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[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

BEGINNING WITH JESUS

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.

THE PROBLEM WITH CHILDREN IN WORSHIP

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 the children possibly understand?

WHAT IS THE POINT?

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 and have a life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ 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. They learn the rhythms of worship. They learn the hymns. They learn the liturgy, the creed, the prayers, the elements of worship. They learn to feel "at home" in the sanctuary. 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. They need adults and youth and older kids to know them by name, to feel they are part of the family of the congregation. 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 CAN WE WELCOME CHILDREN?

Here are a collection of ideas to prepare the building, prepare the congregation, prepare parents, and prepare young children to worship well together:

* Begin with your parking lot. Virtually all of us have handicapped parking spaces for those whose mobility is impaired. Many congregations also mark other parking spaces close to main doors as "Reserved for Visitors" or "Reserved for Seniors." I've also seen parking lots that reserve spaces "For Families with Young Children." Why do this? As a parent of three children, I know what an acrobatic feat it is to get one or two or three or more children safely across the parking lot and into a church building. Make it look like you are expecting families with young children, acknowledge the challenges, and make it easier to navigate the parking lot.

* And how about your main doors? Many of them now sport a handicap-accessible automatic opener, which can certainly be used by a parent with children and car seat and diaper bag in tow. One congregation I visited had a working door handle about 16" off the ground. The message to young children? "Come in! You are welcome! We were expecting you!" Another congregation in which I shared this story was so taken with the idea that they planned, right then and there, to install a "child-height" handle!

* To welcome the child and the family to worship, use children and families as greeters. What a delight for a child to come to worship and be

greeted ... by another child! It will bring smiles to the faces of your adults, too.

* Other accommodations signal that children are loved and welcomed to worship. Have worship bags available for children with books, soft toys, and coloring pictures that tell the story of that day's Scripture lessons. Children's bulletins are another wonderful way to greet and welcome children, making it easier for them to follow the flow of worship.

* Children can also serve as ushers and participants in worship. Some adults express concern, lest a child drop the offering plate. Please point out that they are uniquely well equipped to scramble under the pew to retrieve anything that might have dropped.

* I had the privilege of preaching on Baptism of Our Lord Sunday two years ago. At my request, they had a third grader read the Gospel lesson on Jesus' baptism ... from the *Spark Story Bible*. The story was faithful to the translation we normally use. All understood the lesson. And you should have seen the children in the congregation ... they all sat on the edge of the pews to see one of their own leading them in worship. The child's mother stood behind him to support him, as he stood on a box behind the altar and to help if he got caught on a difficult word. He didn't!

* And what if your pew racks, normally featuring hymnals and "grown up" Bibles also had children's story Bibles? What a powerful way to say again, "We were expecting you." A friend's congregation always announces to children and adults alike, "If you need a Bible, please take home the one in your pew rack as a gift from our congregation." Talk about "equipping the saints," even and especially the very young ones and their parents.

* Let the bulletin and newsletter repeatedly declare that "We welcome children in worship." Have a card in the pew rack that announces the same message.

* In some congregations, it might be in order to retrain ushers not to hustle babies and young children off to the nursery. Invite the worshipping adults to smile at the children they see and hear. Smiling is welcoming; scowling is not! Perhaps even pack kid-friendly supplies to offer a restless child: a few 3x5 cards, short pencils, and sticks of sugarless gum. I have deputized myself to find the young families in the sanctuary after worship to thank them for worshipping with their children, declaring, "This is what my church family is supposed to look like." I

introduce myself and learn their names.

* A congregation I coached has margin notes in the bulletin, explaining parts of the liturgy and suggesting places in the service that make it easy for a parent to leave with a crying or restless child ... and to return.

* Ask the pastor to announce in worship that children are welcome and to include sermon illustrations that are about real children. If a child speaks or cries during worship, may your pastor smile and continue. If the pastor is flustered, the congregation will jump to the defense of the pastor, leaving the child and parents feeling embarrassed and unwelcome.

* Deliver children's messages that tie into the scripture of the day. The point is never to give a prize or make the congregation laugh at the expense of the children. This is a vitally important part of worship that leads all of us into the lessons and ties into the sermon.

* When the congregation shares the peace, make sure adults greet children. A gentle reminder to adults is never amiss. Let the music include songs children know. They are often favorites of the adults, too, and bring back many happy memories.

* Encourage families to sit in the front pews, where the children can see and participate. The back pews make it impossible to see and so much easier to be distracted. Wonder what they see? Sit in the back pew yourself and, when the congregation stands, get on your knees to see what a child sees. If they can't see, trust me, they won't behave well.

* Some congregations have reserved the front several pews for families with young children. Others have removed them, providing a few rocking chairs, small bean bag chairs, or quilts on the floor instead.

* A Presbyterian friend from North Carolina, who received her MDiv from Luther Seminary, shared a strategy from her home congregation. Her congregation trains "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.

* Schedule a time when worship is not in session to invite families and their young children to come and explore the sanctuary. Be available to describe what things are, their function, and provide names. (Many adults don't know this either!) Invite children and adults into the chancel

to see things close up. If you have windows that tell a story, share those stories with the kids. All of this helps kids feel "at home" in the place they worship. This will inspire respect, not undermine it.

* So, what will the young child learn? Twenty-five years ago, Gerhard Frost, Lutheran pastor and poet, spoke gently to one of my friends, a young dad struggling to worship with his two young daughters while their mother sang in the choir. The father felt defeated, concerned that they had distracted others, not sure what his little girls had actually learned. Frost gently reassured him, saying, "They will always remember who worshipped with them!"

Remember, in baptism, parents promise to bring their children to worship in God's house, in the midst of God's family. Children have faith. Children worship. Children experience reverence, awe, love, and praise. Let them bring those qualities to worship and inspire the rest of us. In baptism, we welcomed the child into God's family, into our faith family, and promised to support the parents in this lifelong faith journey with their child. Let's keep our promises by welcoming children to worship.

HELP PARENTS BY GIVING THEM SOME 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.

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