

Children & Worship



What Is A Church To Do?

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Every church must be intentional in providing the best worship experiences it can for all ages, including children.

How your church meets the needs of your children and the congregation needs to be considered, discussed, and chosen thoughtfully and prayerfully. Before you make your decision, you may want to consider some of the following information.

Seven-year-old Jessica likes Sunday School but begs her parents to go home rather than go to the worship service. The Sundays that her parents do not give in to her begging, she plays in her mother's purse, makes faces at the people behind her, goes out to use the restroom, and falls asleep in her mother's lap. Nothing in the service invites her to worship.

What is a church to do?



The worship leader of the church plans a worship service that appeals to adults. When she and the pastor are approached by some parents about being more inclusive of all age groups present in the service, she says, "If I change the worship service, other people will get upset."

What is a church to do?



The mother of two young children visits your church. After struggling with her children during the worship service, she asks the pastor, "Do you have a children's church?" When the pastor answers, "No, but we have talked about it," the young mom goes to another church down the street that does have children's church – and she is not the first.

What is a church to do?

Four-year-old Timothy is promoted out of the preschool worship care and his parents, who have been long-time members of the congregation, insist that your church start a children's church because "my child isn't getting anything out of the worship service and so neither are we."

What is a church to do?

What can those who have studied children and worship tell us?

“Our national surveys have shown that while more than four out of five parents (85%) believe they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children, more than two-thirds of them abdicate that responsibility to their church. Their virtual abandonment of spiritual leadership for their children is evident in how infrequently they engage in faith-oriented activities with their young ones....less than one out of every twenty have any type of worship experience together, other than while they are at church, during a typical month.”

George Barna
*Transforming Children into
Spiritual Champions*
pp. 109-110

“Children enter the consideration of the worship planner only slightly more than that person perceives their importance to the membership.”

“While worship planners feel that some attention should be given to inclusion of children in the worship life of the congregation, evidence suggests that only the children’s message is a widely found form of inclusion.”

Shirley Morgenthaler, Peter Becker
and Gary Bertels
*Children in Worship:
Lessons in Worship*
p. 9

“How did the Hebrew child learn to worship? First through a relationship with a worshiping parent, a member of a worshiping community; through intentional education built into the rituals of home and community worship; through a multitude of sensory experiences and vivid, thought-provoking symbols and dramas; through a life of ethical actions growing out of worship; through a pattern of recurring Sabbath and festivals that recreated the Hebrews’ story; and eventually through a form of public, community gathering which made teaching an essential part of the liturgy.”

David Ng and Virginia Thomas
*Children in the Worshiping
Community* p. 52

“A vital element in all ages worshipping together is this wedding of adult and childhood gifts in our corporate liturgy. Our differences become a rich harmony.”

David Ng and Virginia Thomas
*Children in the Worshiping
Community* p. 16



“Ritual must always be at the heart of Christian education, for in the community’s liturgy, story and action merge; in worship we remember and we act in symbolic ways which bring our sacred tradition and our lives together, providing us with both meaning and motivation for daily existence. That is why, if our children are to have faith, they must worship with us.”

John Westerhoff, III
Will Our Children Have Faith?
p. 58 revised edition

“When worship happens in the fellowship of faith, it becomes a celebration of belonging and participating in that community. We need children with us to complete the family of faith, to make it all that Jesus envisioned for the church. When we begin to include children, we also begin to be open to everyone, as Jesus commanded; the children, the poor, the powerless, the foreigners, the sinners. With a view of worship that includes children in significant ways, our words and actions communicate meaningfully with many different kinds of people, and we can truly become a community.”

Elizabeth Sandell
*Including Children in Worship:
A Planning Guide for Congregations*
p. 13

What are the benefits for children being in a “family” or congregational worship service?

■ Children see their parents and other adults and youth engage in the significant worship of Almighty God. With the hectic schedule of today’s families, many children never observe their parents in worship at home. They may or may not have nighttime prayers or blessings at meals when the family may eat together, but stressed parents often use the early morning or late night quiet to do their personal devotions. A worship service may be the only opportunity that children see their parents engage in worship, and parental modeling is powerful in faith development.

