

Help!

There's a child in my church!



EXPLORING CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT IN WORSHIP

One child, ten children or a hundred children — the presence of children in a worshipping congregation is a source of joy for the present and hope for the future.

It may also provide opportunities to reshape worship practices and attitudes for the benefit of all worshippers.

'What can we do about children in worship?' is a frequently asked question at the Resource Centre for Children's and Family Ministry. There is no one single, simple answer to this question that suits every congregation.

We've prepared the following study paper to help congregations, worship planners, children's ministry leaders and parents explore the involvement of children in congregational worship.

You may photocopy the paper as required for this purpose.

Each section includes one or more reflection questions. These questions are at the heart of the exploration of what worship with children means in your particular context. Whether you read this paper as an individual or in a group, please take time to reflect seriously on the questions.

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1. CONCEPTS

What do we do about children in worship?
How do we attract them? hold them? help them? support them? include them?

Your answers to these questions will depend on a number of factors, including

- your understanding of worship
- your congregation's tradition of nurturing the faith of children
- parents' expectations
- the characteristics of the children associated with your congregation
- and your understanding of faith — particularly the faith of children.

1-A. WHAT IS WORSHIP?

Worship has been described as:

- a dramatic dialogue between God and God's people
- a family gathering of the children of the Heavenly Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ
- a demonstration of how we assess the worthiness of God (to receive thanks, praise, time and obedience)
- an experience of the whole person: body, mind and spirit
- an audacious human activity commanded by God the Father, made possible by Jesus and inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Reflect: Which — if any — of these descriptions resonate with you? How do you define 'worship'?

Corporate Christian worship is a unique experience. The congregation worships as a 'body'. Apparently everyone does the same thing at the same time. Within the body, each person worships in their own unique way. Each individual contributes to the body's worship, and each individual uses the experience in their own unique way.

In the United Church . . .

Being in mission and ministry together with children is the privilege and responsibility of every member of a Christian faith community.

. . . Children are people of God

. . . Children are invited to trust Jesus Christ as Saviour, and friend.

. . . Children belong to the body of Christ and are called to serve with their own gifts.

. . . Children grow in Christian faith as they experience and express their belonging, believing, growing, and sharing with other pilgrims on the way to the promised end.

. . . God's Spirit gives various gifts to the church for the church's ministry with children.

On the Way Together, UCA 1998

1-B. WHO ARE THE CHILDREN?

We tend to speak of 'children' as if they were a single demographic. They are, in fact, individuals.

The children may range in age from birth to any arbitrary age at which we consider them 'adults' — or 'teenagers' or 'young adults'. The worship involvement of a child in the first year of life is quite different from that of a toddler. The involvement of a lower primary school-aged child is quite different from an adolescent's.

Children come from many different family situations, different levels and styles of faith nurture in their homes, different levels of importance the adults in their lives place on worship, and thousands of other variables.

Some children have been baptised, some have been dedicated, some have not had any formal entry into Christian life.

Children — like adults — have different interests and skills, likes and dislikes, experiences and dreams.

If we respect each child's God-given unique characteristics we may need to look at some options for children, eg:

- rather than expect all children to come forward for a children's address that is aimed at 3-year olds, invite 'anyone who wants to see what I have in this box' to come closer
- rather than expect all children to do a worksheet aimed at year 5 students with some Bible knowledge, provide a blank sheet of paper (or an area with a range of craft items) and suggest that 'anyone who wants to' can write or draw their prayer for a sick member of the congregation
- rather than expect all children to sing a 'children's song', team children with adults with similar interests, eg singing, instrumental music, cleaning, decorating, preparing and serving food, arranging flowers . . .

Reflect: *Who are the children in your worshipping community? What do you know that is unique about each child?*

2. INVOLVEMENT

2-A. BEING THERE

In worship we come into God's presence. God is there. That's a given.

Our physical presence is the base line for participation in worship.

'Being there' is a demonstration that, for us, God is worthy of at least that much of our time and effort.

Almost anyone, regardless of age or mental capacity can 'be there', although the young or infirmed may not do so on their own initiative. Young children will never participate in worship — even in this basic way — unless they are brought to worship by adults who choose to be there themselves.

Reflect: *Who brings children to worship in your church?*

It is important also for the other worshippers that the children are present. They, like all other members, contribute to the rest of the congregation and receive from it. The presence of children can help us to recall the child in all of us, and remind us that spiritually we are all children.

Children in Corporate Worship
www.lca.org.au/resources/cow/worshipstate23.pdf

2-B. BEING THERE WITH OTHERS

We are talking about corporate worship, the worship of the body of Christ or the church family. We are there with other worshippers (ten, a hundred, five hundred): in the same place, at the same time, able to see one another, hear one another, touch one another, feel the presence of one another.

Beyond that, we are there to share one another's joys and burdens — to help and support one another and to accept the help and support of others:

- when our faith is being tested
- when our physical condition is weak
- when our relationships are strained.

Almost anyone, regardless of age or mental condition can 'be there with others', although the young or infirmed may not do so on their own initiative.

Children can experience being a part of the body as they see, hear, and touch other worshippers — young and old — as they exchange with others smiles, hugs, handshakes, greetings, glances.

Reflect: *What is the attitude of other people in your congregation to children who are there in worship with them?*

2-C. SPECTATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

Although 'being there' is an important starting point, Christian worship expects more.

For New Testament believers, the curtain of the temple has been torn; there is no longer a holy of holies for priests alone. Christ is our High Priest and we are all called to minister to one another.

But too often people are merely spectators. They 'attend worship' rather than worshipping. They accept and expect that they are spectators. They sit back, watch and listen to the worship leaders, preachers and musicians who are seen as the 'players' in the game or performance of worship.

On the other hand, ministers and musicians — the very people who seem most involved in worship — often express a wish to 'just worship' rather than always needing to think about leading worship as they worship.

Children in worship may feel that they are merely spectators of the spectators.

Reflect: *In what situations are you a worshipper?*

- ... a worship spectator?
- ... a worship leader?

2-D. LEARNING TO WORSHIP

Up to a point, it is quite all right for children to observe adults at worship. Observation can be a first step in learning to do something.

