

The Mom Factor

Five Insights on the Discipleship Multiplier
Most Churches Often Overlook

A new resource from Barna
produced in partnership with
The MomCo

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Introduction: Why The “Mom Factor” Matters

Most church leaders don't need a research report to know that families are struggling. You feel it in the prayer requests, in the after-service conversations, in the tired faces of parents who got everyone dressed and out the door on a Sunday morning and are just trying to hold it together.

You already know parenting today is hard.

What this research does is sharpen the picture and point toward specific ways churches can help.

Barna's data, drawn from surveys with both parents, pastors and practicing Christians, consistently shows that moms are among the most formative spiritual influences in a person's life. Not Sunday school teachers or youth pastors (though those matter). Moms. Faith tends to be first modeled, questioned and embodied at home, and more often than not, a mother is the one holding that space. Yet the same research reveals something worth sitting with: Many moms don't experience their church as a place where they feel genuinely understood or equipped for that role.

That gap matters. It exists not because pastors don't care—most do—but because caring isn't the same as clarity. And when you're already stretched across preaching, pastoral care, staff, finances and everything else the job requires, clarity about where discipleship leverage actually lives can be hard to come by.

This insight guide walks through five key findings from Barna's research. Together they trace what we're calling the “mom factor”—the outsized spiritual influence moms already carry, the pressures quietly working against them and the ways churches can show up differently. The goal isn't more programs or a longer to-do list. It's a clearer way of seeing, so the time and energy leaders already invest can go where it matters most.





A Note from Mandy Arioto, President & CEO of The MomCo

I've been listening to moms for more than two decades.

In MomCo groups and church lobbies. In parking lots and text threads. In the kind of honest conversations that only happen when someone finally feels safe enough to say what's actually true. And if I had to summarize what I've heard across all of it, it would be this: Moms care deeply about their faith, their kids and the kind of people their children are becoming. They are paying close attention.

Many of them are doing it largely alone.

That's not an overstatement. The moms I know are often the first ones to hear their children's hardest questions—about death, about God, about whether any of this is real—long before those questions ever reach a pastor or youth leader. They're navigating faith formation in real time, in the middle of everything else life demands. And often doing it while quietly wondering if they're getting it right.

What makes this research so valuable—conducted with both parents and pastors, which matters—is that it puts language and data around something I've observed for years but couldn't always prove. The spiritual influence moms have isn't peripheral; it's central to how faith gets transmitted across generations. A mom's confidence in her own faith, her sense of being equipped, the degree to which she feels genuinely known by her church all ripples outward, into her kids, her home, and the future of the Church itself.

And yet many moms feel unseen. Underequipped. More like a ministry recipient than someone the church actually sees as a leader.

That's the tension this guide is trying to name.

It's not a failure of care. Pastors love their people—I know that. But there's a difference between caring about moms and knowing how to close the distance. This research, I think, helps with the second part.

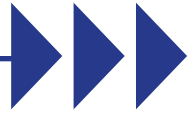
My hope is that you don't read this primarily as a list of things to fix. Read it as a way of seeing. Look at the moms in your congregation and ask not just “how do we serve them better?” but “do they know we see them?” Because moms flourish when they're truly known. Not managed. Not celebrated once a year in May. Known.

That's the kind of church worth building.

INSIGHT 1:

**Moms Are One of
the Most Effective
Disciple-Makers in
the Church**





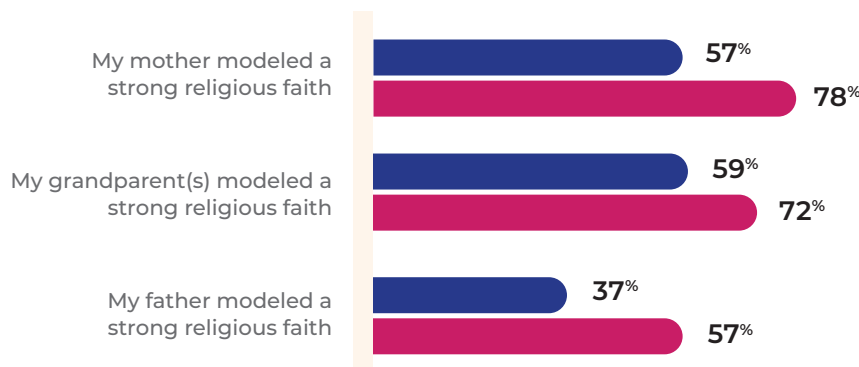
One of the clearest findings in this research is also one of the most affirming: Moms matter profoundly when it comes to spiritual formation.

Among practicing Christians, more than three-quarters (78%) say their mother modeled a strong religious faith. For fathers, that number is more than 20 percentage points lower (57%). That's not a small gap—it points to something consistent across generations. When faith gets passed on, moms are most often the ones doing the passing.