■ Children need to feel the “welcoming” of the church at large – they need to feel that they are part of something bigger than their own age group ministry. When children are never with “the whole church” they may not sense that they are a part of a church “family”.



■ Children need to experience the church in all of its expressions—baptism, communion, deacon ordination, parent-child dedications, mission trip commissioning, etc. They will have many questions for which there are no simple answers, but they will perceive the importance of the moment. Children who are not present in “big church” may not experience these special “family times.”



■ Children need to hear the testimonies of mature Christians. Whether it is through prayer, word, music, or another worship expression, the personal faith journey of growing Christians communicates hope even to children. They may not understand all of the meaning, but they do sense the importance of God in the lives of others.



■ A congregation needs to be reminded of the future. The presence of children keep a church from becoming self-absorbed in meeting only immediate needs. A balanced congregation needs the presence of the past (senior adults), the present (parents and other adults), and the future (preschoolers and children). When children are not present, adults may miss the fresh perspective that children often have to a worship practice long taken for granted.

What about parents?

Often parents of younger elementary-age children are the most resistant to children being with them in worship, and parents bear most of the responsibility for guiding children in worship. The primary reasons given are that either the children are not “getting anything out of it” or the parents are so distracted by the activity of their children that they are not “getting anything out of it.”

Because parents have an enormous responsibility and because this is such an important time for the formation of their child’s faith, two things need to be considered:

Much of worship/faith is not taught – it is experienced and modeled by people significant in the life of the child. Just because children may not be “sitting still and listening,” do not assume that they are not hearing or learning. Children often multi-task: watch television and do homework, play games on the computer and watch television, read and hear the conversation between parents. They are participants in an experience of worship, and that involves more than listening – it includes all of their senses. Parents or churches can provide activities to keep their wiggling to a minimum, and you can be sure that they are benefiting from being with your family as well as “the family of God.”

This is a “window of opportunity” in children’s development during which they are especially sensitive to what

their parents think and believe. There are many times that parents and other adults must sacrifice some of their own desires to meet the needs of their children, and this is one of those times. As parents involve and encourage their child in worship, the child will begin to connect emotionally to a powerful corporate experience. Many churches are discovering that children who grow up in “children’s church” have no emotional connection to the larger family and thus choose not to attend as teens.



How can worship leaders/planners be inclusive of children?

Children should not be expected to “endure” a service that does not acknowledge their presence nor “invite” them to participate. The responsibility for including children in the service belongs not only to the parents but also the worship leaders/planners. The elements of the service that are “child friendly” are often the ones that the adults also find “inviting” for their worship.

Worship leaders must consider how they can be inclusive of children and families in the worship experience. A church that expects children to sit still while adults worship is not being sensitive to the needs of the whole church family. Here are a few ways that worship leaders have included children in family-friendly churches.



- Children can be worship leaders, too. They can lead in a responsive reading or litany and older children can read scripture.
 - Invite children to play an instrument or sing (not necessarily as a children’s choir). This contribution should be worship leadership and not performances or entertainment for adults.
 - Some children will be willing to lead in prayer if leadership will give them guidance.
 - Children can be responsible for a special ritual for signaling the start of each service—lighting candles or opening a Bible, for example.
 - Using children’s thoughts in a service can be very meaningful—litanies, prayers, or poems written in class, for example.
 - Call on children to assist in parent/child dedication ceremonies by presenting the certificate or gift
 - Encourage the congregation to be supportive of parents and their children as they learn how to be participants in worship. Instead of being judgmental of parents who may have an unusually active child, caring adults can offer to let the child sit with them occasionally. Children often behave better for others than their own parents.
 - Provide assistance for parents in how they can guide their child in worship.
- A church can provide children’s worship guides (bulletins) – Sometimes they are related to the service and sometimes they come from a pre-printed children’s bulletin service. The former is more effective but labor intensive, and it requires advanced planning of the worship leadership. (See resource list for suggested children’s bulletin services.)
 - Children enjoy handing out worship guides (bulletins) at the door
 - Children can greet worshipers as they enter the worship center
 - Children can collect the offering as well as be encouraged to contribute as an act of worship
 - Children’s sermons can provide a special time for communicating with the children, but a few minutes for the children, as a part of the main sermon is even better.