However, we need to help children through other learning processes:

- copying
- receiving feedback
- processing experiences
- repeating
- owning.

Much of our learning is by doing. Most life skills we do before we become expert or even proficient at doing. Children are 'talking' when they use a few words. Children are 'walking' when they take a few steps. We learn to dance and swim, and eat, and drive cars by doing.

Children learn to worship by worshipping.

This may sound as if worship is a skill to be learned, like walking or using a computer. Worship 'in spirit and truth' is more than this. However, participating in the public worship of a congregation and using the public worship of a congregation to reinforce your

relationship with God are, in many respects, skills that can be taught.

Some congregations choose to do this teaching in a separate 'children's church' intended to provide age-appropriate worship experiences for children and prepare them to worship with the adult congregation.

Other congregations prefer to 'train' children within the multi-generational body of worshippers.

Reflect: *What advantages and disadvantages do you see providing separate worship experiences for children?*

What advantages and disadvantages do you see in including children in all-age worship?

If you provide separate worship experiences for children, when and how do you help them make the transition from children's worship to adult worship?

An experienced worship leader explains: 'You can't lead somebody to do something you're not doing yourself'.

The following assumes multi-generational practices, but many of the principles can be applied in children's worship settings.

2-E. RESPONSIBILITY

The responsibility for involving children in worship and for teaching children to worship — like all aspects of faith nurturing — is a shared responsibility.

Parents (here we include grandparents or any other adults who bring children to worship) can set an example of worship and encourage children to follow their example. They can direct children's attention to significant aspects of worship and quietly explain what is happening.

Congregation — all members — have a role in raising children as worshipping members of the body of Christ.

Adults and youth are role models. They demonstrate by their own behaviour how they want children to behave in worship.

In multi-generational worship, adult worshippers accept that children are part of the body — in some ways the weakest, and therefore the most important, part. This acceptance may require grace and giving up 'what I like/want/ expect/need from worship' in favour of what the little ones need.

Beyond that, adult members are willing to be childlike in their worship and to learn from children.

Worship planners and leaders must be aware that children are present and that children are valuable members of the worshipping body. Worship planners and leaders can attempt to make what happens in worship accessible to children.

God has given parents, congregation and worship leaders gifts they can use to be his hands and voice in leading children to be worshippers. We strive to do the best we can with the resources God gives us in the time God gives us. The outcome is in God's hands.

Reflect: What responsibility do you have for involving children in worship?

2-F. CHILD IMPACT STUDY

Truly involving children in the worship of a multi-generational congregation requires time, effort and creativity on the part of worship planners and congregational leaders.

Consider putting all aspects of worship through a simple, informal, child impact study with questions like:

- What are children likely to understand by what we do and say?
- How can we make this concept more concrete and relevant to children and their families?
- How can children do this?
- What do children see, hear, feel, taste, smell, do?

And finally: What are we planning that children *can not* participate in?

- Do we want to make this part/these parts of worship accessible to children or do we want to provide an alternative ('age appropriate') activity for children during this part of the service?
- If we want to make it more accessible, how can we do so?
- If we want to provide an alternative, what can children do? Where can they do it?
- How can children remain part of the worshipping congregation if/when they are doing an alternative activity?

Reflect: Have you considered these questions? What might change in the way

your worship is planned if you did consider them?

2-G. THE 'B' WORD

The concept of boredom seems to be a by-product of our media-fed demand for entertainment, pleasure and instant gratification. It's a demand that can never be satisfied and seems to require ever-higher levels of stimulation.

Boredom with worship is related to a spectator approach to worship. If worship is a performance that you can evaluate, the performers need to constantly 'pump up the volume' to maintain your interest.

Boredom with worship is not an affliction of just children or youth. It tends to span the generations. Many adults who have judged worship as boring choose not to worship in church.

A group of adolescent Australian church attenders were interviewed about worship.

The two most common things they liked about worship were 'learning about Jesus' and 'being with friends'.

The two most common dislikes were 'hard seats' and 'long sermons'.

Adults who worship in your congregation may feel that worship is not boring or that, although it can be boring, worship is good for them.

The antidote to boredom may not be a new worship format. More likely it involves:

- a vital, growing relationship with God
- and real participation in worship (possibly

including the planning and leading of worship).

Reflect: Do you ever find worship boring? Who or what is responsible for that feeling of boredom?

3. INTELLIGENCES

Children and adults take in, process, and respond to information in a whole range of different ways. The educational theory of multiple intelligences suggests that everyone has some measure of at least eight different 'intelligences', but that we have them in different proportions. Some people are very strong in one area and weaker in other intelligences, other people are stronger in several areas, others have a fairly even balance across the intelligences. This educational theory can help us think about how children experience worship.

3-A. VERBAL-LINGUISTIC INTELLIGENCE

The intelligence most obviously catered for in worship is verbal-linguistic. Quite possibly this is because — from Thomas Cranmer's prayer book onward — worship liturgies have been devised by people for whom verbal intelligence is their dominant intelligence.

Not only are our services built of words, we are people of the Word and we worship Jesus Christ who is identified as 'the Word of God'.

The challenges are to

- use words that children understand
- avoid words children will misunderstand
- teach children key words used to express Christian faith
- give children the opportunity to respond and express their faith in their own words
- give adults the opportunity to celebrate and learn from the children's verbal expressions.

Reflect: How can your worship engage children's verbal-linguistic intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?

Not everyone is strong in verbal-linguistic intelligence.

Wendy had the role of Eliza in her high school's production of 'My Fair Lady'. Sitting in church on Sunday morning after a hectic fortnight of rehearsals and performances, one of her songs kept playing over and over in her mind, and she wanted to shout it to the minister: 'Words, words, words. . . . Never do I ever want to hear another word. There isn't

one I haven't heard. . . . If you're in love, show me.'

3-B. MUSICAL-RHYTHMIC INTELLIGENCE

Most Christian worship includes music. Martin Luther is quoted as saying: 'When we sing we pray twice'. For musical-rhythmic intelligence there is a power in music that goes beyond the words of a hymn or song.

