

Worshipping With Your Children¹

We at Sovereign Grace Bible Church desire to promote right relationships within our families and right attitudes regarding the worship of our Lord. To this end we encourage families to worship together and *welcome children of all ages* in our worship services. We provide nursery care for infants up to 2 years old and Children's Church for ages 2-3 years. We desire ages 4 and up to worship with the body of Christ and believe it is beneficial for our children to observe adults worshipping and to participate themselves. We also endeavor to address our children when appropriate during the preaching of God's Word. Knowing this is challenging for both children and parents in making the transition from Children's Church to worshipping together, we have prepared this paper to help you and your children make this transition.

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. In this paper, we hope to do two things: 1) demonstrate that parents (or some responsible adult) should bring young children to the Sunday morning worship service. 2) give some practical advice about how to accomplish this.

We at SGBC do not claim our way of worshiping is the only valid way, nor do we believe our methods and ideas will work with the way other churches perform their worship. For example, we do not have a children's sermon as part of our Sunday morning service. It may be fun for children, but in the long run, we believe it would weaken the spiritual intensity of our worship. However, we do need to address children during the preaching when appropriate. To everything there is a season, and we believe we should sustain a maximum intensity of moving reverence for our Sunday morning worship service.

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 themselves. 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

Worshipping 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 humans 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 their children can catch the spirit and form of their parents' worship. Children should see how mom and

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dad bow their heads in earnest prayer during the prelude and other non-directed times. They should see how Mom and Dad sing praises 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 attitudes and behavior in worship. Parents should be jealous to model for their children the tremendous value they put on reverence and worship 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 4 year old that 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 their earliest years. Thus, the desire to have children in the worship service is part of a broader concern that children be reared so they are “submissive and respectful in every way” (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, and the form of the service comes to feel natural. The music 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, songs and sermons give 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. 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 do not 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 their 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 as likely to happen in Children's Church. 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 6 and 12 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 may be the case. We believe it may be more difficult to introduce 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

Getting Started Step by Step

We believe the very earliest school for worship is in the home. Children are taught the basic principles of worship at home when we help a baby sit quietly for just a moment while asking God's blessing on a meal or when a toddler sits still to listen to a Bible story. Moreover, children learn to pay attention to God's Word and pray during family devotional times.

At church, even while children are still nursery-aged, we can begin to help them take steps toward the eventual regular attendance of Sunday morning worship. You may use other gatherings as training grounds like prayer meetings, baptisms, missionary presentations or other special events to help grab the attention of a 3 year old. It is helpful to promote these opportunities to children as something exciting and grown-up. These occasional special attendances will help us transition small children into the regular Sunday morning services.

When you begin you may use the balcony with your children for a few services for a little more privacy and interaction with them during the service. This is not a requirement but simply an option that some have found helpful. In the main sanctuary, some have found that sitting in the first few pews is actually helpful instead of “way in the back”. You might consider trying it and be pleasantly surprised.

Preparation All Week Long

Your anticipation and conversation during the week and before and after service 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. Tell your children who the worship leaders are and call them by name. If you know what the Scripture passage will be for the coming Sunday, read it together several times during the week. A child's face really lights up when he hears familiar words from the pulpit. Sometimes you can take the regular elements of the service and make them part of the anticipation. For instance, ask your child, “We've been reading about Jesus in the Book of Luke. What do you think the pastor will say about him this Sunday?”

Encouraging Your Children to Participate in the Worship Service

First, let a child who wants a worship bulletin have one; it helps a child feel like a participant in the service. Before service begins, it is helpful to show your child the different parts of the service listed in the folder.¹ During service, have your child sit or stand along with rest of the congregation. Encourage your children to tune in and listen to the announcements. Share your Bible and hymnal with your little one, because they are an important part of the service. Look up the hymns together. It is also helpful to use your finger to help little ones follow along with the words in your hymnal and your bible. Encourage your children to sing or even say the words. Help them open their Bibles to the Scripture passages to be read. Teach them to say “amen” after they have listened to and prayed along with the prayers being offered.

The beginning of the sermon is the signal for note taking to begin.² Note taking does not mean just scribbling, but taking notes on a special pad used just for the service. Taking notes grows up

1. Try to minimize trips to the rest room by visiting the rest room before service.

2. A child's activities should to be related to the service. A very young child can look at pictures in his Bible, if he can do so quietly.

as the child does. At first he draws pictures of what he hears in the sermon. Individual words and names trigger individual pictures. Then, he may explain and even write down what the picture means. All this is to help your child develop listening and note taking skills. You might even pick out a word that will be used frequently in the sermon and have the child listen carefully and make a check mark in his notes each time he hears the word. Another idea for young ones is to write sentences from the sermon with fill-in-the-blanks for them to fill in.

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. If a child gets stuck or drifts off during the preaching, it is helpful to write a statement from the sermon on their note pad that has a fill-in-the-blank to get them jump started. One of the great benefits of note taking is to promote discussions with your children after the service, either in the car or at lunch, in order to help them understand what is being said and taught. It is also profitable to ask them questions afterwards to see how well they listened and to encourage them to think and to remember what is being taught.

Goals and Requirements

As we train and encourage our children to worship God we will recognize they are fully capable of learning early to worship God heartily. In addition, parents will also be encouraged to participate more and engage their own hearts in more fervent worship. Families who work together in worship will also cause less distraction to the people around them.

Some expectations to teach young ones and expect of the older ones:

- Sit, stand or close your eyes when the service calls for it.
- Sit up straight and still, not lounging, fidgeting or crawling around.
- Be respectful toward God and the worshipers around you. There are times when a child gets restless or noisy, despite a parent's best efforts. Please understand the Pastor and people of SGBC are patient and sympathetic as many of them have small children or have raised their children. If your child refuses to be quiet or still, it may be best to remove him from the service for the sake of quick discipline and for the sake of other worshipers. You may then decide to slip back into service or use the balcony area for some privacy. Just remember that you are much more distracted by your children than others around you so don't over react.
- Keep bulletin papers, Bible and hymnal pages as quiet as possible.
- Stay awake (for those 5 years old and older). Taking notes helps.
- 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 about them. If you cannot read, listen well.

Creating an Environment in the Pew

Try to create an environment in your pew that makes worship easier. If you have multiple children, sit between them to better help them. You may want to choose seats where you can see the front better (while seated, not kneeling on the pew; kneeling leads to squirming and blocks the view of others). Each child should have a Bible, offering money (preferably not coins) and worship bulletin in hand, so he does not have to scramble and dig during the worship time. During the prelude, if you notice something unusual in the bulletin for which you need to be prepared (i.e. a responsive reading, special music, etc.) quietly point it out to a child who is old enough to participate.

Afterwards

When the service has ended, we should praise the child who has behaved well. In addition to the praise, you might also mention one or two things you both hope will be better next time. If there has been disregard for your established expectations and little attempt to behave, an appropriate post-service response would be a silent and immediate trip to a private place. Then, the deserved words are spoken and consequences administered or promised.

Closeness and Warmth

Often the youngest ones may climb into the lap of a parent which may help them to be more attentive and still than usual. It is a wonderful thing for a young mind to closely associate the closeness and warmth of a parent's lap with special times of worship. 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 our God.

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This paper has been prepared by Sean and Megan Hahn who are “practitioners” of what has been described here. They are more than willing to discuss any aspect of this subject with you. If you have discovered things that have worked well that are not mentioned in this paper please let the Hahns know so we can improve this paper.

For our Lord's honor,
Elders, SGBC