How can parents assist their child in worship?

During this wonderful “window of opportunity” when children are forming their concept of and attitude toward church, parents may need to consider their child’s worship needs as priority. Parents can help form that attitude and “invite” them into participation with a little extra effort.

- Speak of attending the worship service as a special opportunity. Help them to anticipate being with their family in a special experience.
- Make opportunities for the child to talk with worship leaders. Invite them to your home or out to eat so that they will feel that the worship leaders are their friends.
- Take care of basic physical needs before the worship service. Take children to the restroom and walk around a little if they have been physically inactive for a while.
- Sit together as a family, especially when the child is young. This gives you the ability to guide their behavior as well as to interpret things they may not understand.
- Encourage your child to stand and sit with the congregation. They may want to sit during the active part of the service then stand up when the sermon begins. Not only do they need to participate in the worship experience, but also they need the physical movement in order to sit quietly during the sermon.
- Involve the child in music experiences. Help them to read the hymnal or projected words. Encourage them to learn the songs. You might sing them in the car or at home to help them become familiar with your church’s favorite songs.
- Help your child to know how he or she can best join in prayer. Before worship, discuss concerns or thanks for events or people in the child’s life or your family life. Help them to know they can pray silently while others are praying aloud. Since they have a short attention span, help them to sit quietly if they finish praying before the prayer leader does.
- Help your child to find the Scripture passages in his or her own Bible. Especially young readers will be eager to find the passages in their Bible.
- Explain the offering to your child. Let him or her participate by placing an offering in the plate. Emphasize that it is a way we show love to God. Help them to know where the money goes and how it is used.
- If your church does not provide children’s bulletins, you might want to carry a special worship bag for your child. Include interesting paper, special pencils or markers, and perhaps a book. Children often multi-task, listening while they are occupied with an unrelated activity. Change the contents of the bag fairly often.
- Prepare them for the ordinances of baptism and communion so they will understand what is occurring. Younger children, who are concrete and literal thinkers, will not understand the symbolic meaning of the ordinances, but they can understand they are important ways for people to remember Jesus and to show others that they are going to follow Jesus’ example.
- Help them to listen for certain words, Bible names and places, and other simple concepts. Younger children can draw pictures of things they observe. Older children can keep simple notes.
- Before and after the service, talk with your child about the invitation response. They may be getting restless by this time. Explain that people are making important decisions about following Jesus during this time, and the children need to be patient.
- Discuss the service on the way home or after you arrive home, answering questions they may have about the experiences. Ask them what they enjoyed most. Share appropriate thoughts that you may have had. Keep it short and simple.

How can a church help preschoolers worship?

While preschoolers may attend a short service or part of a worship service, the church may need to provide worship experiences on their level of activity and understanding. Before kindergarten, preschoolers need planned activities through which they worship in their spontaneous way rather than in a structured group. It should not

be a “play” time or a “care” time, but rather a teaching/worshiping time with teachers who guide the preschoolers’ thoughts of God as they are involved with planned activities. See “Extended Teaching Care” in this booklet.



What About A Children's Worship Service?

When churches consider starting a children's worship service, they first need to determine: Why do you want to start a separate service? Your answer to this question will affect the children and the ministry profoundly.



There probably will be a mixture of motives, but above all your church must want to provide the best possible worship experiences for children. Some of the reasons a church might provide a separate children's worship service include:

- A number of children attend church without parents to guide them.
- There are many "seeker" parents who need to hear the gospel.

- Worship leaders and/or the congregation are unwilling to be inclusive of children in the congregational worship service. Children sense that they are not welcome.
- The church wants to prepare children for worship through a short-term worship education process.
- Parents are unwilling to accept their God-given responsibility. While the church is "growing" them to assume that responsibility, there may need to be a short-term "interim" service.



What will you call it?