There is no single style of music for children; they can be touched by the mood, rhythm and melody of virtually any music — whether or not they understand the words.

The challenge is to make church music accessible to children. This may mean:

- make a careful choice of music that does 'set the mood' for the worship service or particular portions of it
- aim for excellence in the presentation of music, and inclusivity in congregational singing
- repeat selected hymns/songs a number of times over a period of weeks so they become familiar

- allow for (and encourage) involvement in music in ways other than singing, eg clapping, playing percussion instrument, dancing/swaying,

actions, humming or whistling.

We may also need to create a climate of acceptance for people of all age who are not strong in musical intelligence, who simply will not or can not sing or appreciate the musical aspects of worship.

Reflect: How can your worship service engage children's musical-rhythmic intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?

3-C. VISUAL-SPATIAL INTELLIGENCE

Visual-spatial intelligence responds to what is seen. The architectural design of a worship building as well as the way the space is used has an impact on this intelligence.

For people with strong visual spatial intelligence, decorations involving colour, design or pictures may 'speak' more clearly, and be remembered longer than any words that are spoken or sung.

In the future your children will ask what this ceremony means. Explain it to them by saying, "The LORD used his mighty power to rescue us from slavery in Egypt". (Exodus 13:14)

James fills his worship hours looking at the stained glass windows of the century-old church Trinity Church. He knows every detail of the Bible stories depicted in those brilliant pictures.

Your church may not have stained glass windows or an ornately carved altar, but you can use banners, pictures, displays, candles, flowers, cloth, PowerPoint presentations and pictures and symbols in worship bulletins.

You may emphasise the traditional colours of church seasons to enhance the visual impact of worship.

Worship leaders may use symbolic actions that can be seen.

Give children the opportunity to respond and express their faith in any of these ways. And give adult worshippers the opportunity to celebrate and learn from the children's artistic expressions.

Reflect: How can your worship engage children's visual-spatial intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?

3-D. BODY-KINAESTHETIC INTELLIGENCE

In earlier generations, worship often involved movement: processions, kneeling, standing, physically presenting offerings, etc. All these activities catered for body-kinaesthetic intelligence.

At Divinity Church people ordinarily sit for hymns and stand for prayers. When the hymn 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus' was announced. A couple of children took the title literally and stood up. They looked around and saw that everyone else was sitting, so they started to sit down again. An elderly lady near them struggled to her feet. She looked around and, seeing no one

else standing, gave a stern look and an upward nod of her head. Soon the whole congregation was 'Standing up for Jesus'.

Physical responses to such metaphors are a way of engaging people who learn best through their bodies. Actually stand up when you sing 'stand up', really lift your hands when you say 'I lift my hands', really bow down when you say 'we bow down'.

Reflect: How can your worship engage children's kinaesthetic intelligence to help

them know God's love for them and respond to it?

What Children See in Church

Children are, by definition, little people. They may not see what bigger people see. In fact, the child standing behind a large adult may not see anything except the back of this person's shirt.

Have a go at looking at your worship space from a child's eye level.

If, for example, your liturgy and songs — and some great graphics — are projected on a screen and the child can't see the screen, it's not helping the child.

Find solutions to this situation that suit your worship space and the composition of your congregation, for example:

- encourage families with children to sit up front or on a centre aisle,
- encourage children to take off their shoes and stand on seats, or to move to the centre aisle
- raise the screen
- raise the people leading worship on blocks
- provide booster seats (padded boxes) for children to sit on.

3-E. LOGICAL-MATHEMATICAL INTELLIGENCE

Logical-mathematical is perhaps the least utilised intelligence in worship.

Mathematically minded children may find numbered passages in Bibles or numbered hymns in hymn books.

They may count windowpanes or calculate worship attendance.

We can engage this intelligence with the sequence of seasons in the liturgical year and with a logical flow of element within the worship service.

Number smart worshipping children will relate to stories involving sequences of events, statistics and cause and effect relationships. They

may like to respond using charts, graphs and webs — not something we regularly do in worship!

Reflect: How can your worship engage children's logical-mathematical intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?

3-F. INTER-PERSONAL INTELLIGENCE

Worshipping as a congregation is in itself an inter-personal experience. People learn by relating with other people.

The challenge is to make sure that within the inter-personal environment children have the opportunity to receive and give grace, love and acceptance.

After the service at New Hope Church, Rev Carter walked up the aisle and stopped beside a visiting family. He shook hands with the parents and picked up their six-month old daughter Paula. He held Paula in his arms, and together they greeted each member of the congregation at the door.

That gesture began a relationship for the child and family with the whole congregation.

In a nurturing multi-generational congregation children are greeted when they arrive, both formally and by friends. They make eye contact with other people at various times during the service. They experience some appropriate touching, eg shaking hands or hugging in 'passing of the peace' or 'greet one another' segment of the service. They shake hands with the minister when they leave. They share an appropriate snack and children play with other children in a safe, supervised play area after the service.

Worship leaders and parents regularly remind children that they are part of the whole community; part of the *we* in 'we gather here', the *us* in 'let us pray', and the *our* in 'our Father'.

Reflect: *How can your worship engage children's inter-personal intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?*

3-G. INTRAPERSONAL INTELLIGENCE

To some extent all of worship is about developing a clear understanding of who we are in God's eyes and in relationship with other people.

Much of what we have observed about using the other intelligences can help children build positive self-understanding.

Regular reminders of who we are in Christ (eg 'God loves you', 'you are a child of God', 'you are a very important part of this congregation') can help children in developing this self-understanding.

Providing concrete opportunities for children to contribute in a worthwhile way to the worship and service life of the congregation is also valuable.

Consider also:

- When you read Bible passages, encourage and allow time for people to consider questions like: 'Which person in the story is most like you? or What might God be saying to you?'
- Encourage children to keep a journal of their thoughts and reflections on worship.

Reflect: *How can your worship engage children's intra-personal intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?*

3-H. NATURAL-ENVIRONMENTAL INTELLIGENCE

Although we worship God who created the natural environment, we tend to worship in man-made buildings where we are isolated from the natural environment, with only token flowers on the altar.

