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# **The Family: Together in God's Presence**

Article by

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God-centered worship is supremely important in the life of our church. We approach the Sunday morning worship hour with great seriousness and earnestness and expectancy. We try to banish all that is flippant or trivial or chatty.

Not all services are this way. Sunday morning is the Mount of Transfiguration — the awesome place of glory and speechlessness. Sunday or Wednesday evening is the Mount of Olives — the familiar spot for conversation with the Lord and each other.

In this article, we hope to do two things: 1) demonstrate that parents (or some responsible adult) should bring little children to the Sunday morning worship service rather than send them to a “children’s church,” and 2) give some practical advice about how to do it.

We don’t claim that our way of worshiping is the only valid way. Not all our ideas may fit with the way another church does it.

For example, we don’t have a children’s sermon as part of our Sunday morning service. It would be fun for the children, but in the long run would weaken the spiritual intensity of our worship. To everything there is a season. And we believe that, for at least one hour a week, we should sustain a maximum intensity of moving reverence.

## **The Biggest Stumbling Block**

There are several reasons why we urge parents to bring their children to worship. But these arguments will not carry much weight with parents who do not love to worship God.

The greatest stumbling block for children in worship is that their parents do not cherish the hour. Children can feel the difference between duty and delight. Therefore, the first and most important job of a parent is to fall in love with the worship of God. You can’t impart what you don’t possess.

## **Togetherness**

Worshiping together counters the contemporary fragmentation of families. Hectic American life leaves little time for significant togetherness. It is hard to overestimate the good influence of families doing valuable things together week in and week out, year in and year out.

Worship is the most valuable thing a human can do. The cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with Mom and Dad between the ages of 4 and 17 is incalculable.

## **Catch the Spirit**

Parents have the responsibility to teach their children by their own example the meaning and value of worship. Therefore, parents should want their children with them in worship so the children can catch the spirit and form of their parents' worship.

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is that their parents do not cherish the hour.”**

Children should see how Mom and Dad bow their heads in earnest prayer during the prelude and other non-directed times. They should see how Mom and Dad sing praise to God with joy in their faces, and how they listen hungrily to His word. They should catch the spirit of their parents meeting the living God.

Something seems wrong when parents want to take their children in the formative years and put them with other children and other adults to form their attitude and behavior in worship. Parents should be jealous to model for their children the tremendous value they put on reverence in the presence of Almighty God.

## **Not an Excessive Expectation**

To sit still and be quiet for an hour or two on Sunday is not an excessive expectation for a healthy 6-year-old who has been taught to obey his parents. It requires a measure of discipline, but that is precisely what we want to encourage parents to impart to their children in the first five years.

Thus the desire to have children in the worship service is part of a broader concern that children be reared so that they are submissive and respectful (1 Timothy 3:4).

Children can be taught in the first five years of life to obey their father and mother when they say, “Sit still and be quiet.” Parents’ helplessness to control their children should not be solved by alternative services but by a renewal of discipline in the home.

## **Not Everything Goes Over Their Heads**

Children absorb a tremendous amount that is of value. And this is true even if they say they are bored.

Music and words become familiar. The message of the music starts to sink in. The form of the service comes to feel natural. The choir makes a special impression with a kind of music the children may hear at no other time. Even if most of the sermon goes over their heads, experience shows that children hear and remember remarkable things.

The content of the prayers and songs and sermon gives parents unparalleled opportunities to teach their children the great truths of our faith. If parents would only learn to query their children after the service and then explain things, the children’s capacity to participate would soar.

**“Children should catch the spirit of their parents meeting the living God.”**

Not everything children experience has to be put on their level in order to do them good. Some things must be. But not everything.



For example, to learn a new language you can go step by step from alphabet to vocabulary to grammar to syntax. Or you can take a course where you dive in over your head, and all you hear is the language you don't know. Most language teachers would agree that the latter is by far the most effective.

Sunday worship service is not useless to children just because much of it goes over their heads. They can and will grow into this new language faster than we think — if positive and happy attitudes are fostered by the parents.

## **A Sense of Awe**

There is a sense of solemnity and awe which children should experience in the presence of God. This is not likely to happen in children's church. Is there such a thing as children's thunder or children's lightning or the crashing of the sea "for children"?

A deep sense of the unknown and the mysterious can rise in the soul of a sensitive child in solemn worship — if his parents are going hard after God themselves. A deep moving of the magnificence of God can come to the young, tender heart through certain moments of great hymns or "loud silence" or authoritative preaching. These are of immeasurable value in the cultivation of a heart that fears and loves God.