Practicing Christians Say Their Mom Modeled Faith

Thinking about the adults (parents / guardians, teachers, coaches, pastors), community and friends who were in your life growing up, to what extent would you say were true?

● All U.S. adults ● Practicing Christians



n=2,003 U.S. Adults, November 2023. | % Completely true + Somewhat true

The Gen Z data sharpens the picture even further. When teens ages 13–17 were asked who they trust most with questions about faith or spirituality, “my mom” ranked first—named by more than half (53%) of teens, outpacing even the Bible (37%). In a generation often described as skeptical of institutions and resistant to authority, teenagers are still turning to their moms first with their hardest spiritual questions.

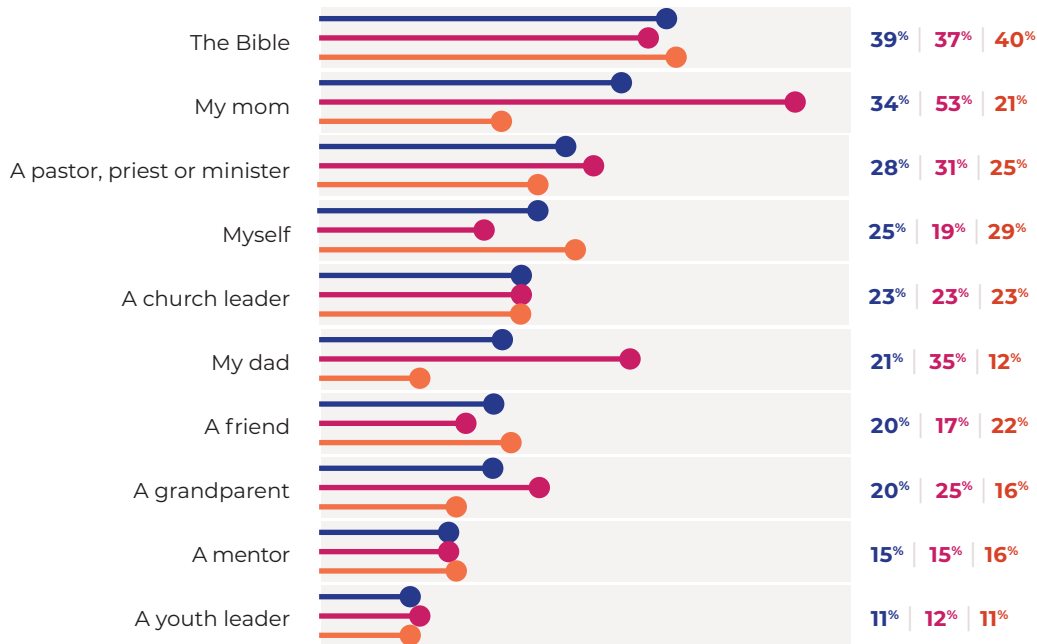
What this tells us isn't simply that moms are influential. It's *how* they're influential. Faith isn't primarily passed down through formal instruction. It's *absorbed* through proximity, presence, daily practice. Moms are often the ones answering questions at bedtime, modeling prayer under pressure, translating faith into language their kids can actually understand.

INSIGHT 1

Top 10 Sources Gen Z Trust with Their Spiritual Questions

If you had questions about your faith or spirituality, who or what would you consider a trustworthy source?

● All Gen Z ● Ages 13–17 ● Ages 18–24



n=2,000 U.S. teens and young adults ages 13–24, August 23–30, 2023.

For church leaders, this reframes discipleship in an important way. The most consistent, high-frequency spiritual formation happening in your congregation may not be in classrooms or Sunday services. It's in kitchens and cars and living rooms, led by moms.

The opportunity isn't to replace that influence. It's to reinforce it. When churches invest in equipping moms—with confidence, language, support—they are effectively multiplying discipleship well beyond the walls of any building.

INSIGHT 2:

**Moms Feel Less Seen
and Understood by the
Church Than Dads**





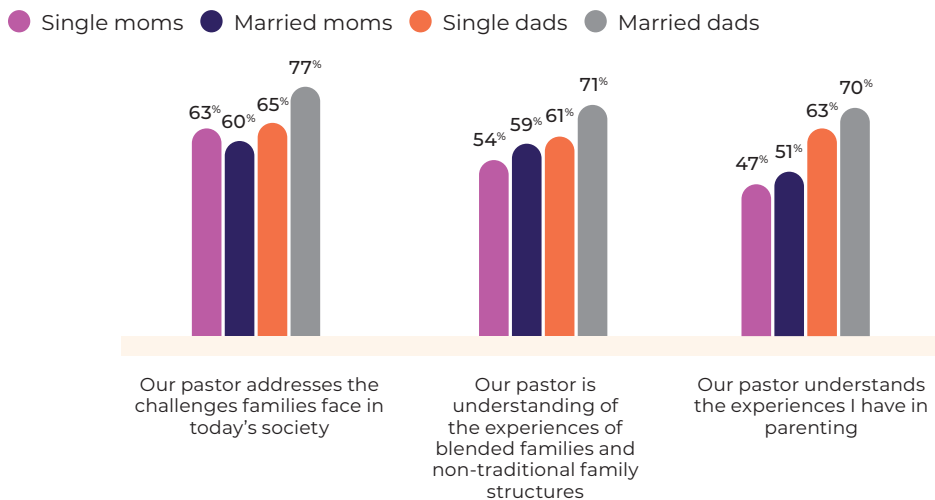
The influence of moms is clear. Their experience of church is more complicated.

Across multiple measures, moms consistently score lower than dads when it comes to feeling understood, supported, and equipped by their church. The gaps are not subtle. When asked whether their pastor understands the experiences they have in parenting, only 47 percent of single moms say yes vs. 63 percent of single dads. About half (51%) of married moms say yes, compared to seven in ten (70%) married dads. Similar gaps show up on related questions, especially for married parents: whether their pastor addresses the challenges families face today (60% of married moms vs. 77% married dads), and whether their pastor understands the experiences of blended and nontraditional families (59% of married moms vs. 71% of married dads).

Married Dads Are Most Likely to Say Pastors “Get” Today’s Families

Thinking about the experience you have had in your church, parish or faith community, are the following true for you?

Base: U.S. adults who have children and are Christians or church attendees | % yes



n=1,537 U.S. adults, August 16–29, 2024.

On whether their church has equipped them to disciple their children, only 44 percent of single moms and 50 percent of married moms agree, compared to 54 percent of single dads and 65 percent of married dads. On whether their children are growing in faith because of their church, 54 percent of single moms and 58 percent of married moms say yes, versus 59 percent of single dads and 69 percent of married dads.

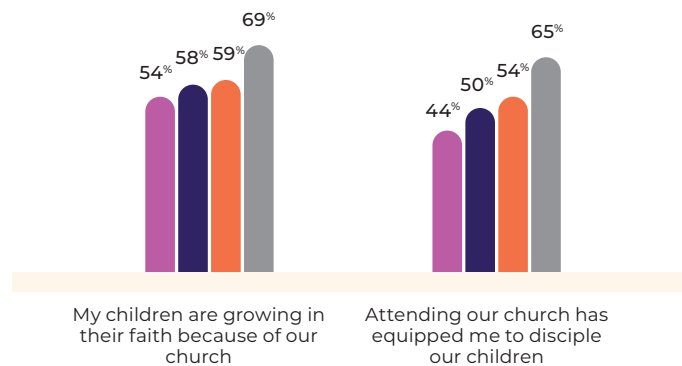
INSIGHT 2

Married Dads Feel Most Supported for Family Faith Formation

Thinking about the experience you have had in your church, parish or faith community, are the following true for you?

Base: U.S. adults who have children and are Christians or church attendees | % yes

Single moms Married moms Single dads Married dads



n=1,537 U.S. adults, August 16–29, 2024.

This doesn't mean moms are checked out or hostile to their churches. Many are still showing up faithfully. But the data points to something quieter and more worth paying attention to: Moms often feel unrecognized in the weight they carry.

That's an important distinction for pastors. Disengagement doesn't usually begin with disagreement. It begins with feeling unseen. When moms sense that their lived reality isn't fully understood by the people leading their church, they tend not to bring their real questions, their real struggles, their real family complexities into church spaces.

The result isn't a loud announcement that "I'm leaving." Usually, it's a silent retreat out the back door.

INSIGHT 3:

**Feeling Understood
by Church Leaders
Dramatically Reduces
Shame and Loneliness**





This may be the most striking finding in the entire dataset.

Among moms who say their church leaders understand the unique needs of mothers, only about one in seven (15%) regularly feel lonely or isolated. Among moms who don't feel understood, that number more than doubles to one-third (33%).

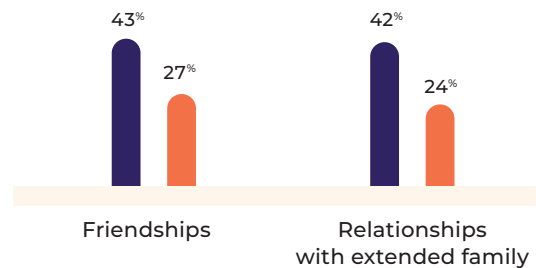
Moms on Their Relationships with Others

- Moms **with** church leaders who understand the unique needs of mothers
- Moms **without** church leaders who understand the unique needs of mothers

Moms who regularly feel lonely and isolated from others

15% vs. **33%**

% of moms very satisfied with ...