Matthew isn't overly keen about going to church most Sundays, but he never lets his parents miss taking him to St John's Church's annual Easter dawn services held

beside a dry creek bed in the local nature reserve.

It's our natural-environmental intelligence that gives a bonfire camp worship, a Transfiguration service on a mountaintop, or an Easter Dawn service in a park their special impact — on children as well as adults.

Seasons of Creation resources take seriously Australia's natural environment and our natural-environmental intelligence (see www.seasonofcreation.com).

Reflect: *How can your worship engage children's natural-environmental intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?*

3-I. SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE

Some research suggests that there is a spiritual component in the make up of intelligence, just as there are mathematical factors, verbal factors and the others.

In *Schooling Christians: Holy Experiments in American Education* (1992) John Westerhoff postulated that: 'Faith formation takes place among role models, ritual and predictability.'

Children and adults with strong spiritual intelligence may react on a deep level to all aspects of worship. They may be particularly comfortable in quiet, contemplative moments, and more attuned to 'hearing God speaking to them' through the words of the Bible, rituals, prayers and hymns.

Reflect: *How can your worship service engage children's spiritual intelligence to help them know God's love for them and respond to it?*

4. SENSES

God has given us five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch/feeling. One of the keys for involving children in worship is to make it an experience that involves the senses.

The sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion clearly involve the senses of taste, smell and touch together with God's word.

People use their senses while they worship — whether you plan for them to do so or not; and whether they want to or not. What they see, hear, taste, smell and feel is part of their worship experience whether it enhances or detracts from the worship.

For children and others who may not be able to find meaning in spoken words and rituals, what they experience with their senses can be the most important aspect of their worship experience.

Curiously, the church traditions that we tend to discard as being old-fashioned or 'inappropriate in today's world' are often the ones that engaged the senses: churches

decorated with Biblical scenes, the use of formal movement and gestures (eg kneeling, processions), incense, liturgical costume and decoration.

Perhaps we could revive some of the older traditions or create more contemporary ones that make use of all the senses. As a minimum we could:

- be aware of what children see, hear, taste, smell and touch
- draw children's attention to the worship-enhancing things they can see, hear, taste, smell, or feel
- look for opportunities to incorporate different senses in the worship experience.

Reflect: *What does a child in your worship service see? . . . hear? . . . taste? . . . smell? . . . touch?*

Which of these sensory experiences contributes positively to the worship experience? Which detract from the worship experience?

You have taught children and babies to sing praises to you.
(Psalm 8:2)

5. MOODS

Worship includes times of contemplation and times of celebration. To some extent, the quieter we make the quiet and the livelier we make the celebration, the more easily children will accept and react to the mood.

Yes, children can be very still — for a short time — if everyone around them is still and if there is a reason for the stillness. Sometimes children may need to be given something to do during the stillness (even though that seems like a contradiction in terms). For example:

- We may be still for prayer, and the old 'fold your hands and close your eyes while we talk to Jesus' still works.
- We may be still during a time of self-examination and confession and actually kneeling and folding hands at this time helps children focus.
- We may be still during a musical interlude. Children can be encouraged to look at a candle or a picture or a symbol on a banner as they listen to the music.

On the other end of the spectrum, when we 'praise God with a harp and timbrel' or with dancing or with song, children can actually do these things.

Some churches have discovered the use of streamers/flags to emphasise either of these contrasting moods. Flags can be waved in slow, quiet ways that emphasise the mood of solemnity; they can be waved exuberantly to emphasise a mood of celebration.

Most of our worship tends to fall in between these extreme moods. You can't be 'up' all the time, but when you are up make sure children are up — and know why they are up.

Reflection: *Do you experience a variety of moods in worship or do you have 'flat line' worship? What sets the mood?*

Worship is the most important thing you can ever train your child to do . . . Worship is the only thing we get to do forever.

-Robbie Castleman in *Parenting in the Pew*

6. PRACTICES

Following are some of the most commonly used strategies for involving children in worship.

6-A. CHURCH BAGS

Church bags are usually colourful cloth bags containing items for young children to use during the worship service.

Bags contain age-appropriate quiet toys and activities (eg soft toys, plastic figurines, puzzles, Bible board books, activity sheets with coloured pencils, bagged play dough). Bags may be colour coded, eg red for under 3's, yellow for 3-5's, blue for 6 and older.

Greeters may give the bags to children as they arrive and collect them after church or families may collect and return them to a display or storage area.

Good Points: Church bags can be a good way of letting children know the church expects and welcomes them.

Creating the bags — perhaps in a working bee — can be a service opportunity for a group of adults or teens.

Those who create the church bags have a vested interest in seeing them used by the children, and thus have a concern about children in worship.

Cautions: You will need a reliable person to monitor church bags and check them after every use.

Be careful that bags and contents are safe and are kept as sanitary as possible.

Note: If you are a parent/grandparent in a church that does not provide church bags, you might create your own church bag for the child you worship with.

Reflection: *How do (or could) church bags help your children to worship?*

6-B. CHURCH LIBRARY

A variation on the church bag is a library of children's books and/or toys located near the entrance to the church where children can borrow a book, game or toy to use during worship.

Reflection: *How does (or could) a church library with this facility help your children to worship?*

6-C. ACTIVITY SHEETS

Activity sheets are like activity bags for school aged children. They provide something quiet that children can do during worship. Some churches provide a range (or at least two) sheets to cater for children of different ages.

It's not hard to find children's activity sheets in books of photocopy masters and on the internet. However, it requires a knowledgeable, reliable person to organise the preparation and distribution of the sheets — and pencils (and possibly Bibles) that go with them.

Good activity sheets have a variety of activities to appeal to children with different interests, capabilities and intelligences. They have some open-ended activities, eg blank areas where children can write or draw their own ideas.

The best activity sheets are an aid to children's worship, not simply something to keep children quiet while the adults are doing something else. These worksheets have activities that relate directly to what is happening in worship, eg a colouring-in picture of a Bible story that is read in worship, a code to find a key Bible passage or theme of the service, a tally challenge to keep track of the number of times they hear a key word.

