



Children and Worship

All churches say they want their children to grow up in the faith but we don't often review the assumptions behind the children's ministry that we experienced in our own childhoods. What are our assumptions and do they work for today's children?

We live in a culture of more choices than any of us can fully explore. If we aren't immediately happy with the way a sales clerk treated us or with the décor or menu choices of a restaurant we simply move on and this is the approach that many people now also apply to churches.

When we think about the children who have left the church we often blame it on "worldly reasons." *Why are YOU still part of a church?* If you have memories from childhood and youth of someone at church who listened and cared about you with compassionate interest you are far more likely to be part of a church in adulthood. **As we think about how to include children at church-are we asking the Lord to show us how to make such friendships and relationships more likely in and through our church community today?** When young people look at churches and church people through a lens of love the age of the building and its décor become far less important!

Every church leadership team needs to ask itself the question: **What is our long term goal for the participation of children in our church?** And: Is what have we implemented likely to produce that result?

Do we expect that one day our kids will be comfortable and happy sitting in and participating in worship? If so-when do we expect that to happen? (middle school? High school? Adult hood?)

On that day will they feel comfortable and at home in your sanctuary and with the order and expectations of your worship service or will it be a completely new and adult oriented experience?

If your children's program is child care, Sunday School or a kids' version of a youth group they are likely to feel like a fish out of water in "adult" worship and that means that they will likely NOT be worshipping and NOT be thrilled about being there. Why?

- 1) unfamiliar songs, prayers, rituals and liturgies
- 2) pastors who they don't know well enough to trust
- 3) passive "best behavior" expectations in a room of mostly strangers

When are YOU most able to worship? Being uncomfortable, unsure or embarrassed are sure fire distractions that make it very hard to open your heart or mind to worship. We have all seen kids who are obviously just waiting out a service by sitting, reading, coloring or even using a smart phone regardless of what the rest of the congregation is doing.

An uncomfortable truism is that we usually get exactly what we have prepared for even if we thought we were preparing for a different outcome. "Raise up a child in the way he should go" may not mean



the way that YOU have decided he or she should be shaped. That verse (Proverbs 22:6) could challenge us to think about the children themselves and ask the good Lord to show us how He works in them! How can we make it more likely that THEY could be as comfortable in worship as we are?

Children who are not in worship:

Many churches segregate their children out of a desire to

- 1) Have a quiet and uninterrupted adult worship experience
- 2) Give their kids an age-appropriate time at church that we hope they will think is “fun” so they won’t resent and resist coming...because deep down we know that the adult worship was designed for adults.

Are those God’s desires? Are those desires and decisions likely to result in kids growing in their sense of belonging and purpose in God’s family and mission? Is it possible that adults can also grow in their faith as a result of including kids in worship? I say YES!

Common church choices:

- 1) Child friendly worship services that all attend together
- 2) Child friendly PORTIONS of worship services
- 3) Dedicated Children’s Church Worship Services

OPTION 1: Child friendly worship services

Some churches have tried to make their entire sanctuary comfortable and inviting for kids so that they will have something to do and can remain with the adults through the worship hour.

- 1) Tables at the back with art and craft supplies
- 2) Worship bags with kids’ Bibles, puzzles, related worksheets, coloring pages etc.
- 3) “Pray”-ground areas where very small children can crawl around and play with toys and with one another.
- 4) Rocking chairs for nursing mothers (back row of seating)



These approaches require patience and understanding from church members because some sounds as kids interact with one another are inevitable. Very small kids are often oblivious to what is important to the adults but this can work for churches with so few children that there is no regular option for kids to be away from their parents. Be aware that the extra sounds can make it harder for folks with hearing aids to be able to understand what is being spoken. You may need to turn the sound system up. Also-consider placing your pray-ground off to the side rather than in a line of sight as some worshippers may find it distracting. Your worship is intended for EVERYONE’s spiritual nourishment. We want to be sensitive to children, parents and seniors so be sure you get a consensus agreement about trying this and consider first implementing it on a trial basis!