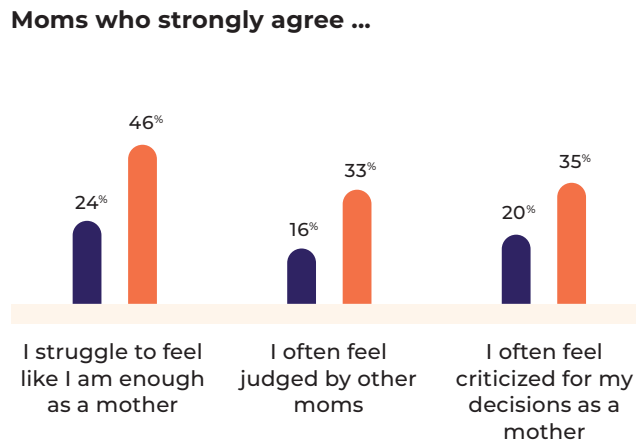
n=691 U.S. self-identified Christian mothers of children under 18, October 12–20, 2022.

The ripple effect goes further than that. Moms with understanding church leaders are significantly more satisfied with their friendships (43% vs. 27%) and their relationships with extended family (42% vs. 24%). The pattern holds around shame, too. Moms without understanding leadership are nearly twice as likely to say they struggle to feel like they're "enough" as a mom (46% vs. 24%), twice as likely to say they feel judged by other moms (33% vs. 16%), and more likely to feel criticized for their parenting decisions (35% vs. 20%).

INSIGHT 3

Moms on Their Relationships with Others

- Moms **with** church leaders who understand the unique needs of mothers
- Moms **without** church leaders who understand the unique needs of mothers



n=691 U.S. self-identified Christian mothers of children under 18, October 12–20, 2022.

These aren't marginal differences. They suggest something foundational about what church culture actually does to people. When moms experience church as a place of genuine empathy, it functions as a buffer—not just against church-related stress, but against loneliness and shame that touch every part of their lives. When they don't, churches, even unintentionally, can quietly reinforce those same struggles.

For leaders, this is both sobering and hopeful. Pastoral posture—how you listen, how you speak, how you respond when someone shares something hard—can be just as formative as any program you offer. Creating a culture of understanding doesn't require having all the answers. It requires curiosity, humility, and a willingness to actually *hear* people.

INSIGHT 4:

**Young Moms Are
Parenting Under
Serious Pressure**



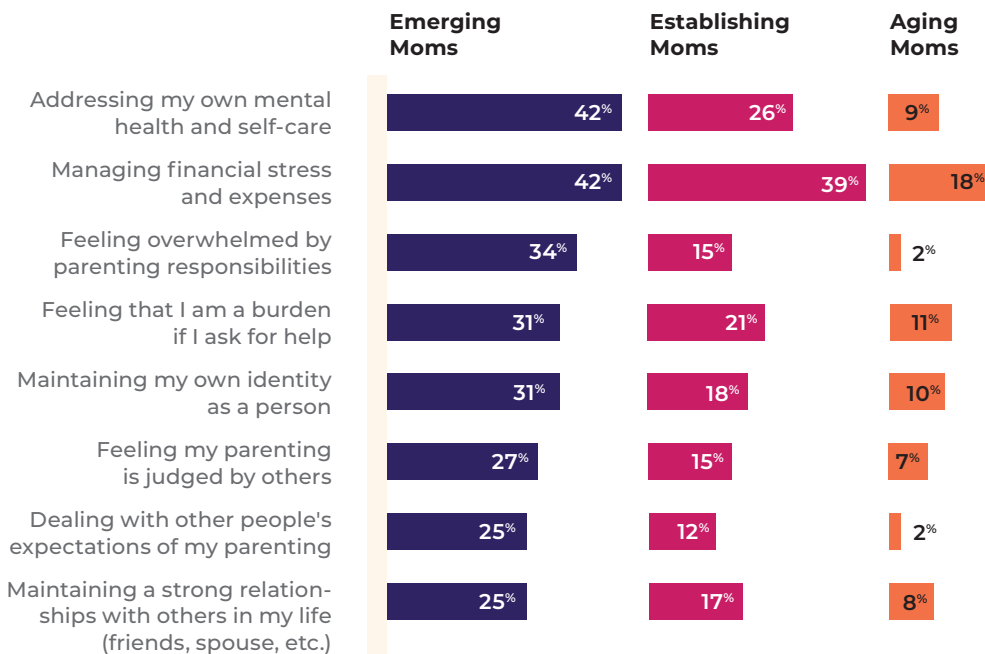
INSIGHT 4



All moms feel pressure. But the data is clear that young adult moms are carrying a particularly heavy load.