Cautions: You may need to provide clipboards or cardboard sheets for children to work on. They can sit on the floor and write on the pew, but this eliminates any possibility of children being part of what is happening in worship around them.

Not all children enjoy paper and pencil type activities. Nor are all children willing to use activity sheets as they are intended.

Textas and biros can easily mark furniture (or neighbouring worshippers).

Reflection: *How do (or could) children's activity sheets help your children to worship?*

6-D. CHILDREN'S ACTIVITY AREA

Typically a children's area within a worship space is carpeted and has some child-size

furniture. Sometimes the area is at the back so kids don't disturb adults. Sometimes it's at the front so kids can see what's going on. Sometimes it's beside the band so children can watch musicians.

In some churches, children are invited to the children's area during a specific part of the service — particularly the sermon — to do a quiet, supervised activity. Often they have an opportunity later in the service to show the rest of the congregation what they have made or done.

In other churches, the activity area is available throughout the service. Parents and children can spend the whole time there or move there when they need to. Parents can sit in (or next to) the children's area and supervise their own children, while children make use of their choice of a range of quiet toys and games.

Good points: A dedicated children's area welcomes children and their families. Use of a children's area allows children who can't sit still through an entire service a legitimate activity and frees the parents from trying to keep the child still.

A dedicated area — like most of these strategies, gives children a place of their own where they are comfortable — and an expectation that there will always be something for them in church.

Cautions: The area must be clean and tidy with safe equipment that is kept in good repair.

Reflection: *How does (or could) an activity area for children within your worship space help children to worship?*

6-E. CRY ROOM

Cry rooms are an architectural feature of many older church buildings. They are a space where parents worshipping with noisy or restless children can withdraw with their children. They keep unsettled children from disturbing people around them and ease the parent's concern that their children are disturbing others.

Good points: Having a clean attractive cry room shows that the congregation

In the mid 1990s The Centre for the Study of Children's Ethical Development in the USA did extensive study of worship practices as they impact children in Lutheran congregations.

Their research established that the most common ways children are involved in worship there are:
children as acolytes,
children's messages
and children's choirs.

It also revealed that children are almost never involved in planning congregational worship.

understands that babies and young children are naturally noisy at times.

Cry rooms usually have a window into the worship area and sound piped in so that parents using the cry room remain part of the worshipping congregation.

Cry rooms can also help build relationships. Parents who meet in a cry room have an automatic bond.

Two older ladies with hearing problems regularly moved to the cry room at St Peter's Church to benefit from the amplification. While there, they played with children and talked with mums who used the cry room for its intended purpose.

Cautions: You will need a reliable person to monitor the condition of a cry room. It must be clean and any toys provided for children must be safe and as hygienic as possible.

It's also good if it is bright, colourful, attractive and comfortable.

If nursing mothers use the room, they need comfort and privacy.

Even if the cry room is not used regularly, resist the impulse to use it for storage. Don't let a space designed for kids become a place for junk.

Reflection: *How does (or could) a cry room help children and parents to worship?*

6-F. NURSERY/CRÈCHE

A nursery is like a cry room, except that it is generally separate from the worship area and is often 'staffed' by volunteers so that parents can spend their time in worship without the concern of having their children with them.

When some people shop for a church their first question is 'is there a nursery?' Nurseries are becoming common in places like gyms and some workplaces. In these situations — unlike worship — children are not part of the 'mainstream' activity, and it may, if fact, be unsafe for them.

Good points: A nursery, like the other strategies mentioned, can be an unspoken statement that families with children are expected and welcomed in the church.

Cautions: A nursery requires careful upkeep, with safety as the main concern.

Beyond the physical safety of children, if we invite parents to leave their children in the care of nursery volunteers, we must be absolutely certain that those volunteers are worthy of the parents' trust. Today, as a minimum, they must have police clearance. They need common sense and understanding of how to care for children.

Adolescents and teenagers may like to volunteer for crèche/nursery duty, but they should have adult supervision. In fact, there should always be at least two responsible people supervising children in a nursery. The number increases as the number of children increases.

Nursery volunteers must know who the adult responsible for each child is and where to find the responsible person if they are needed. They must also return the child to the same person who brings the child to them.

Everyone must come — men, women, children, and even the foreigners who live in your towns. And each new generation will listen and learn to worship the LORD their God with fear and trembling and to do exactly what is said in God's Law. Deuteronomy 31:12 (CEV)

Reflection: *How does (or could) a nursery help children and parents to worship?*

6-G. CHILDREN'S SEGMENTS

Many churches include children's segments in their

worship services. Children's segments take many different formats. They can be divided into two general categories.

SEGMENTS by CHILDREN: These include songs, dances, puppet performances and other items performed by children. They may be related to the worship theme for the day or may be something quite incidental.

Another type of children's segment is a show-and-tell report on something the children have done in children's sessions.

SEGMENTS for CHILDREN: These include songs, video clips, dramas and special activities that are seen as being particularly engaging for children.

Reflection: *How do (or could) a children's segment help your children to worship?*

6-H. CHILDREN'S ADDRESSES

Children's addresses are the most common form of children's segments. They are

generally short, simple sermons or homilies, presented for children by the minister/pastor/priest or by a layperson. The presentation is likely to include an object lesson or illustration.

Children are usually invited to come to the front of the church where the presenter and children sit on a front step.

There are many printed and internet resources available with models and ideas for children's addresses.

Good points: Many (but not all) children love the chance to have some time in a small group of other children with a caring, approachable adult — and the opportunity to move around.

A lot of creativity goes into children's addresses. Often adults say they remember the children's address better than the adult sermon.

Cautions: There are some surprising cautions concerning children's addresses. They fall into three areas:

- **Impression** Having one specific segment of the worship service dedicated to children can give the impression that the rest of the service is not for children.
- **Content and format** The content of children's addresses needs to be appropriate to the life and understanding of the children being addressed.

It can take more effort to design a talk that is relevant to both 3 year olds and 10 year olds than it takes to design a message for 10 year olds and 90 year olds. And a children's address that goes over a child's head may do more damage than an adult sermon that goes over their head.