OPTION 2: Child friendly PORTIONS of worship services

These churches plan to have children in church for a portion of the service. Kids may sit with their parents for the beginning of the service or sit together in a kids' area (such as the front pew) until a designated time or until a children's message.

The advantages to this approach are:

- 1) Children become familiar with some worship music, prayers, rites and rituals. Pastors might consider planning for what is important for children to witness or participate in such as a passing of the peace, baptisms, the corporate prayers such as the Lord's Prayer, communion, the reading of scripture, mission team reports (the list will vary denominationally). Children might even be included in certain worship leadership such as helping to hand out bulletins, serving as acolytes, ushers or being readers. These are honors.
- 2) **Children see their parents pray and worship and see how important it is to them.** This helps them understand that prayer and worship are important and that even adults have someone they are accountable to: God!
- 3) Children feel included and more grown up.
- 4) The attention span of children is respected thereby reducing the likelihood of disruptions.
- 5) **Seeing children respectfully participating in church can bring real joy to other adults in the congregation. It reinforces the belief that the church has a future!**
- 6) Inter-generational relationships are encouraged as adults without children have the opportunity to see which children belong to which parents and hopefully interact with them.
- 7) **Adults without children are more likely to see themselves as having a responsibility to support the Christian upbringing of the church's children.** This can result in a more generous giving of time and resources to children's ministries.

OPTION 3: Dedicated Children's Church Worship

Children's Church can fill the same time slot as the adults' service or be planned for after kids have participated in a portion of the adult service.

Why create a Children's Worship Service?

- 1) To teach your children how to worship
 - a. Churches that only offer Sunday School have totally age defined peer groups (just like school) and may end up teaching kids' Biblical literacy without teaching them to worship. Intercessory prayer is also not always taught in Sunday School settings.
 - b. Adult services usually contain many images, symbols and elements that the worshipper is assumed to understand. Kids need to be taught what they mean and why they are important in order to be able to appreciate, respect, and participate in them when they are present or invited.
- 2) To create a worship service at children's levels of understanding that WILL nourish, grow and deepen the faith and discipleship of your children.



Recommendations for Children's Church:

- I. Think of your children as a congregation of their own.

When children feel like they are a part of something valuable and important to their parents and to God they will participate more deeply and form a deeper commitment to it. This is worth your time!

A multi-age children's congregation can mirror the adult congregation and models the kind of leadership, compassion and teaching by kids that we see in vital adult congregations. Kids know that these roles are important and valuable and will be ready to seamlessly step into more grown up versions of these responsibilities as they come of age. Younger kids will look up to the older kids to learn. Nervous younger siblings can stay with their older siblings. Older kids are seen as leaders that are capable of setting a good example and of being pastoral to younger kids! This builds skills of empathy and compassionate observation and response.

- II. Create a service of worship with

- a. **Kids in age appropriate leadership training roles**

- i. Kid Manager of attendance with the sign-in adult
 - ii. Kid Lay Leaders leading the call to worship that begins and consecrates the kids' time as a worship time as well as the benediction that sends them out into their world.
 1. Consider using a kinetic component such as sign language
 2. A Benediction example is "Go and Grow in wisdom, strength and love." with sign language. This is what the scriptures tell us of the child Jesus.
 3. Have a worship table with a candle on it that a child can light or turn on to signify that we are inviting the presence of the Holy Spirit.
 - iii. Scripture readers (use the same Bible you give out so that kids are encouraged to bring their Bibles from home.)
 - iv. Ushers Let the kids choose between 2 or 3 kid related ministries or charities. Be sure to tell stories about how their offerings help.
 1. Ask a child to say the prayer to bless the offering.
 - a. Occasionally ask kids to draw a picture, add a note to a card or help with making or assembling gifts for the kids you will be blessing. See if you can start an occasional exchange of letters and pictures.
 - v. Worship Space Jobs-Have a crafty volunteer make felt banners that felt pieces can be added to
 - a. For Advent kids could add felt candles with felt flames and share the word that signifies the Sunday (Joy, Peace etc.)
 - b. For liturgical churches have kids drape your table with the color for the season