Among young moms ages 18–35, more than two-fifths report dealing with mental health or self-care challenges (42%), are managing financial stress (42%), and feel overwhelmed by parenting responsibilities (34%). These numbers are consistently higher than those reported by middle-aged and older adult moms. Young adult moms (ages 18–35) report the highest levels of stress across nearly every category.

Which of the following personal challenges are you currently facing as a parent?

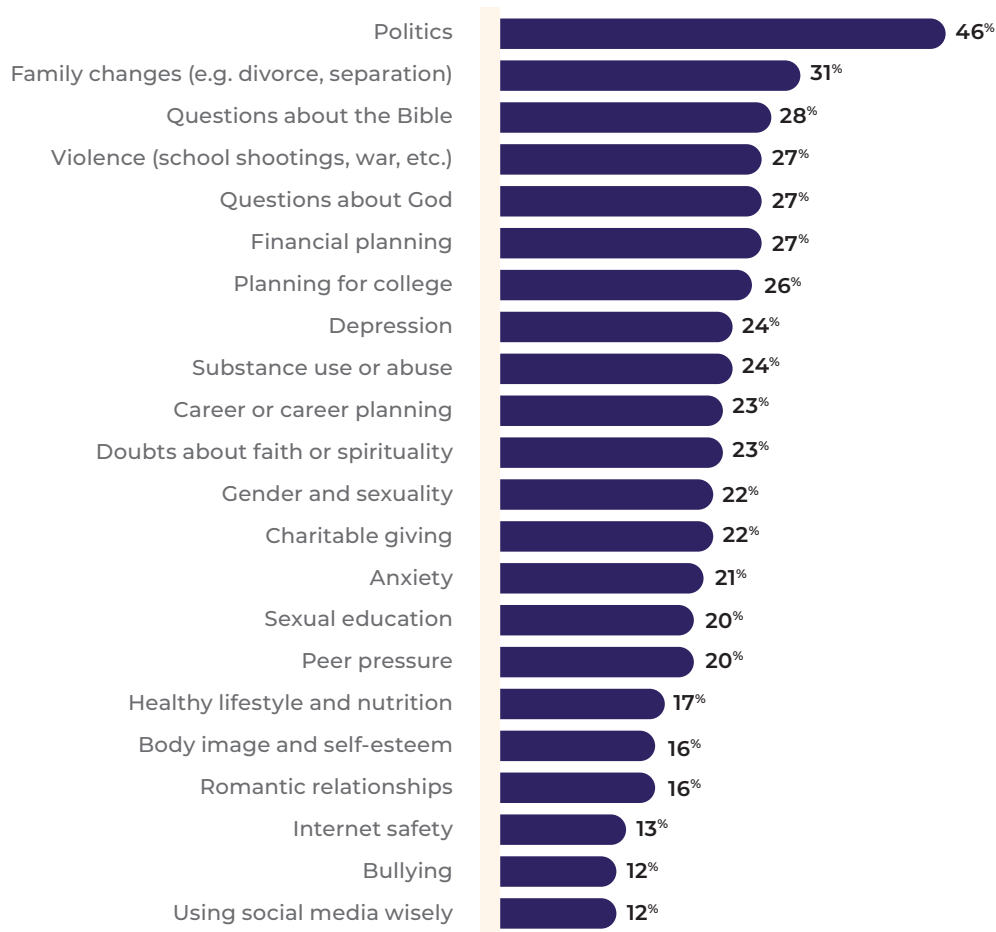


n=1,053 U.S. Moms, August 16-29, 2024.

That pressure shows up alongside a significant sense of being unequipped for some of parenting's hardest conversations. The topics where young moms feel least equipped are telling: depression (24% say they're least equipped), gender and sexuality (22%), anxiety (21%), sexual education (20%), peer pressure (20%) and family changes like divorce or separation (17%). These aren't fringe issues. They're the conversations that come up at the dinner table, in the car, at bedtime—often without warning.

INSIGHT 4

Young Adulthood Moms | Least Equipped



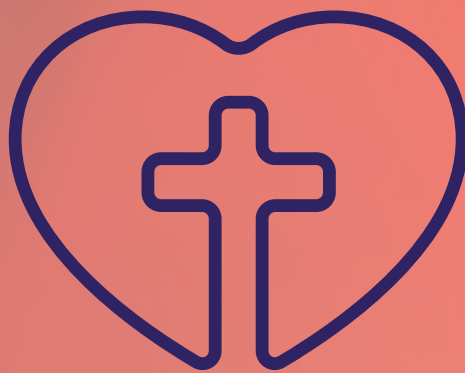
n=235 Moms Ages 18 to 35, August 16-29, 2024.