It's common in children's addresses to use similes, eg 'God is like this apple' or 'Jesus is like a shepherd'. Educators tell us that young children's brains simply cannot cope with this level of thinking.

It is also easy to let children's addresses become moralising — telling kids 'what God wants them to do', rather than assuring them that God made them, loves them and cares for them.

Sometimes, with the best intentions, presenters tell children that God wants them to do things they simply cannot do. How many 3-year olds, or 7-year olds, can actually 'read their Bible every day' or give food to poor people?

- **Ethics** There is something disturbing about 'using' children in worship. Occasionally children's segments become a way of entertaining adults with the cute kids and their unpredictable antics.

There is also something disturbing about asking children — just because they are children — to do things you wouldn't ask adults to do, like come out to the front of the church or answer personal questions in front of the whole congregation.

Reflection: *How does (or could) a children's address help your children to worship?*

6-1. CHILDREN'S 'JOBS'

In some congregations children perform leadership and service duties during the worship, eg children

- greet worshippers
- light candles
- distribute leaflets and collect offerings
- read portions of Scripture
- lead prayers (written by others or by themselves)
- arrange flowers
- and clean communion vessels.

Good points: Inviting children to perform these worship duties shows that they are welcome and valued.

'Apprenticeship' in which children work with an adult to learn specific forms of service and worship can build relationships and help children understand and take part in worship.

Cautions: Simply having a worship leadership role performed by one child does not necessarily make other children more interested in what is happening.

Never set a child up to fail by giving them responsibilities they are not prepared for or unable to manage competently.

Reflection: *How does (or could) giving children jobs in worship help children to worship?*

Minister's wife and author Robbie Castlemain recommends that parents — particularly single parents or single-on-Sunday parents — sit near:

- other families who have the same approach to parenting in the pew
- or another adult who can help with parenting in the pew.

7. SUGGESTIONS

Worship, like good children’s TV programs, is made up of a number of short, inter-related segments and activities.

Whether your church follows a traditional liturgical pattern or a more informal one, most of the following elements are likely to be included in the service. Some of the ideas may be things you are already doing; other suggestions may be inappropriate for your situation. Use them as starting points for thinking about children in worship in your congregation.

[P] indicates something that may be done by parents (or another adult worshipping with a child).

[L] indicates something that may be done by the worship leader.

[A] indicates something that may be done by all adult worshippers.

7-A. BIBLE READING

In worship *God* speaks to us through his word, the Bible.

Children are (or should be) comfortable with listening to someone read to them from a book. It’s something they experience at home and at school. Children can come to understand that the reading of God’s book is a highlight of worship.

Consider these possibilities:

- Make a point of holding and showing the Bible when you read from it. [L]
- Invite children to come forward for the reading of the Gospel — ‘because it is very important and you want to be sure they hear it’. [L]
- Introduce Bible readings by explaining their context, and perhaps previewing something children should listen for in the passage. [L] [P]
- Read the passage clearly. [L]
- Have several people read the ‘parts’ in a narrative. [L]
- Encourage older children to follow the Bible readings in print as well as listening to them by providing pew Bibles, printed text sheets or project words on a screen. [L] [P]

- If children have printed texts, they can highlight or mark particular words and phrases, and they can take the sheet home to re-read and discuss. [P]
- Show illustrations of the Bible passage. Invite older children to use Bible software to research and prepare Powerpoint slides to illustrate the passages. [L]
- Occasionally act out narrative passages or use recorded/video versions. [L]
- Keep the length of Bible readings manageable. As a rule of thumb, if your designated reading is more than ten verses and you want children to listen, summarise part of the passage or break it into shorter sections. [L]
- Occasionally ‘play’ with a text, eg encourage people to cheer for good guys and boo bad ones, or echo repeated words or phrases, or do an

action for specific words. There are lots of possibilities. Don’t single out children; let everyone enjoy it. [L]

Children are not likely to encounter the **responsive reading** sometimes used in church — particularly with psalms — in any other context. But this is a skill that can be learnt fairly easily.

Make sure pre-readers know the response they will be asked to say. Practice saying it and have a clear prompt when it is time to say the response. To some

extent children can pick this up by watching adults around them, but it doesn’t hurt to explain the process to everyone.

If the responsive reading is printed out, older children can join in as adults do.

Reflect: *How can Bible readings be more accessible to your*

... young children?

... early primary aged children?

... older children and adolescents?

7-B. SERMON

In worship *God* speaks to us through the preaching and teaching.

Children seldom encounter lengthy spoken ‘lectures’ in contexts other than church. So listening to sermons is a skill that may have to be taught in worship.

WORSHIP DIALOGUE

In formal liturgy there was a helpful convention that the worship leader faced the congregation when representing God speaking to the congregation and faced the altar when representing the congregation speaking to God.

This simple practice helped people to make the significant distinguish between two parts of the worship dialogue.

In less structured worship it may be hard to recognise which voice is speaking.

But, by far, the most common practice is to remove children from this part of the worship service or to provide them with an alternative activity.

Some preachers experiment with different forms of interactive and illustrated sermons, and these attempts can make the sermon more accessible to children.

Employing the five S's of children's addresses — short, succinct, simple, surprise, and something to see — can also make it more reasonable to ask children to listen to and remember sermons.

Using stories and illustrations from children's experiences and relating the teaching to family and school life can be helpful.

Also consider:

- sermon note sheets with a fill-in-the-blank outline of the main points of the sermon [L] [P]
- key words to listen for [L] [P]
- a question at the start of the sermon that will be answered during the sermon [L] [P]
- pre-worship discussion — at home or church — where older children can consider the sermon text and theme and try to predict what will be taught [L] [P]
- after-worship opportunity for children to debrief with an adult about ways that what they have heard impacts their own lives. [L] [P]

Reflect: How can the sermon be more accessible to your

... young children?

... early primary aged children?

... older children and adolescents?

7-C. SINGING

In worship we sing to praise and thank God, to tell one another about God to express our feelings about God and to pray.

Most children are exposed to music in many contexts beside worship: at home, via television and video, at school, and for some children at concerts. They know their favourite performers and their favourite songs. And they can listen to the same performers and songs over and over again.

