

Parent pages



Resources for Christian parents in the 21st Century

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Training the young worshiper

There is only one teenager left at my house, so the early childhood years of diaper bags, snacks, and church toys are long gone for my husband and me. I remember the time when I wondered if I would ever have the opportunity to worship again. It seemed the Sunday morning hour was spent in trips to the bathroom, diaper changes, picking up snacks off the floor, chasing errant toys, and soothing infants—neither of whom could sleep through the sermon.

After 25 years of sitting in pews with small children, either as mother or teacher, I have made a few observations. When working to train young worshipers, we have four truths we want them to learn:

- Worship is a part of my life (*developing a worship habit*).
- Worship is respectful (*my behavior affects others*).
- Worship is participatory (*my worship community needs my help*).
- Worship changes me (*God's word is efficacious*).

These goals are not achieved all at once

or by a certain age. Children will progress through the stages at their own pace. They are attainable goals for all children because we have the help of the Spirit in nurturing faith and worship.

What can we expect of children for each goal of worship?

Children who understand that *worship is a part of their life* can be expected to attend worship willingly, fold hands during prayer, look at the hymnal/song during singing, and participate in children's messages.

Children who understand that *worship is respectful* can be expected to busy themselves with meditative activities and participate in familiar songs, simple responsive readings, and familiar parts of the liturgy such as the Lord's Prayer.

Children who understand *worship is participatory* can be expected to help with the service by participating in a choir for their age group, singing hymns, participating in responsive readings, helping with the details of wor-



ship (usher, communion), and serving as a buddy for young children coming up for the children's message or for the elderly and their needs.

Children who understand that *worship changes us* can do the above and be expected to respond when asked about the value of worship. Children in this group are especially responsive to servant events, either within or outside the congregation. I sometimes think children in middle school understand the blessings of worship best when they are painting walls at the city mission. They need to live the "response" part of worship if they are to understand and feel the Law and Gospel.

It is God's will that children should praise Him; and the voices of His children, even the occasional wail of a baby, are a joyful noise.

A Growing Christian makes the Best Parent!

Next time you are readying your bundles of joy for church, consider some of these suggestions:

▶ Regular attendance: Nothing helps children learn expectations better than making the activity an expected part of the family routine. Once you let excuses or “just this once” creep in, it begins to affect how worship is valued by your family. Children who attend church every week have more learning opportunities to practice what is appropriate for worship.

▶ The younger the children, the closer the family should sit to the front of the sanctuary. I realize it’s a long way to the back of the church when your 18-month-old is screaming, but there is more to see and hear up front.

▶ When children are fussing, crying, or arguing, take them out of the worship area until they are calm and ready to return. This teaches them what behaviors are acceptable in church and discourages them from disturbing those around them.

▶ The younger the child, the shorter the attention span. The shorter the attention span, the more often you will need to direct attention to worship. Look for things to point out to look at or listen for. As your children age, you will need to redirect less often. You will have taught them how to look and listen for how God attracts their attention.

▶ Whenever the pastor makes the sign



of the cross, turn and do the same on your children’s foreheads. Repeat the blessing for them. Do this at night before bed, also, to include a church ritual as part of your bedtime routine.

▶ If you are comfortable with toys in church, limit your children to those that do not distract from worship. Look for toys that allow children to listen while their hands are busy (drawing or puzzles).

Toys that encourage imaginative play should be discouraged as you are teaching your child to create a different world instead of participating in the world of worship. Put a few items in a bag that is saved for church use only. Rotate toys to keep the contents fresh. School-age children should be limited to writing paper where they record their thoughts or pictures about the service.

▶ Use favorite hymns, Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed as a part of family devotions, making them more familiar to your children.

▶ School age children should get their

own service folder. Show them where you are in the service to encourage participation. Encourage them to find the hymns or hold the bulletin for you.

▶ Establish a routine that encourages use of the drinking fountain and restrooms before the service. Limit exits (other than those to calm a fussy child) to one per child per service. Children should be accompanied by an adult for safety purposes.

▶ Avoid punishment or reward. Calmly take children out and redirect their behavior by waiting until they are calm or by explaining the standards you have set. This will take consistency and patience but will contribute to you modeling proper worship behaviors.

“O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants You have ordained praise.”

Ps. 8:1-2a

You are not alone in this undertaking. It is God’s will that children should praise Him and the voices of His children, even the occasional wail of a baby, are a joyful noise. Rest assured it is His will for you to be able to worship too.

Before you know it, that baby needing an immediate diaper change will be wearing a confirmation robe and standing next to you at the Lord’s table.



Questions for discussion

1. When you worshiped as a child, what helped you to feel a part of the worship?
2. What things does your church do to help children feel included in worship?
3. What could you suggest your church try?
4. Has your church ever considered an adopt-a-grandparent program to pair older worshipers with families where adults are outnumbered by young worshipers?

Resources:

- Psalm 8, 26, 122; Deut. 11:19-21.
- “Children Are Members!” available from CPH.

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The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295; 1-800-248-1930; www.lcms.org
Kim Marxhausen, Lincoln, Neb., Writer • Frank Kohn, Editor and Layout

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