This generation is parenting without many clear maps. Most young Christian moms are deeply committed to raising thoughtful, faith-filled kids. They're just not always sure how to do that in a cultural moment that keeps shifting under their feet.

Churches that recognize this have a real opportunity. Investing in young moms isn't just about meeting an immediate need. It's an investment in the long-term health and resilience of the church itself.

INSIGHT 5:

**Understanding Drives
Engagement More Than
Programming**





The research draws a direct line between feeling understood and staying engaged.

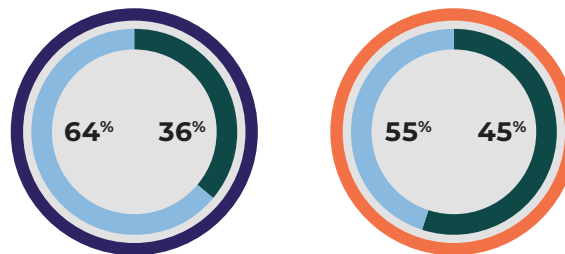
Among moms who feel their church leaders understand them, almost two thirds (64%) say they are actively involved in church. Among those who don't feel understood, that drops to a little more than half (55%). On its own, a nine-percentage-point gap might not seem dramatic. But it reflects something real: Engagement follows trust. Moms lean in—they serve, they invest, they bring others—when they feel seen as whole people, not just as volunteers or ministry recipients.

Moms on Their Current Church Involvement

- Moms **with** church leaders who understand the unique needs of mothers
- Moms **without** church leaders who understand the unique needs of mothers

Today, how involved are you with your church?

◆ Involved ◆ Not involved



n=691 U.S. self-identified Christian mothers of children under 18, October 12–20, 2022.

For leaders who feel pressure to build more programs or create more entry points, this finding is important. Relational credibility often does more work than a full calendar. The moms in your church don't primarily need another event. Many of them just need to know that someone in leadership actually gets it.

Guest Contributors

Moms' Voices



Andrea Fortenberry is a writer, speaker and Bible teacher, and the host of *The Perfectionist's Guide to Mothering*, a podcast that equips moms to find freedom from perfectionism and show up for the life God has for them. She has been married to Will for 18 years and they have two children, ages 14 and 11. She and her family live outside of Phoenix, Arizona.

Sarah Ferraro believes that when moms belong, beautiful things happen. She mentors and equips women to find real connection and live into their truest identities. When she's not pursuing these passions, she's on her own journey as a homeschooling mother of three and wife to her husband of 17 years. You might find Sarah refueling on a jog, but it won't be long before she's back to her people, rallying for a family game night or encouraging friends over dinner and a good conversation.



Laurie Jarvis is a wife, mother, restaurateur and leadership coach based in Jacksonville, Florida. She and her husband are parents to two wild, fun, and adventurous boys, and her favorite pastime is cheering them on at baseball games, swim meets and on the basketball court.



Guest Contributors

Pastors' Voices



Jay Kim is a pastor, author and speaker whose work focuses on faith formation in the digital age. He is the author of *Analog Church* and *Analog Christian*, and serves in pastoral ministry in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Amy Seiffert is a speaker, Bible teacher and the author of *Starved: How Fasting Can Set Us Free*. She serves on staff at Mosaic Church in Findlay, Ohio, where she leads discipleship initiatives and advocates for women's voices in ministry leadership.



Bryan Loritts is a pastor, author and church leadership consultant. He has planted and led churches in Memphis, New York, the Bay Area and Raleigh-Durham, and is the author of several books, including *Insider Outsider*. He is a sought-after voice on church culture, diversity and equipping the next generation of leaders.



MOMS' PERSPECTIVES

1. Reflecting on the Research and the Current State of Motherhood

“The statistic that really stood out to me was that only a small percentage of Christian moms feel they’re meaningfully contributing to the world on a regular basis. I went into motherhood working full-time, then moved to part-time, and eventually stayed home when I had two kids. And I really did feel like my world had shrunk. Like my offerings to the world were minimal—because I was covered in spit-up and changing diapers and spending most of my time at home.

“I didn’t feel like those things were life-changing. Even though now I would say they absolutely were. I think that’s the real need—moms need to know that however they’re mothering, whether they’re working full-time, staying home, or some combination of both, they are contributing something. They are changing the world by raising their kids, disciplining them, loving them.

Andrea Fortenberry

“Hearing all of these stats just brings truth to what I’ve been seeing. The stats don’t lie. You become a mom and you kind of feel like you’re ‘just a mom’—and I don’t even like that phrase. Because we know this work is meaningful. But moms don’t always know that. They need to be told. And they need to actually believe it.