Consider calling it a "children's worship" or "children's worship service." The term "children's church" is not accurate because the children are not a separate church. We do not

want to convey that church consists only of a worship service or that they are not part of "the church."

Who will be the worship leaders?

Leadership is perhaps the greatest obstacle to having a quality children's worship service experience. Many churches make the mistake of rotating leaders every week. You might consider how you would feel if the preacher in your pulpit was different every Sunday. Faith is communicated primarily through relationship with others and with God. Children need to relate to their worship leaders and the worship leaders need to know the children much as adults want to know the pastor of the church.

In order to meet the worship needs of children, the leaders must know how to relate the worship experiences to those needs. That cannot be done well through rotation of worship leaders. Teaching/leading styles as well as behavioral expectations vary from person to person. Children will continue to test leaders' limits unless they know what is expected each time.



Children's worship is not an entertainment time for children or childcare for parents. It is worship education/leadership. Therefore, the worship leader needs to make a commitment to one year (if possible) but no less than three months at a time. The worship assistants (one for every six children) can work for a month at a time (or longer if possible).

If you are having difficulty with enlistment for preschool worship care, you will have difficulty in this ministry as well since you are drawing from the same volunteer pool. You need an adult worship leader that is consistent as well as one adult worship assistant for every six children. A larger ratio will fail to meet their relationship and learning needs and discipline problems are more prevalent.



What ages will you include?

Preschoolers (3-5 years) and children should not be grouped together in a combined service. Their differing attention spans, level of Biblical concepts, and ability levels make it extremely difficult to meet the needs of all of the ages in a worship experience where many adults are not available to guide each child. Preschoolers need to have experiences in which they use their five senses and yet are guided by adults to pray, sing, learn Bible thoughts, etc. as they are involved. The preschool child does not learn best in a structured

(sit-still-in-a-chair-and-respond-when-asked-to) environment. Therefore, a format is recommended that involves learning experiences geared to their way of worshiping – spontaneously through activities. See "Extended Teaching Care" in this booklet.

Consider limiting the ages of children in attendance to first, second, and third graders. If a church chooses to provide children's worship for older elementary-age children, consider having two groups, first-third and

fourth-sixth. If you have more than 24 children in one group they need to be divided, too. The rule of thumb is:

- The smaller the age span of the children, the better.
- The smaller the teacher/pupil ratio, the better.
- The smaller the size of the group, the better.

All of these factors make for a better teaching/worship experience for preschoolers, children, and their leadership.

What schedule will you follow?

Churches use a variety of schedules to meet the worship needs of their children. The predominant schedules are:

- **Half and Half** - The children are in the congregational worship service for part of the time and then adjourn to their separate worship service for a Bible message and application activity.
- **Full Worship** - The children are in children's worship the entire worship time every week.
- **Mixed** - The children are in the congregational worship service some Sundays and in their own worship service the other Sundays. Some churches have children's worship only one Sunday a month while others are in the congregational worship service only one Sunday a month.

The service schedule you choose will determine what you can do when you have children's worship. If you have children's worship for an hour, a suggested schedule is:

- Beginning Time
(Transition activity in small groups)
- Music
- Call to Worship
- Prayer Time
- Offering (optional)
- Scripture Reading
- Bible Message
- Bible Skills
- Bible Application Activities



If the children are in the congregational worship service for part of the time and then leave the congregational service to continue with their own worship service, the Bible message and Bible application activities are the only elements in the above schedule that you would do.

What literature will you use?



Choose a worship literature that fits your purpose for the service and the theology of your congregation. There are many publishers providing such literature, but they vary greatly. Do not choose literature until you have evaluated it carefully. Guard against making this an entertainment or "fun" time. Insist that it be a worship experience that matches your church's congregational worship style. This should be a worship preparation time

so that they can "connect" with the congregational service when the time comes. Be especially careful to avoid showing videos, having entertaining puppet shows, playing games, or doing other activities and calling it "worship." This is a critical "window of opportunity" for children to learn and experience worship on their level.

What about a children's sermon?

Many churches have a children's sermon even if the children are in the congregational service for part of the time. Often these sermons are not appropriate for the children but are aimed at entertaining the adults in the audience. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind to meet the worship needs of children.



