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Sunday School for Atheists

By Jeninne Lee-St. John / Palo Alto

On Sunday mornings, most parents who don't believe in the Christian God, or any god at all, are probably making brunch or cheering at their kids' soccer game, or running errands or, with luck, sleeping in. Without religion, there's no need for church, right?

Maybe. But some nonbelievers are beginning to think they might need something for their children. "When you have kids," says Julie Willey, a design engineer, "you start to notice that your co-workers or friends have church groups to help teach their kids values and to be able to lean on." So every week, Willey, who was raised Buddhist and says she has never believed in God, and her husband pack their four kids into their blue minivan and head to the Humanist Community Center in Palo Alto, Calif., for atheist Sunday school.

An estimated 14% of Americans profess to have no religion, and among 18-to-25-year-olds, the proportion rises to 20%, according to the Institute for Humanist Studies. The lives of these young people would be much easier, adult nonbelievers say, if they learned at an early age how to respond to the God-fearing majority in the U.S. "It's important for kids not to look weird," says Peter Bishop, who leads the preteen class at the Humanist center in Palo Alto. Others say the weekly instruction supports their position that it's O.K. to not believe in God and gives them a place to reinforce the morals and values they want their children to have.

The pioneering Palo Alto program began three years ago, and like-minded communities in Phoenix, Albuquerque, N.M., and Portland, Ore., plan to start similar classes next spring. The growing movement of institutions for kids in atheist families also includes Camp Quest, a group of sleep-away summer camps in five states plus Ontario, and the Carl Sagan Academy in Tampa, Fla., the country's first Humanism-influenced public charter school, which opened with 55 kids in the fall of 2005. Bri Kneisley, who sent her son Damian, 10, to Camp Quest Ohio this past summer, welcomes the sense of community these new choice offer him: "He's a child of atheist parents, and he's not the only one in the world."

Kneisley, 26, a graduate student at the University of Missouri, says she realized Damian needed to learn about secularism after a neighbor showed him the Bible. "Damian was quite certain this guy was right and was telling him this amazing truth that I had never shared," says Kneisley. In most ways a traditional sleep-away camp--her son loved canoeing--Camp Quest also taught Damian critical thinking, world religions and tales of famous freethinkers (an umbrella term for atheists, agnostics and other rationalists) like the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

The Palo Alto Sunday family program uses music, art and discussion to encourage personal expression, intellectual curiosity and collaboration. One Sunday this fall found a dozen children up to age 6 and several parents playing percussion instruments and singing empowering anthems like I'm Unique and Unrepeatable, set to the tune of Ten Little Indians, instead of traditional Sunday-school songs like Jesus Loves Me. Rather than listen to a Bible story, the class read Stone Soup, a secular parable of a traveler who feeds a village by making a stew using one ingredient from each home.

Down the hall in the kitchen, older kids engaged in a Socratic conversation with class leader Bishop about the role persuasion plays in decision-making. He tried to get them to see that people who are coerced into renouncing their beliefs might not actually change their minds but could be acting out of self-preservation--an important lesson for young atheists who may feel pressure to say they believe in God.

Atheist parents appreciate this nurturing environment. That's why Kitty, a nonbeliever who didn't want her last name used to protect her kids' privacy, brings them to Bishop's class each week. After Jonathan, 13, and Hana, 11, were born, Kitty says she felt socially isolated and even tried taking them to church. But they're all much more comfortable having rational discussions at the Humanist center. "I'm a person that doesn't believe in myths," Hana says. "I'd rather stick to the evidence."

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