

## Engaging Kids in Worship

*Here are a few pointers for not only parents, but for all of us, on how to engage the children in our congregation in worship:*

- 1. Sit in the front.** Some churches have pews thoughtfully reserved in the back for parents with active children. Some have “cry rooms” that families camp out in lest their kids make any noise and disturb anyone. While these accommodations have good intentions, they do little more than make families feel unwelcome into full membership in the worship community. Think about it. The most active, engaging, kinesthetic and participatory (aka “most child-friendly”) moments in worship often happen when we’re standing or moving. From the back, kids can’t see the best parts of worship! Sit them right up front, presume they want to know what’s going on, and explain to them what they see. Which leads to point #2...
- 2. Explain the worship service to them.** Not with big theological words or deeply philosophical meanings (unless they’re into that). Help them notice those kinesthetic and participatory moments, and describe them. “Look at that person lighting the candles. That’s the acolyte. That means worship is about to begin.” Or “What is the pastor doing? She is lifting the bread and saying the Words of Institution, the words Jesus shared with his friends.” The more you explain/describe, the more they will pay attention and will notice.
- 3. Notice what they’re noticing.** Kids are kinesthetic. They will not (cannot) sit still for long periods of time. We do not bring them to worship to learn to do this. We bring them for the same reason we come- to experience the living God and to be transformed by God’s Word and presence. So, if we come into worship presuming that kids are there for the same reasons we are, we can reasonably assume that they are listening, even if they are coloring, counting ceiling lights, or walking up and down the kneelers. Pay attention to what catches their attention (they’ll stop what they’re doing or will look up, even if for a very brief moment), and grab onto it. Ask, “What did the pastor just say?” “What did you notice?”, and respond to it. Now this assumes that they’re just not zoned out on your (or their) iPhone...
- 4. Bring quiet activities that engage rather than distract.** Technology is great. iPhones are the invention of a lifetime. But having the world at your fingertips is not conducive to a worshipful environment. You can argue that there are great Bible/worship/Christian apps, but they are not suited for corporate worship. They pull your attention away from, not into, worship. Simple, interesting materials cater to kinesthetic learners, who need to draw, move, or do something while learning, and can actually help them listen better. Children’s bulletins, simple “busy” bags, or a not-too-messy snack can help a child “be” in worship, and can engage her body while her mind and spirit are soaking in the experience.
- 5. Point to where you are in the bulletin/hymnal.** Even if he can’t read. The practice of following along with what you’re doing deciphers some of the mystery of worship, and might even help a child to learn to read (words, or even music). And if you’re sitting next to a parent who is trying to engage his child by pointing in the bulletin, but can’t seem to hold the bulletin, hymnal, and child, please offer to hold one. Or point in your bulletin, too. You might start paying closer attention, as well.

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6. **Prep them to engage.** Teach them to participate to their fullest ability. Have kids bring their own offerings. The lesson they bring home from worship the first Sunday they use their own offering envelopes may be that God expects us to be obedient (always a good lesson), and that we are asked to give back a portion of what was given to us. This teaches them that the offering is not taken primarily so the church can pay its bills. When kids learn that giving is an act of worship (as well as obedience, and maybe even sacrifice), they will have learned a great deal about worship. You can also help them move to the next level of participation. Just like pointing out where you are in the bulletin may help teach a child to read, pointing out the actions of the reader, acolyte, usher, organist, pastor...may awaken in a child a calling to that type of ministry. And **as soon** as they are physically capable of doing it, sign them up for it.
  
7. **Answer questions quickly and quietly.** It may be the middle of a prayer or the Words of Institution, or some other very reverent moment, but if a kid has a question, he may ask it 642 times until you give him an answer. Don't shush him. Believe it or not, that is way more annoying to all the other worshippers than his questioning is. If you answer the question right away, and quickly return to your worshipful posture, the child will stop bothering you (and possible others around you), but will also learn from your actions that you are fully engaged in the important act of worshipping.
  
8. **Help that harried parent next to you by doing all these things for her kids.** We are the church. These are all of our children. Please take note of what kids are doing in worship. You may be the one the notices how engaged a child is in what the crucifer is doing. You should suggest to her mother that maybe, as soon as she can pick up the cross, she should train to be a crucifer. If you are a Sunday School teacher, and you notice a particularly good reader, make a point to tell the parent and the person who coordinates readers. Get that kid on the reader schedule! It is somewhat helpful to tell a parent that their noisy kid isn't really bothering you (although the fact that you pointed out the noisiness contradicts that sentiment). However, if you help a child learn to worship and you assist a parent, to engage in worship herself, you are creating a connection with a family, and you are participating in building up the kingdom.

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