We have already looked at a number of ways that children can participate in congregational singing (see 'Musical/Rhythmic Intelligence')

Also consider:

- give children percussion instruments or cloth flags to use at specific times during songs [L]
- introduce songs with a simple verbal explanation, eg is it a story or a prayer; are we singing to God or to each other; is there a pattern to watch for (eg the old hymn pattern of Father, Son, Holy Spirit and response in four verses), does it relate to a Bible passage we have heard . . . [L]
- use a musical introduction that draws people into the mood of the song [L]
- select at least one song each week specifically for children, or let children select a song [L]
- provide opportunities for children to get acquainted with music leaders [L] [P]
- provide instrumental or vocal tuition for children with musical aptitude. [A] [P]

Reflect: How can music and singing be more accessible to your

... young children?

... early primary aged children?

... older children and adolescents?

Eleven year old Jason had been learning about his church's liturgy. He said:
'It's good to say the creed in case the minister leaves out anything important.'

7-D. PRAYER

In worship we pray for ourselves and other people.

Children have varying experiences with prayers outside of church. For some, prayer happens only in church; others are steeped in prayer at home and/or in Christian schools.

In church we have two primary ways of praying: a leader prays for us and we, as a group, speak set prayers.

Participating in a prayer spoken by another person is not a common experience apart from worship. We can encourage children's participation by:

- teaching (modelling) a helpful prayer posture, eg open hands to receive blessing or folded hands to help them concentrate [P] [A]
- keeping the prayers short [L]
- having different people lead (read, write or speak) different petitions [L]

- using 'bidding' prayers that introduce the topic before each petition, eg let's pray for people who are sick or in hospital [L] and encouraging children to think their own prayers in response to the bidding [P]
- encouraging (modelling) a quiet 'yes, Jesus' response or an 'amen' or a nod of the head when they hear something in the prayer that they want to make their own [P]
- encouraging a practice of silently echoing the leaders words in their heads as they listen to the prayer [P]
- telling the story or showing a picture that shows why we are praying for someone or about a situation [L]

Rote memory is no longer a part of our lives. Children, however, learn a surprising number of things through informal repetition: nursery rhymes, television advertisements and family jokes and stories.

Set prayers of the church — especially the Lord's Prayer — can give children a framework and language for prayer. Repetition of these prayers creates familiarity and allows children to join in as they are able. [L] [P]

Reflect: How can prayers in church be more accessible to your

- ... young children?
- ... early primary aged children?
- ... older children and adolescents?

7-E. DECLARATION OF FAITH

In worship we declare (confess) our faith.

The congregation may speak the Apostle's or Nicene creed — or another occasional creed — summarising for one another what we as Christians believe about God: who God is.

These creeds, like set prayers, give us a language and structure for thinking and talking about God, and they help to put us in touch with the whole body of Christ across time, geography and cultures.

Regular use of creeds and other worship elements also creates a sense of predictability in which faith can grow.

Explaining portions of the creed — and helping people recognise how they relate to day-to-day life can help them become more than just a memorised formula. [L] [P]

Reflect: How can the confession of faith be more accessible to your
... young children?
... early primary aged children?
... older children and adolescents?

7-F. CONFESSION OF SINS

In worship we confess our sins.

In worship we recognise who God is and that God is actually present in worship. We also recognise who we are.

Life experiences will generally lead children — and adults — to come to worship with one of three attitudes:

- I'm worthless, weak, hopeless. God is concerned with stronger, better people.
- I'm OK — at least better than the average bloke. I do all right on my own.
- On my own, I'm weak and helpless, but I trust that God loves me and forgives me and makes me strong.

If we come to worship with a burden of weakness and failure, we need to be able to let go of it.

If we come with a sense of our own power and worthiness, hearing a prayer of confession may move us to a more honest evaluation of our worth.

If we come with a healthy attitude of our relation with God, we know we need constant repetition of who we are in God's sight and what God does for us.

We tend to shy away from asking people — particularly children — to identify themselves as 'poor helpless sinners'. But we still need to find a way of allowing children and adults to get things off of their chest.

Also consider these possibilities:

- teach Gospel-based values and rules and helping children from an early age to recognise the consequences of bad behaviour [P]
- model confession (apologies) and forgiveness in family life [P]
- create a safe environment at home where children can talk about bad things they have done — and know they are still loved [P]
- create play situations where children can use dolls to act out the consequences of bad behaviour, confession and forgiveness [P]

CS Lewis spoke of his preferred worship style as a liturgy that was as comfortable as an old pair of slippers; so that he could communicate with God without being distracted by the form.

- start or precede worship with a time to reflect on the things that have happened during the week — particularly the things that we feel bad about [L] [P]
- use child-friendly language and imagery in prayers of confession [L]
- tell Bible stories and personal experiences of confession and forgiveness. [L] [P]

Reflect: *How can the confession of sins be more accessible to your*
... young children?
... early primary aged children?
... older children and adolescents?

All that happens at home and in worship regarding confession, is based on the next aspect of worship . . .

7-G. FORGIVENESS

In worship God forgives our sin.

God's forgiveness of our sin is the heart of the Gospel, the heart of our lives as Christians and the heart of worship.

It can happen in worship through a statement of God's forgiveness — absolution — following a prayer of confession.

It happens in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion in ways that are concrete, tactile, and go beyond symbolism.

The suggestions given above for involving children in the confession of sins also relate to involving them in receiving God's forgiveness.

We can also look for meaningful ways of celebrating God's forgiveness when we receive it. It's something to jump up and down about, something to shout and cheer and wave banners about.

Reflect: *How can God's declaration of forgiveness be more accessible to your*
... young children?
... early primary aged children?
... older children and adolescents?

7-G. OFFERINGS

In worship we give an offering.

Because the offering portion of worship involves simple actions, children are readily involved:

- parents can give even a very young child a coin (or an envelope or card) to put into the offering bag, plate or on the altar — mimicking the actions of the people around them [P]
- some children can help to collect the offering. [L]

Apart from church, most children's experience with money is payment for goods and services. Children may see the offering as a payment for the entertainment of worship. So it's important to talk to children in terms of giving a gift to say thank you to Jesus and help with the work of his church. [P] [L]

It may be good for parents to have discussions with older children about how parents prioritise their spending and decide how much offering to give in church and to people in need. [P]

Our offering is about more than money. In response to all that God gives us, we give ourselves. We often say a prayer or sing a song about this at the time of the offering.