We do not believe that children who have been in children's church for several years between the ages of six and twelve will be more inclined or better trained to enjoy worship than if they had spent those years at the side of their parents. In fact, the opposite is probably the case.

It will probably be harder to acclimate a 10- or 12-year-old to a new worship service than a 5- or 6-year-old. The cement is much less wet, and vast possibilities of shaping the impulses of the heart are gone.

## **Some Practical Suggestions from Noël**

When our four sons grew to be young men, we assumed that the worship-training chapter of our life had ended. But God has wonderful surprises. Our youngest son was twelve when we adopted our daughter, who was just a couple of months old. So our experience with young children in the pew started more than twenty years ago and will continue a while longer.

### **Getting Started Step by Step**

We discovered that the very earliest "school" for worship is in the home — when we help a baby be quiet for just a moment while we ask God's blessing on our meal; when a toddler is sitting still to listen to a Bible story book; when a child is learning to pay attention to God's word and to pray during family devotional times.

At church, even while our children were still nursery-aged, I began to help them take steps toward eventual regular attendance in Sunday morning worship services. I used other gatherings as a training ground — baptisms, choir concerts, missionary videos, or other special events that would grab the attention of a 3-year-old. I'd "promote" these to the child as something exciting and grown-up. The occasional special attendance gradually developed into regular evening attendance, while at the same time we were beginning to attempt Sunday mornings more and more regularly.

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I've chosen not to use the church's child care as an escape route when the service becomes long or the child gets restless. I don't want to communicate that you go to a service as long as it seems interesting, and then you can go play. And I wanted to avoid a pattern that might reinforce the idea that all of the service is good, up until the preaching of God's word — then you can leave.

Of course, there are times when a child gets restless or noisy, despite a parent's best efforts. I pray for the understanding of the people around me, and try to deal with the problem unobtrusively. But if the child won't be quiet or still, I take him or her out — for the sake of quick discipline and for the sake of the other worshipers. Then I have to decide whether we'll slip back into service or stay in the area reserved for parents with young children. It depends on how responsive the child seems and whether there's an appropriate moment in the flow of the service. If we stay in the "family area" outside the sanctuary, I help my child sit quietly as if we were still in the sanctuary.

By the time they are four years old, our children assume that they'll be at all the regular weekly services with us.

## **Preparation All Week Long**

Your anticipation and conversation before and after service and during the week will be important in helping your child learn to love worship and to behave well in service.

Help your children become acquainted with your pastor. Let them shake hands with him at the door and be greeted by him. Talk about who the worship leaders are; call them by name. Suggest that your child's Sunday School teacher invite the pastor to spend a few minutes with the children if your church's Sunday morning schedule allows for that.

If you know what the Scripture passage will be for the coming Sunday, read it together several times during the week. A little one's face really lights up when he hears familiar words from the pulpit.

Talk about what is "special" this week: a trumpet solo, a friend singing, a missionary speaker from a country you have been praying for.

Sometimes you can take the regular elements of the service and make them part of the anticipation. "We've been reading about Joseph. What do you think the pastor will say about him?" "What might the choir be singing this morning?" "Maybe we can sit next to our handicapped friend and help him with his hymnbook so he can worship better too."

There are two additional and important pre-service preparations for us: a pen and notepad for "Sunday notes" and a trip to the rest room (leaving the service is highly discouraged).

## **What Happens During Service?**

First, I let a child who wants a worship folder have one — it helps a child feel like a participant in the service. And quietly, before service begins, I may point to the different parts of the service listed in the folder.

During service, we all sit or stand along with rest of the congregation. I share my Bible or hymnal or worship folder with my little one, because use of these is an important part of the service.

**"We discovered that the very earliest 'school' for worship is in the home."**



The beginning of the sermon is the signal for “notetaking” to begin. (I want a child’s activities to be related to the service. So we don’t bring library books to read. I do let a very young child look at pictures in his Bible, if he can do it quietly.) Notetaking doesn’t mean just scribbling, but “taking notes” on a special pad used just for service.

“Taking notes” grows up as the child does. At first he draws pictures of what he hears in the sermon. Individual words or names trigger individual pictures. You might pick out a word that will be used frequently in the sermon; have the child listen carefully and make a check mark in his “notes” each time he hears the word.