- vi. Kid song or prayer leaders
 - 1. Kid musicians can play their instrument as the offering basket is passed.
This is an offering of their talents and prepares them for VBS leadership
- vii. AV support
 - 1. Trust a mid-older elementary child to advance the slides for a Power Point presentation you create to project the words to the songs, the scriptures and Bible story pictures that a child can advance for you.
 - a. Using consistent pictures such as are available for free at www.distantshores.org from Sweet Publishing helps kids visualize the Bible stories you teach as part of a greater whole.
- b. Worship activities that **allow kids to move** (More ideas available)
 - i. Compliment the kids on sitting so respectfully in adult worship but tell them that Children's Church is a kid friendly space!
 - ii. Get up and greet: consider a welcome or blessing phrase in which everyone is asked to shake at least 3 other kids' hands and say their names. This helps kids learn one another's names and practice welcoming one another. Make it simple so that kids can easily remember
 - 1. My name is _____. God is happy that you are here!
 - a. Response: My name is _____. God is happy that you are here too!
 - 2. My name is _____. May the peace (or love) of God be with you.
 - a. Response: And also with you. My name is _____
 - iii. Choose songs with motions and easy-to-move-to rhythms
 - 1. Consider using some song videos with lyrics (VBS songs are great)
 - 2. Choose 1 or 2 kids to add some rhythm (shakers, tambourines)
 - a. You may need to remind them that the song should be part of their offering to God.
 - iv. Consider adding an age segregated prayer circle time in with dedicated volunteers
 - 1. Encourage kids to practice leading prayers.
- c. Plan variety in so that Children's worship is never boring or monotonous
 - i. Occasionally plan for a related craft time for a PORTION of your service.
 - 1. Don't allow worship time to become craft time.
 - ii. Occasionally show a Bible story movie instead of reading the story
 - 1. Be sure to debrief what they noticed about how the story was graphically presented.
 - iii. Occasionally make a simple video for parents (IPhones OK!)
 - 1. Make participation relevant but optional, short and easy
 - a. EG-kids line up to sit in a special spot to quickly share how they see Jesus' love in their parents
 - i. What would they have said to the wise men about Jesus?



- ii. If you could ask God anything what would you ask?
- 2. Edit so as not to embarrass or identify any children (check to be sure that photo permission was given) set up during the Fellowship hour of create a video to show when parents pick their kids up or maybe even in worship sometime.
- iv. Occasionally invite in a guest speaker to build interest and compassion.
 - 1. Mission trip experiences (youth are great)
 - 2. A person living with a disability (hearing loss, visual impairment)
 - 3. Monthly visits from a mother with an infant (lesson plans available)
 - a. Observe how babies can't talk but need quiet, loving observation to discern what they need. What God wants from us can also be discerned when we pay quiet, loving, observant attention to the signals the Holy Spirit sends us.
 - b. Observe the neediness of a baby and reflect on how God came to us in a way that required human beings to be at their best-as a child that needed loving care and protection!
 - c. Observe how babies grow and gain skills and talk about how important it is to teach babies well.
- v. Occasionally have kids contribute to writing a group prayer and publish it in a bulletin or newsletter.
- d. With Pastoral approval plan activities that kids can lead that would bless the entire congregation
 - i. Assemble and hand out Blessing Bags after worship
 - 1. Non-perishable protein foods and hygiene items for the homeless that can be kept in parishoners' cars for when they see a person in need.
 - ii. Hand out flowers to every woman on "Mothering Day"
 - iii. Line up to give High 5's to people as they leave worship (perhaps in honor of Father's Day)
 - 1. Be sure to have it announced so the congregation will understand what to expect
 - iv. Draw pictures for bulletin covers on a pastor selected theme.
 - v. Plan a Children's Sunday where kids have some leadership in adult worship
 - 1. Kids who regularly participate in lay leadership in Children's Church are often not intimidated to lead in "adult" worship especially if the adult leader that they have practiced with is at their side.
 - 2. Kids who have led in adult worship bring joy to the congregation and often receive lots of appreciation from adults. This helps build a Godly self-esteem as well as an understanding of their Family of God!

Kids need to worship and congregations need kids!

Jesus invites us: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." Matthew 11: 29