“There’s something deep in moms that craves to know we’re contributing to society in a meaningful way—that we’re changing the world. And yet, especially in those early years, there’s this really hard disconnect between what is true and what it feels like is true. That’s why this conversation matters so much.”

Sarah Ferraro

“What struck a chord with me was the reality that churches so often don’t provide materials or support specifically for women as mothers. Because honestly, that has been my experience. I love our pastor. He walks us through the Word, he partners with us in growing—but as a mother, I need community with other moms who understand my particular struggles. And my particular victories.

“Statistically, moms are some of the most influential people in their households when it comes to leading their families to Jesus. And yet we’re also suffering with loneliness, surviving the demands of post-pandemic life, walking through real anger and defeat. That feels like an all-time high among the moms I talk to.

Laurie Jarvis

2. Practical Insights and Advice for Church Leaders

“ I would remind pastors that motherhood is hard and lonely, and moms need encouragement to know that what they're doing matters. We also need to be seen as the leaders and influencers we are. Moms are often handling so much in the home—not just faith conversations, but everyday decisions, rhythms, relationships.

“When moms need advice, they ask other moms. What are you doing, what's working, what do you love? Moms are genuinely some of the best word-of-mouth communicators there are. So when you meet a real need and give a mom a real solution, she is going to tell people. She's going to bring her friends.

Andrea Fortenberry _____ ”

“ Through MOPS—and honestly just through walking alongside women for years—I've seen so many stories of moms coming in and being transformed because they felt seen and known and loved. Especially for a nonbeliever, it can be such a non-threatening way to step onto a church campus. They hear there's hot coffee and uninterrupted conversation and childcare, and they think, okay, sign me up.

“What they don't always realize is that when they enter a truly safe space, God begins to meet them there. And when a mom meets Jesus, it doesn't stop with her. It pours out onto her kids, her spouse, the rest of her life. So if I were talking to church leaders, I'd say: Resource the mom, lean into the mom, create a genuinely safe space for her on your campus—because the impact is exponential.

Sarah Ferraro _____ ”

“ I believe discipleship groups are necessary and impactful—I want that to be clear. But if we're not connecting with the mom holistically, in this particular season of her life, then at best we keep her engaged without ever recognizing her full potential as a leader. And at worst, we lose her altogether.

“What moms need is intentional community. A sisterhood that lets everybody be messy, that makes room for complications, that allows for authentic relationships where people can actually dig deep and make room for Jesus. When a church creates that kind of environment, you will see life change. Because moms will not be afraid to go out and be kingdom influencers.

Laurie Jarvis _____ ”

1. Responding to the Research

“One of the most sobering things for me in the research is how little difference many mothers experience between Christian and non-Christian environments. That should challenge us. If the gospel really is good news, it should show up in tangible ways in the everyday lives of mothers. If moms aren’t experiencing meaningful support, or real relief from shame and loneliness, inside the church, we have to ask whether we’re actually embodying what we proclaim.

“I don’t think this is primarily a critique of pastors’ intentions. Most leaders deeply care. But care doesn’t always translate into lived experience. Mothers can show up faithfully week after week and still feel unseen—still feel like they’re carrying everything alone. That gap between what we intend and what they experience is something we have to take seriously.

Jay Kim ————— ”

“What stood out to me was how often mothers are the ones family members go to when they want to talk about faith. I’m seeing that in my own home, with my middle schooler and high schooler wanting to process spiritual questions with me. That influence is real. And I want to see moms helping shape those same conversations inside the church, not just at home.

“What the research highlights for me is how powerful understanding really is. When moms feel understood by church leaders, shame and loneliness begin to loosen their grip. That tells me this isn’t just an emotional issue—it’s a discipleship issue. It matters who’s being listened to, who’s helping shape the conversation, whether moms feel like their real lives are being taken seriously.

Amy Seiffert ————— ”

“What strikes me is that we do moms a real disservice when we only look at them through a one-dimensional lens. I’ve pastored in Memphis, where single-income homes were much more common. I’ve pastored in New York and the Bay Area, where dual-income homes were far more common. And now I’m in Raleigh-Durham, where you see all kinds of family dynamics and highly educated, high-capacity women.

“The research calls us to broader vision. There isn’t one kind of mom, one set of pressures, one uniform need. If the church only sees motherhood through a single lens, we will miss—and underserve—a lot of women sitting right in front of us.

Bryan Loritts ————— ”

2. How to Engage and Empower Moms

“If we truly believe that moms are shaping the faith of the next generation in kitchens and cars and bedtime routines, then our theology of discipleship has to take that seriously—not just rhetorically, but structurally. It should shape how we design ministry, how we define leadership, whose voices are present when decisions get made.

“For me, it starts with the most basic truth: Before a mother is anything else, she is a beloved daughter of God. So much is expected of moms—spiritually, emotionally, practically. The church has to be a place where they are also seen and known and cared for.