Later he may want to copy letters or words from the Scripture passage for the morning. When spelling comes easier, he will write words and then phrases he hears in the sermon. Before you might expect it, he will probably be outlining the sermon and noting whole concepts.

## **Goals and Requirements**

My training for worship has three main goals:

1. That children learn early and as well as they can to worship God heartily.
2. That parents be able to worship.
3. That families cause no distraction to the people around them.

So there are certain expectations that I teach the young ones and expect of the older ones:

- Sit or stand or close eyes when the service calls for it.
- Sit up straight and still — not lounging or fidgeting or crawling around, but respectful toward God and the worshipers around you.
- Keep bulletin papers and Bible and hymnal pages as quiet as possible.
- Stay awake. Taking notes helps. (I did allow the smallest ones to sleep, but they usually didn’t need to!)
- Look toward the worship leaders in the front. No people-gazing or clock-watching.
- If you can read fast enough, sing along with the printed words. At least keep your eyes on the words and try to think them. If you can’t read yet, listen very hard.

## **Creating an Environment in the Pew**

For my part, I try to create an environment in our pew that makes worship easier. In past years, I would sit between whichever two were having the most trouble with each other that day. We choose seats where we can see the front better (while seated, not kneeling on the pew; kneeling leads to squirming and blocks the view of others).

Each child has a Bible, offering money, and worship folder at hand, so he doesn’t have to scramble and dig during the worship time. During the prelude, if I notice in the bulletin something unusual for which we need to be prepared (a responsive reading or congregational prayers, for example), I quietly point it out to a child who is old enough to participate.

## **Afterward**

When the service has ended, my first words are praise to the child who has behaved well. In addition to the praise, I might also mention one or two things that we both hope will be better next time.

But what if there has been disregard of our established expectations and little attempt to behave? The first thing that happens following the service is a silent and immediate trip to the most private place we can find. Then the deserved words are spoken and consequences administered or promised.

## Closeness and Warmth

On the rare occasions when my pastor-husband can sit with the rest of us, the youngest one climbs right into his lap — and is more attentive and still than usual. What a wonderful thing for a young mind to closely associate the closeness and warmth of a parent's lap with special God-times.

A child gets almost the same feeling from being next to his parent or from an arm around the shoulder or an affectionate hand on the knee.

The setting of the tight family circle focusing toward God will be a nonverbal picture growing richer and richer in the child's mind and heart as he matures in appreciation for his family and in awe at the greatness of God.

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# Should Children Sit Through 'Big Church'?

John Piper

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## Audio Transcript

*Robert from Columbia, South Carolina, writes in to ask, "Pastor John, I am wondering if there are situations in which a separate children's time — in Sunday school rooms, completely apart from the Sunday gathering — is necessary. Our church is wrestling through this issue. Many families have infants, some have wandering and noisy toddlers, there are rambunctious five-year-olds, and we have three children of varying ages with special needs (like autism and Down syndrome). Most parents want a break and desire a separate time for children while the adult service is going on, yet the children workers wish they were in the adult service and feel limited in their ability to control the behavior of the children. What should we do?"*

## Children In or Out?

I hope you have a strong leader in your church, because weak leaders will never stand up against the onslaught of criticism that will come if you do what I am going to suggest.

When I came to Bethlehem as a pastor in 1980, one of the first issues I had to deal with was children in worship. We did not have a lot of them, but they were beginning to come. The people all wanted to know what to do about it. Will we have a children's sermon in the middle, the little three-minute delay where the children walk to the front? Will we have children's church, then bring them back in to the service if they do not disappear when they turn thirteen? What will we do?



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in family life and in the life of the church.”*

My wife, Noël, and I teamed up. We have not done anything quite like this since. We teamed up because we both felt unbelievably strongly about this point. We staked our lives on it. We wrote a paper for our people arguing against having children’s church and against having a mini children’s sermon in the service. We urged parents or other responsible adults to bring their children to the service after they were about four years old. We provided a nursery until then. Eventually those nurseries became very God-focused, nurturing places to help get little children oriented toward God and ready to go with Mom and Dad to the big service.

The article we wrote is on the Desiring God website. It is called [“The Family: Together in God’s Presence.”](#) I am going to quote from it, but I am going to leave out the very thing everybody wants to know — namely, how do you control kids? That is the part my wife wrote. So, if what I say here is provocative enough to get your interest, then go to the website, search for the article, and read what my wife had to say about that. I think the big issues are worship, parenting, and how to transmit ideas to kids.