Many years ago children's television presenter and Christian minister, Mr Fred Rogers, wrote:

If the only thing they have to do is to sit, then the only thing they can do is fail at being quiet and so forth. Then, children get the notion that the church doesn't really like them.

A people to belong to, 1984

What does the concept of 'giving yourself' mean for children? Perhaps this is one of those things in a worship service that we don't attempt to explain or re-formulate. The words can wash over children — and adults, who will take them on board to the level they are able to do so.

Or perhaps we can talk about God loving us, and our loving God back.

Or perhaps we can raise the question: God gives us everything we need, what can we give back? We may learn a great deal from children's responses to that question. [L] [P]

Reflect: *How can giving an offering be more significant to your*
... young children?
... early primary aged children?
... older children and adolescents?

7-I. SACRAMENTS

God comes to us in a very special way in Baptism and Holy Communion.

Churches traditionally have strict guidelines about age and prerequisites for receiving the sacraments.

Preparation for Baptism and Holy Communion are ideal times for teaching children and their parents about the sacrament and about worship in general.

Baptism happens once in a lifetime, but children can be involved in anticipating or recalling their own baptism over and over again, eg

- when they gather around to observe the baptism of another person or
- when they celebrate baptism anniversaries.

Reflect: *How can Baptism become more significant for your*

... young children?

... early primary aged children?

... older children and adolescents?

Holy Communion happens frequently (sometimes weekly) in worship. Some churches invite small children to receive the sacrament. Others exclude children from the sacrament, but encourage them to come forward and receive a special blessing when others receive communion.

Reflect: *How can Holy Communion become more significant for your*

... young children?

... early primary aged children?

... older children and adolescents?

7-J. BLESSING

In worship God blesses us.

Most worship services end with a blessing; some include special blessings within the service.

Children can

- feel the touch of another person putting a hand on them in blessing [P] [L] [A]
- put their hand on another person who is being blessed [P] [L]
- speak words of blessings, prompted by the worship leader [L]
- copy making the sign of the cross when it is used in blessing. [P] [L]

In some ways the closing blessing is like a souvenir to take with you when you leave

worship to help you remember what happened in worship.

One of the best ways of involving children in worship is to give them a tangible souvenir to take home with them. It can help them remember and can trigger family discussion about worship and about God. [P]

The souvenir might be:

- a card with a key Bible text [L]
- a picture of the Bible story for the day with some questions to talk about [L]
- a rock, shell or any small object that links with the Bible reading, children's address

or some other part of the worship [L]

- a section of the weekly bulletin with something to do at home. [L] [P]

Reflect: *How can blessings be more accessible to your*

... young children?

... early primary aged children?

... older children and adolescents?

7-J. OUTSIDE THE CHURCH BOX

Each individual's worship experience is shaped by the personal traits and experiences, the joys and concerns they bring with them to worship.

Our discussion about children's involvement in worship must include a look at what happens outside of the church box.

During the 166 or so hours they are not in church, members of the

congregation can form relationships with individual children and families, spending time with them, helping them as needed. They can get to know the children; meet them where they live and share in their activities, eg visit schools and attend sports matches.

They can pray for them and let them know that they are praying.

They can encourage the children and their families to participate with them in other functions of the church body:

Congregations expect parents to share the responsibility for teaching their children to worship and for helping their children participate in worship. Congregations have a responsibility for helping parents to do so.

Some ways of helping parents are:

- family worship mentors (or church chums) who support an individual family
- resources, eg books about worship and Christian parenting. These can be available in a church library, given to parents as a gift from the congregation or used as the basis for study in small groups of parents.
- bulletin notices with helpful ideas and information
- suggestions given in worship about what parents can do at a specific point in worship
- courses about worshipping with children.

- Teaching
- Fellowship
- Service
- Outreach/mission.

Worship planners and worship leaders are members of the congregation and share the congregation's roles. When worship planners and leaders have a relationship with the children, they are in a better position to help make worship relevant to the children.

Parents are the people who have the greatest influence on children, and who spend the most time with them. These suggestions may need to be modified where carers other than parents spend more time with children or are the adults who worship with children.

Parents can develop some form of daily family worship.

Parents can 'set the scene' for weekly congregational worship.

On the day before worship they may:

- talk about the exciting thing that they will be doing tomorrow: visiting God's house.
- talk about and plan what they will need to do to get ready, eg what children will wear, what they will take with them.
- talk about good things that have happened that they want to thank God for in worship and bad things that they want to talk to God about.
- pray together about tomorrow's worship, eg pray for the people who will lead worship; pray for the people who will be worshipping; ask God to help them learn good things about him in worship.

What happens in the household in the morning before worship, and the stress levels it may create, impacts the worship experience of the whole family. So it's good if there is a simple routine in place — even if things seldom go exactly to plan.

Parents can help children debrief after worship. They can help their children learn right from the start that the worship doesn't finish when they leave the church building.

During the trip home they may:

- sing songs they enjoyed singing in worship
- recall the things they did in worship
- talk about the things that were prayed for and consider if there is any way they can be 'answers' to the prayers.

At home, parents can :

- help children put any worship souvenir in a prominent place — and refer to it from time to time during the week
- repeat short Bible texts from the service daily and/or re-read the Bible passages that were read in church.

Useful discussion of worship with children avoids a spectator's evaluation of the performance of worship leaders. It focuses on what God did for them and said to them in worship and how they responded in worship and how they can respond throughout the week.

This way of thinking and talking about worship can set a good pattern for children's continuing involvement in worship.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart; all your soul, and all your strength. Always remember these commands I give you today. Teach them to your children, and talk about them when you sit at home and walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

A last word:

As Matt Redman reminds us in his song 'The Heart of Worship' — it's all about Jesus. If we make it anything else, we are missing the mark. And our children are missing out on true worship.