- **Prepare your "sermon" for the children, not the adults.**
Keep concepts and vocabulary simple. Do not use this vehicle for preaching to the adults under the pretense of speaking to children.
- **Use a Bible story, Bible verse, or present-day story about a child with whom they can identify.**
 - Do not use symbolic object lessons. Make sure the object stands for itself and not an abstract quality.
 - Do not use fables, legends, or other fantasy material the children may confuse with Biblical content.
- **Do not make it a performance of the children for the adults.**
Avoid asking "cute" questions to elicit "cute answers about which adults will laugh. Make the questions thoughtful and meaningful for children. If they say something funny, control yourself! Further questioning probably would reveal a logical reason (to them) for the answer.
- **Sit on eye level with the children.**
If you stand or sit up high, their necks will become tired from looking up. When they look down, you have lost eye contact and likely their attention.
- **Call the children to the front of the sanctuary.**
The children should face away from the congregation. They may sit on the front pews or on the floor. It is helpful to play some music as they are moving.
- **Look at the children when you talk with them.**
Ignore the adults during this time. They will be listening, but they are simply eavesdroppers. In larger churches, the worship leader may use a microphone, but it is best if the children's answers are not amplified for the adult audience.
- **Use a children's teaching picture, a question, or an object to capture the children's attention at the beginning.**
If you use an object, it should represent itself, not a symbolic quality. It may be a Bible times article (a scroll, basket, stick), a nature object (flowers, rocks, seeds), a Bible story picture, a poster (happy face/sad face, a traffic sign), etc.
- **Keep it short-about four-five minutes.**
That means you will plan carefully what you will say. Do not be laborious or extremely detailed.
- **Do not moralize or talk down to the children.**
This is different from speaking on their level of understanding. Do not use a patronizing tone or babyish voice.
- **You can use children's songs or music when it reinforces the concept of your "sermon."**
- **Use facial and vocal expression when telling a story.**
It may seem exaggerated to you, but not to the children.
- **Use a variety of storytelling/sermon methods:**
 - Pantomime - a child enlisted ahead of time to act out a story.
 - Monologue - tell the story in first person (with or without a costume)
 - Use direct quotations when the characters speak.
 - Picture Posing - let children volunteer to assume the poses of the people in the picture. They cannot hold the pose for very long.
 - Interview a Bible character or a church "helper"
 - Do not use puppets to tell a story. It distracts from content although children are entertained. This is a worship time, not entertainment.

Worship Care for Preschoolers

Preschoolers worship in spontaneous ways rather than structured, formal worship formats. In other words, their attention span is approximately one minute for every year of age, so we must connect with them and God as they engage in planned activities designed to appeal to their senses and to guiding them toward God.



What is Extended Teaching Care? (ETC)

Extended Teaching Care (or Extended Session) is the term many churches use for the teaching/worship time with preschoolers during the congregational worship service. It follows Sunday School (or precedes it if your church

has an “early” worship service.) Thus, it is an extension of Sunday School. Children from birth through three years of age are involved in this ministry, and often four and five year olds, too.



What teaching/worship materials do we use?

Preschoolers make no differentiation between Sunday School and Extended Teaching Care (ETC). If you change Bible “stories” for worship care, the preschoolers often go home with the two Bible stories confused. It is recommended that a class continue the same story and application for the entire time the child is at church in order to help the child remember the stories and life application without confusing two stories and applications.

Many publishers provide materials for those churches that teach all preschool age groups in Extended Teaching Care. It is best if the children remain in the same rooms used for their Sunday School class. They are familiar with their surroundings and feel more secure. The furniture, toys, and teaching materials are appropriate for their age group. Also, parents may not know where their preschooler is if they are moved to a room other than the one where they left them.