## **God-Centered Worship**

Let me give a few thoughts from that article. God-centered worship is supremely important in family life and in the life of the church. We approached the Sunday morning worship hour during my 33 years in the pastorate with tremendous seriousness, earnestness, and expectancy. Do not hear those words as standing contrary to joy. Think serious joy. Think deep joy.

We were and are a happy people at Bethlehem. However, we tried to banish all that is flippant, trivial, chatty, and chipper. I abominate chipper worship services. We called Sunday morning “The Mount of Transfiguration,” meaning it was an awesome place of glory where you were to fall on your face almost speechless in the presence of God. Sunday evening (or Wednesday evening, or whatever else you do) was “The Mount of Olives,” the familiar spot where Jesus probably lay down, put his hand on his elbow, and talked things over with his disciples. Those times are utterly crucial in the church as well.

We did not have a children’s sermon as part of the Sunday morning service. We believed that even though it might be fun for the kids, it would weaken the spiritual intensity of our worship in the long run. “For everything there is a season” ([Ecclesiastes 3:1](#)). That is so crucial. People think you have got to put everything in the Sunday-morning service. But to us it seemed that for at least one hour a week out of 168 we should sustain a maximum intensity of moving reverence. I will say that again, because I really like that phrase: a sustained maximum intensity of moving reverence.

## **Authentic Worship Witnesses**

Of course, our arguments for bringing children to worship will carry weight only with parents who really love that. They will only convince parents who really love to meet God in worship and want their kids to grow up breathing that air. The greatest stumbling block to children’s worship is parents who do not cherish their own worship. They do not love it. Children can feel the difference between duty and delight. They know whether or not Dad loves being here.

*“The greatest stumbling block to children’s worship  
is parents who do not cherish their own worship.”*

So, the first and most important job of a parent is to fall in love with the worship of God. If you go to church out of duty, feel forced to, or have any reason other than a love for being there, your kids will know. They will hate it just like you do. You cannot impart what you do not possess. You want your children to catch authentic worship. Authentic, heartfelt worship is the most valuable thing in human experience. You cannot calculate the cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with Mom and Dad — between the ages of four and seventeen — in authentic communion with God and his people.

We aim for children to catch the passion for worshiping God by watching Mom and Dad enjoy God week after week. If the children saw Dad praying, face in hands, before worship week after week for twelve years, how would it impact them? If they saw Mom and Dad beaming with joy as they sang God's praises, how would it impact them? Millions and millions of children never see their parents sing, let alone sing songs to a great God with joy. It seems wrong when parents send their kids to children's church during their most formative years rather than having them right there to shape them. Why would parents not be jealous to model for their children the tremendous value they put on joyful reverence in the presence of Almighty God?

## **Worship: More than Fun**

Of course the service is over the children's heads. It is supposed to be over their heads. They are beginners. The English language is over their heads when they come out of the womb, but we do not say, "Well, let's put them with other children in their own situations and limitations so they can understand a word or two." No. We immerse them in the English language every day. For a while, they do not understand most of it. But we hope and expect them to grow up into joyful use of the English language. Long before children fully understand the words said and sung in the service, they are absorbing tremendous amounts of valuable experience.

This remains true even if they say they are bored. Music and words become familiar. The message of the music starts to sink in. The form of the service starts to feel natural. Even if most of the sermon goes right over their heads, experience shows that children hear and remember remarkable things. The content of the prayers, the songs, and the sermon gives parents an unparalleled opportunity to teach their children the great truths of the faith. If parents would only learn to query their children after the service and explain things to them, they would sow enormously valuable seeds for their long-term growth in the knowledge of God.

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There is a sense of solemnity and awe which children should experience in the presence of God. They should sense the sacred moment, the sacred place. This likely will not happen in children's church. Unfortunately, it is not likely to happen in many adult services that put a high premium on horizontal chatter rather than vertical joy. We should aim to awaken them to the greatness and majesty of God, not just his tenderness and familiarity.

Those are some thoughts about why we should value having children in worship. We could say so much more, especially about the kind of parenting and discipline at home that makes all of this possible. But you can go to the article for that and see what Noël and I wrote about discipline. The bottom line is this: Parents should most earnestly desire heartfelt, passionate encounters with the living God in worship. And there is no better way to impart this than by worshipping together with Mom and Dad in the service.

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