God and your spouse should form the foundation upon which you construct your parenting. In fact, we would go so far as to say that the building blocks we present in this book will not be effective if that foundation is not solid. Therefore, commit yourself to strengthening these two areas before attempting to enhance your adolescent-parenting skills.

Making the Teen Years Your Best Parenting Years

As we discuss the things vital to raising a teenager, we will run our key principles of increasing honor and decreasing anger through the finest grid that has ever been designed. It's made up of the two great commandments Jesus gave, which He said cover all the commandments in the Bible. Here they are:

1. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment.*
2. *“The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor [as you value] yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”⁷*

We believe that increasing honor and releasing anger daily is at the heart of following these commandments to love.

Love always implies value, worth, and honor. When love is used as a verb, it means to do something important for someone we consider valuable. When used as a noun, it denotes worth and great value placed on others and things. When we run our key principles through the grid of these two commandments, we arrive at these three specific goals in the area of increasing honor:

1. *Helping parents and teens to highly honor God*
2. *Helping parents and teens to highly honor others*
3. *Helping parents and teens to highly honor themselves*

By teaching our teens to honor God, others, and themselves, we're not just helping them and ourselves, but also hundreds of people in the future. Through our influence on any one teenager, we will affect more than 600 people in the next 100 years. Thus, the next several generations need for us to make wise decisions that will give them the best opportunity for successful lives. That's why we're looking for mothers and fathers, teachers, coaches, youth workers, and neighbors to join with us in breaking the past patterns

that have brought much suffering to modern families. We're hoping you also desire a real awakening in the way we raise our teenagers. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people in the future could look back on this period as a time when adults became strongly committed to the principle of raising teenagers with greater honor and love?

But this won't mean anything unless we, as parents, take our children seriously. We need to dedicate ourselves anew to laying a solid foundation in our marriages and in our relationship with God, and then to building healthy, honoring relationships with our teens.

The same lesson the Swiss watchmakers learned is our biggest encouragement to parents of adolescents: *Don't be afraid to change.* (Mistrust of change is exactly what cost 50,000 watchmakers their jobs.)

The chance to help our teenagers through this difficult time is such a great opportunity! Now more than ever, they need our love, encouragement, support, understanding, and time. One of the greatest things my (Greg's) parents did during my adolescence was to never stop saying they loved me. Although many times I didn't respond to their encouragement, I still heard every word.

Let us restate an important point: We're not suggesting you give up your current parenting methods if they're working. Instead, we're encouraging you to think in new ways and try new things. We're talking about adapting to the changing circumstances and utilizing what works during this period. Most of all, we want you to have hope that your experience with your teenager doesn't have to be as depressing as it was for the man who, before he had children, conducted a seminar titled "Rules for Raising Children." After he became a father, he changed the title to "*Suggestions* for Raising Children." Finally, when his kids reached their teen years, he discontinued the seminar altogether.

Remember, in most families there will be difficult periods and many trials. This is normal any time we enter a new phase of life. As you focus on getting more honor into your home and more anger out, God will reward your faithfulness. The Bible says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance."⁸

We're excited you're joining us in the quest to build better relationships with our teens. Your efforts will benefit not only your own children but also generations to come. In the next chapter, we'll begin to see how to increase honor by discovering one of the greatest principles in life, the "I'm Third" principle.

Study Guide

Chapter 1: Making the Teen Years Your Best Years

1. How can you apply the “increasing honor and decreasing anger” concept to create a sense of security within your home?
2. Are you taking steps to keep your marriage a priority? Raising a teen can be stressful; consider a few positive ways to continue nurturing your relationship with your mate.
3. Are you sensitive to your teen’s needs during this changing period of his or her life? Can you think of areas where you need to modify your parenting methods in order to meet your teen’s needs?

Activity: Creating a safe environment in your home begins with laying a secure foundation. You may need to reach out to your teen and make an effort to reopen the relationship. Perhaps you just need to spend some family time, showing your spouse and teen that they are a priority to you. If you aren’t in the habit of having dinner as a family (and even if you are), set a date for a special dinner where every (immediate) family member is present. Be sure to work around schedules. This isn’t meant to be drudgery; the purpose is to develop a comfortable and open relationship. Initiate conversation and really listen to your teen.

Chapter 2: Honor: The Greatest Principle of Life

1. The Smalleys live by the “I’m Third” principle. Are you setting that same example for your family? Read Matthew 22:37-39 as a family and discuss God’s commandments about loving God and loving others.
2. Chapter 2 presents four possible ways to honor your teen. If honor can be defined as genuine love in action, what are some ways that you can show honor to those you love? Can you think of a specific time when someone honored you? How did you feel? What about a time you felt dishonored?

Notes

Chapter One

1. "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity" (Ephesians 4:26-27). For an in-depth understanding of anger, see Dr. Gary Oliver and Norm Wright's excellent book titled *When Anger Hits Home*.
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7. Matthew 22:37-40.
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Chapter Two

1. *The Denver Post*.
2. Matthew 22:37-39.
3. Psalm 127:3.
4. Matthew 6:21.
5. D. Kalmuss, "The Intergenerational Transmission of Marital Aggression," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (1984): 11-19.
6. K. D. Craig, "Social Modeling Influences: Pain in Context," in *The Psychology of Pain*, ed. R. A. Sternbach (New York: Raven Press, 1986), 67-95.

The National Institute of Marriage

The National Institute of Marriage (formally known as the Smalley Marriage Institute) was founded by Dr. Greg Smalley, and consists of a team of marriage experts with a wide variety of training and experience but one single passion—to make an eternal difference in the lives of couples. Through their nationally recognized Couples Intensivesm program, the Marriage Intensivesm program, and their various conferences, retreats and other enrichment events, the Institute team is providing couples with insight and skills that can set them free from the barriers that keep them from experiencing a thriving marriage. The Institute is also committed to offering products and training opportunities to get meaningful, life changing information in as many hands as possible, and to equip individuals working with marriages to be more effective and successful.



For more information on these programs and services,
or to inquire about speaking engagements,
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The Center for Relationship Enrichment John Brown University

Enriching relationships for a lifetime.

The Center for Relationship Enrichment (CRE), under the leadership of Dr. Gary Oliver, equips people for healthy relationships through biblically-based consulting, education, enrichment, resources, research and assessment. Several initiatives or programs that the CRE uses to accomplish its mission and vision include:

1. CHURCH RELATIONSHIP INITIATIVE

An important part of the mission of the CRE is to partner with church leaders to increase their effectiveness in ministering to the wide range of personal and interpersonal needs represented by those in their congregation. As a part of this mission, CRE has designed the Church Relationships Survey.

2. CONSULTING AND TRAINING SERVICES

The CRE offers consulting and training services to Christian leaders and organizations in order to contribute to the effectiveness and health of personal and interpersonal ministries. As part of our Church Initiative, we administer the CRE Church Relationship Assessment. The survey gives us detailed and specific information on the health and effectiveness of the relational ministries that are being offered to the church congregation. This information is then given to the staff, pastors, elders, deacons and lay leaders.

For more information about the Church Survey, the Church Relationships Survey, or consulting and training services, please contact Judy Shoop at (479) 524-7105 or jshoop@jbu.edu.

3. SPECIAL SPEAKING

The CRE speaking team, including Dr. Gary and Carrie Oliver and Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley, is well equipped to provide you with the necessary tools for enriching marriage and family relationships. We would love the opportunity to discuss your specific needs and customize a speaking event that will have maximum impact for you. To schedule our speakers, please contact us at (479) 524-7105 or cmfs@jbu.edu.