LifeWay provides appropriate Extended Teaching Care activities in the Family Bible Study leader guides: *Bible Teaching for Babies*, *Bible Teaching for 1's and 2's*, *Bible Teaching for 3's - Pre-K* and *Bible Teaching for Kindergarten*. LifeWay's *Bible Foundations* curriculum also has ETC guidance. All Bible Teaching Leader Guides and Leader Packs include reproducible teaching suggestions and helps for ETC. There are enough learning and worship

experiences in these Sunday School materials for more than one hour. All of these materials can be ordered on a literature order form from LifeWay or by calling 1-800-458-2772 or going to their web page at www.lifeway.com.

Gospel Light provides a separate kit for each year's Sunday School material. *Little Kids' Time* is the resource that corresponds to their Sunday School curriculum for preschoolers.



What if we do not have Extended Teaching Care for Four and Five-Year Olds?

For four- and five-year-old preschoolers who attend worship with their parents, we suggest that preparation begin at home to make this a satisfying experience for both parent and child. Speaking to the child about the things they will be doing (such as singing, praying, reading the Bible, etc.) will help him/her to know what to expect and how he/she can participate. Helping the child with the hymnal, following the words with your finger as you sing, putting your arm around him/her to assure him/her that he/she is a part of the service help orient the child to the place. A book, paper and crayons, or a small toy may help keep

him/her occupied during the sermon. Preschoolers are active and may need to stand from time to time to relax muscles and expend some of that stored energy!

You might consider reading together *When I Go To Church* by Kay Henry to help preschoolers understand the worship service experience. Some churches have worship preparation classes for parents and others have classes for the preschoolers using the contents of the book. With some careful preparation, a parent and child can have some memorable worship experiences together.



Who are the leadership for worship care or Extended Teaching Care?



The leadership for your worship care for preschoolers are often the first people with whom visiting parents will interact. That **first impression** of your church needs to be a positive one.

Teaching in Extended Teaching Care or worship care requires some preparation. Committed, dedicated persons are needed to teach preschoolers. Extended Teaching Care or worship care may be staffed with parents, preschool teachers, or other adults in the church who want to help preschoolers worship and learn. They need to know how

children grow and develop, how they think and respond, and make themselves available to the child's needs. A bond needs to be established by an ongoing relationship between teacher and child. A child's eager anticipation of worship care speaks volumes about the loving preparation made by the teachers.

In addition, volunteers need to be people with whom the preschoolers will be safe. Background checks and other screening procedures need to be in effect for all volunteers entrusted with the care of our children.

What are some good resources?

Children's Church:

A Comprehensive How-To

Doris Freese

Moody Press, 1982

Children in the Worshiping Community

Ng and Thomas

John Knox Press, 1981

Creating and Leading Children's Sermons

O. Suthern Sims, Jr.

Smyth & Helwys, 1999

Forbid Them Not: Involving Children in Sunday Worship

Carolyn C. Brown

Abingdon Press, 1993

(based on the Revised Common
Lectionary-one for each cycle)

Get Ready! Get Set! Worship

Sue Lou, Jean Floyd Love, Mickey Meyers,
and Sylvia Washer

Geneva Press, 1999

HCSB Read to Me Bible

Holman Bible Publishers, 2005

www.lifeway.com

Including Children In Worship

Elizabeth Sandell

Augsburg Press, 1991

Parenting in the Pew

Robbie Castleman

InterVarsity Press, 1993

Prime Time with God

Pam Brown

LifeWay Press, 2001

(Fundamental Series)

Teaching Godly Play

Jerome Berryman

Abingdon Press, 1995

Teaching Kids Authentic Worship:

How to Keep Them Close to God for Life

Kathleen Chapman, Baker Books, 2003

When I Go to Church

Kay Henry

Convention Press, 1992

or www.lifeway.com

Worship KidStyle

www.lifeway.com

You Can Preach to the Kids Too!

Carolyn Brown

Abingdon Press, 1997

Young Children and Worship

Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman

Westminster John Knox Press, 1989

(Godly Play concept)

Children's Bulletin Publishers:

Children's Worship Bulletins

800-992-2144

www.childrensbulletins.com

K.I.D.S. Worship Activity Bullentins

Broadman Church Supplies, 2008

Logos Productions

800-328-0200

www.logosproductions.com

(follows Revised Common Lectionary)

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www.lifeway.com



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