

CHILDREN IN WORSHIP

[Jesus] called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

Matthew 18: 2-5

Jesus did not welcome children because he was a nice or tolerant guy. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this story because Jesus had something important to teach adults: the lesson of love, trust, and true humility. Now, we, too, are to welcome children in Jesus name, welcoming Jesus himself and learning what children are sent to teach us.

But do we have to have them in worship? They are noisy, messy, and wiggly and they distract adults. Shouldn't adults have the right to be able to concentrate and have it be a peaceful, worshipful experience? And what can they possibly understand?

Why should children be in worship? Research tells us that children who worship with their parents are more likely to be active and involved in congregational life as adults, than those children who went to Sunday school alone. Worship is learned behavior. Children learn what they observe their beloved parents doing and valuing. And, children learn what they experience. It becomes a "family habit." Children learn from babyhood on that this is what our family does. If we want them in worship in the future, we need to welcome them now.

Children also need to become part of the worshipping community, to know and be known by all the generations. In baptism, the child became a member of the body of Christ, of the congregation. They are not a future commodity, but a vitally important part of the present, and we need to welcome them as such.

How will we do that? To welcome the child and the family to worship, use children and families as greeters, ushers, and participants in worship. Let the bulletin and newsletter repeatedly declare that "We welcome children in worship." Ask the pastor to announce in worship that children are welcome and to include sermon illustrations that are about real children. Deliver children's messages that tie into the scripture of the day. When the congregation shares the peace, make sure adults greet children. Let the music include songs children know.

Encourage families to sit in the front pews, where the children can see and participate. The back pews make it impossible to see. If they can't see, trust me, they won't behave well.

Other accommodations signal that children are loved and welcomed to worship, including worship bags, children's bulletins, quilts or rocking chairs or little bean bag chairs in the front of the sanctuary. Some congregations train "pew angels," loving adults who offer to sit with a frazzled parent and children; an improvement on glowering ushers or tongue clucking pew judges, a better way to welcome children and welcome Jesus.

So, what will the young child learn? Twenty-five years ago, Gerhard Frost, Lutheran pastor and poet, spoke gently to one of my friends, struggling to worship with his two young daughters while their mother sang in the choir. He said, "They will always remember who worshipped with them!"

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Prepare your child for worship, talking about why and how we worship. State the behavior you would like to see. Catch them doing it well.
2. Worship at home. Pray with your child. Teach your child simple songs of faith.
3. Speak with your pastor about how to encourage parents of young children to worship with them and underscore the importance of doing so.
4. With your pastor and worship team, share some ideas for how to make worship in your congregation more child-friendly ... and offer to help.
5. After worship, find a parent with a young child and thank them for worshipping with their child. Let them know that this is what their church family is supposed to look and sound like and that you appreciate all of the effort it took to be here.