

Strategies for Worshiping with Children - 1. The Vision



Remember what dinner was like before your children were born? Eating with preschoolers or elementary schoolers or teenagers is different! Eating with children at each age has its particular joys and trials. At times it drives adults a little nuts. But, when after 18 or so years we find ourselves eating with adults only again, we recall those loud, messy meals fondly (at least the better meals 😊) and miss them.

It is the same way with worship. Worshiping with children changes the way you worship forever. If “before children” worship was a quiet “just for me” time, that is over and done. It is a new day. Worshiping with children is a team sport. You can no more worship beside your children than you can eat beside them. Both are interactive. You are now a worship coach. Your children will insist that you hone your worship skills and deepen your understanding of worship – and almost everything else – as you draw them into worship. Expect to be embarrassed, stretched, frustrated, delighted and deeply enriched by the process.

To live into that vision of parents and children worshiping together and to help congregations support parents, over the next few weeks I will post a series of lists of strategies parents can use “in the pew” as they worship with their children. At this point I plan separate lists of strategies for singing, praying, and listening to scripture in the sanctuary with children. More may evolve. Join the process by suggesting more lists and/or adding strategies to each of the lists. This is definitely a work in progress.

Part 2: Singing with Your Child in the Sanctuary



Worshipping with a child is a team sport, i.e. something you do together. And, like all sports having a collection of strategies and tricks to pull out as you play makes worship more interesting, fun and satisfying for all the players – including the parent/coach. So, here is a list of strategies with which even not-very-musical parents can draw children into singing with their congregation. It is far from complete. Add strategies that have worked for you in the Comments section.

- As soon as they are comfortable with three digit numbers children enjoy the responsibility of finding the hymns by their numbers for the family to sing. They become the **“keeper of the hymnbook.”**
- In the child’s worship bag, provide bookmarks with which a **child can find and mark the hymns** you will sing.
- **Insist they sing** with the congregation. Pull them away from anything else they are working on during worship, if needed.
- While the musical introduction is playing, **tell your child something you like about this hymn.** (Last week my 90 year old mother whispered, “this is one of my favorites!” and I paid attention to it in a new way as we sang.)

- **Position their heads so they can hear and feel their voices in the middle of the singing.** Younger children enjoy standing on the pew, being as tall everyone else, and singing in the middle of the music rather than hearing it somewhere above them. When children get too tall to stand on the pew, sit beside your standing child or simply scrunch over so that your voice is near your child's ear.
- Don't sing all the time. Occasionally, **hum** or **la-la**, even **whistle** a hymn together. (Yes, in the sanctuary!) This is especially welcome by early or non-readers. They can participate and begin learning the tunes without the words.
- As they begin to read, use a paper on its side or your finger to help children **follow the words**. They will brush you aside when they are ready to keep up on their own.
- Emphasize repeated phrases or choruses in a hymn with **a nudge and wink** encouraging young readers to sing at least those phrases even before they can read all the verses.
- **Invest in a hymnal** to keep in a worship bag. With your child underline important words. Write the date of each time you sing each hymn. Add star stickers or dog ear the ones you really like. Encourage your child to make notes or draw illustrations in the margins. Add some of your own.
- Write a key phrase in a hymn you just sang on a piece of paper or a page in a worship journal. Urge your child to **illustrate or write about it** during rest of worship. Make your own page or add a note or drawing to your child's page.

Strategies for Worshiping with Children: 3. Reading Scripture in Worship



Worshipping with a child is a team sport, i.e. something you do together. And, like all sports having a collection of strategies and tricks to pull out as you play makes worship more interesting, fun and satisfying for all the players – including the parent/coach. That means parents need strategies for helping children listen to scripture as it is read in worship.

“Hearing” and “getting” the scripture is important. The sermon and most of the songs and prayers of the day are built directly on this text. If you don’t hear the scripture, you’re going to miss a lot of the rest of worship too. Personally, I think most of the responsibility for helping children “hear” the story lies with the worship planners. It is their challenge to devise ways to present the scripture that attract and hold the attention of children as well as adults. But parents can also get in the act. Below is a list of strategies with which parents, even parents who do not consider themselves great Bible students, can draw children into hearing scripture with their congregation.

- **Keep a Bible story book in their worship bag.** When the reading is a story, find it in the book for the child to read or reread during the sermon. If all the children of

the church are given the same Bible story book, page numbers of corresponding stories can be printed with the text location in the order of worship.

- Encourage older children to read along in Bibles by providing them with **bookmarks with which to mark the passages**. As everyone is getting settled in before worship they can find the texts listed in the printed order of worship.
- **Turn a bookmark or a bulletin on its side** help young readers follow along with you as the preacher reads the text. (Think about this: when a parent helps a child follow the words the worship leader reads all three become a community sharing the scripture, like I said it's a team sport.)
- Challenge children to **draw a picture in response to a scripture by asking a question**, e.g. how do you think that looked? Or, how do you think Jesus looked when he said that? Drawings can be made in margins of bulletins or in spiral bound worship journals brought to worship each week.
- When you recognize a familiar story or text about to be read, **say something about it to your child and add the word listen**. "Listen to this, it is one of my favorite stories about Jesus." "These words were read at your mother and my wedding. Listen." Even, "Listen to this. I never have figured out why...."