Jay Kim _____

”

“Before asking a mom to serve again, I want the church to ask how it can serve her. What a young mom with babies needs is very different from what a mom with teenagers needs. It begins with a compassionate listening posture—and listening is not passive. It is deeply formative. When moms feel heard, trust begins to grow, and discipleship becomes possible.

“And if mothers are shaping faith in the home every day, then their wisdom belongs at the table where ministry decisions are made—not just in task-based volunteer roles. I want to see moms helping shape conversations inside the church, not just carrying influence at home.

Amy Seiffert _____

”

“One practical place to start is language. Even the faith-and-work conversation—as crucial as that is—can be subconsciously catered to men. But if you look at Proverbs 31, you see a woman who is a mom and highly entrepreneurial at the same time. When churches talk about leadership, calling, work, influence—be intentional in saying this includes women and mothers too.

“The other major area is community. After COVID, I tell church planters and leaders: People can access preaching anywhere. You can’t podcast community. Churches need varied, meaningful ways for moms to connect—whether that’s a Word-driven environment, something more relational or honestly just giving moms a break and taking the kids off their hands for a stretch. All of that is deeply empowering. And when moms can engage in ways that actually fit their season, they are much more likely to step in—and to bring others with them.

Bryan Loritts _____

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From Insights to Action:

Five Practical Steps for Church Leaders

The research points to a clear conclusion: Churches don't need to invent a new ministry to reach moms. They need to more intentionally support the spiritual leaders moms already are. Here are five practical steps grounded in the data.

1. Publicly Name and Affirm Moms as Spiritual Leaders

Language matters. When pastors and leaders consistently name moms as spiritual leaders—from the pulpit, in leadership conversations, and in vision casting—it reshapes expectations. Moms begin to see their everyday faithfulness as meaningful ministry, not just personal responsibility.

2. Lead with Listening Before Leading with Solutions

Many moms aren't asking for answers as much as they're asking to be understood. Creating listening spaces, formal or informal, signals respect and builds trust. This could be as simple as asking better questions in a sermon or creating feedback loops that genuinely inform leadership decisions.

3. Equip Moms for Faith and Cultural Conversations at Home

Moms don't need more content; they need confidence. Churches can help by offering simple, accessible tools that equip moms to navigate faith conversations with their kids, especially around complex cultural topics, without needing to be experts.

4. Reduce Barriers to Engagement Rather Than Increasing Expectations

Flexibility matters. Childcare, scheduling, and seasonal rhythms all impact moms' ability to engage. Churches that design involvement pathways around real life—rather than idealized availability—create space for sustainable participation.

5. Invite Moms into Meaningful Leadership, Not Just Service

Where can moms not just serve but lead? Many of them have wisdom, discernment, and leadership gifts shaped precisely by their parenting experience. Inviting them into decision-making and mentoring roles signals trust and unlocks long-term impact.



Conclusion: Seeing What's Already There

The future of discipleship does not rest on creating something new. It rests on recognizing what God is already doing.

Moms are already leading. They are already discipling. They are already shaping faith in powerful ways—in kitchens and cars and bedtime conversations, in the questions they answer and the prayers they model and the faith they embody every single day.

The invitation for church leaders is both simple and significant: Will we see them? Will we support them? Will we walk alongside them as the spiritual leaders God has already called them to be?

The data gives us reason for hope. When churches move toward moms with genuine understanding, intentional equipping, and authentic community, the impact extends well beyond the mom herself. It reaches her children, her household, her network. It ripples through the congregation and into the next generation.

The mom factor is already at work in your church. These insights offer an invitation to join it. When we do, discipleship increases and transformation results.





Methodology

The data in this Insight Guide is drawn from multiple Barna Group research studies conducted with U.S. parents and pastors:

- Barna Group survey of 2,003 U.S. Adults, November 2023. Data used for faith modeling findings (Insight 1).
- Barna Group survey of 2,000 U.S. teens and young adults ages 13–24, August 2023. Data used for Gen Z trust findings (Insight 1).
- Barna Group survey of 1,537 U.S. adults who have children and are Christians or church attendees, August 16–29, 2024. Data used for church experience comparisons (Insight 2).
- Barna Group survey of 691 U.S. self-identified Christian mothers of children under 18, October 12–20, 2022. Data used for loneliness, shame, and engagement findings (Insights 3 and 5).
- Barna Group survey of 1,053 U.S. Moms. Data used for personal challenges findings (Insight 4).
- Barna Group survey of 235 Moms Ages 18–35. Data used for equipped/least equipped findings (Insight 4).

All research was conducted by Barna Group. This Insight Guide was produced in partnership with MomCo. Commentary from guest contributors was lightly edited from recorded interviews for clarity and length.