Strategies for Worshiping with Children: 4. Praying in the Sanctuary



Helping a child grow into praying with the worshiping congregation requires more than repeated shushing and instructions to “close your eyes and be quiet!” It requires that parents become prayer partners with their children. Different weeks and different prayers in any given service can be shared by parents and children in a variety of ways. Below is a collection of strategies for parents to use in the pews with their children. The goal is not that a child is fully involved in EVERY prayer EVERY week, but to encourage children to participate in at least one prayer each week. And, BTW, sometimes we do pray more readily with our eyes open and a pencil in hand (especially when we are children). So...

- **Help children follow printed prayers** in prayer books or printed orders of worship just as you help them follow the words in the hymn book. A bookmark or other paper on its side just under the words helps.
- Prayers don't have to have words. Invite your **children draw their prayers**. They may draw a friend they love or are having trouble with, some activity or problem they are dreading, something that makes them say “Yea, God!” this morning. Draw in the margins of the printed order of worship, on a sheet of paper or in a spiral bound worship journal you bring to worship each week.
- Identify all the **prayers that are prayed regularly** in your worship, e.g. the Lord's Prayer. Learn them a phrase at the time at home. Then, encourage children to pray them with you in the sanctuary.

- Listen with your child to “the long prayer” writing down important words or phrases as you hear them on a sheet of paper or in a worship journal. Enjoy **passing the pencil back and forth as you listen and write**.
- **Write your own sharable prayers** in margins of the bulletin for your child to read.
- **Underline a phrase in a printed prayer and write “Amen!”** (“I agree” or “so be it”) beside it. Or, write your own prayer that builds on the underlined prayer maybe tying it to a specific concern in your family. Share it with your child.
- Write a word or phrase in one of the day’s prayers on a sheet of paper or a page in a child’s worship journal. **Encourage the child to illustrate it** or add more related prayers around it. Add drawings or prayers of your own to the page – if it feels right.



- Help your child draw his or her prayers starting with a loopy design. In each section **the child draws or writes one person or topic about which to pray**. With markers or crayons they decorate each section as they talk to God about that person or topic. (This is a good strategy to try first at home. Suggest it at the beginning of “the long prayer” at church after the child knows the process.)
- Older children like to **structure prayer by writing simple poems**. The first line is a person or topic. The second is two words that describe that person or topic. The third is three “ing” words for that person or topic. The last line either repeats the word or name or offers a word that is the same.

Getting Through the Sermon

A reader named Alicia says there are parents in her congregation who have trouble getting through the sermon with their children. Imagine that! I suspect that is the hardest part of the service for children everywhere to grow into. Where else are they asked to sit and listen to a person on the other side of the room speak without interruption and often without pictures for – well, however many minutes it actually is, it feels like FOREVER! if you are a child. So, I am responding to all of us hoping to get a conversation started that will help us all.

I think there are two parts of supporting parents in this endeavor: **giving them a vision** and **giving them lots of little tips**.

THE VISION

In my mind it helps to ***compare listening to a sermon to learning a sport*** – say soccer. In both you have to start playing the game before you have mastered it. Actually you master it by playing it. The more you practice and play the better you get. If you are a child you are often trying to learn skills almost before your body has the ability to do them (think trying to slam dunk a basketball or sit still on a pew with your legs dangling). But, you keep trying. Part of the trick is to find ways to enjoy it while you are learning. This comparison helps parents think like coaches and children think like players (rather than both thinking like survivors tied in mortal combat).

Once parent and child have decided that listening to a sermon is hard and will take time but is worthwhile, the tips become useful.

THE TIPS

- Remember that few adults ***listen to every single word of a sermon***. Something is said that makes me think about something important to me and I follow that for a while then tune back in. It's the same with children. Only the younger they are the less often they tune in. For preachers the trick is to seed a sermon with words and references that will cause the children to tune in for a few minutes here and there. For parents the trick is to notice when the child tuned in and talk about that rather than the times she was definitely tuned out. For children the trick is to pay enough attention to the parts that fly over their heads that they notice when something interesting happens. Nudging parents can help with this.

- Every week in the car on the way home expect every member of the household to tell one **“sermon take away”**, i.e. one thing to remember from the sermon – and yes a joke or funny story counts. Children learn through this discipline that they are expected to listen – at least a little – rather than just to be quiet. They also learn that their parents think sermons are important. (Heads up: occasionally a child who wants to talk about something that was not mentioned in the sermon but is important to him and which he thought about during the sermon, will raise it as a “sermon take-away.” Go with him on it. It may be more important than anything the preacher said this week.
- Particularly with older children, **insist that looking through books be saved for sermon time**. They can participate in all the songs and prayers. During the sermon provide Bible story books that can be read or simply looked at during the sermon. (Such books keep children “in the room” more than their latest mystery or computer game does.) Some congregation provide a shelf of appropriate books at the rear of the sanctuary or put one in each child’s worship bag.
- Provide a **hard candy** (they are called lifesavers for many reasons) to enjoy during the sermon. They give children something to do with the tongue while they sit back and listen.
- Provide paper and pencils or crayons for **sermon art** and/or **worship journals**. Go to [Worshiping With Pencils and Crayons](#) and [Worship Writing](#) for details expanding on this.