



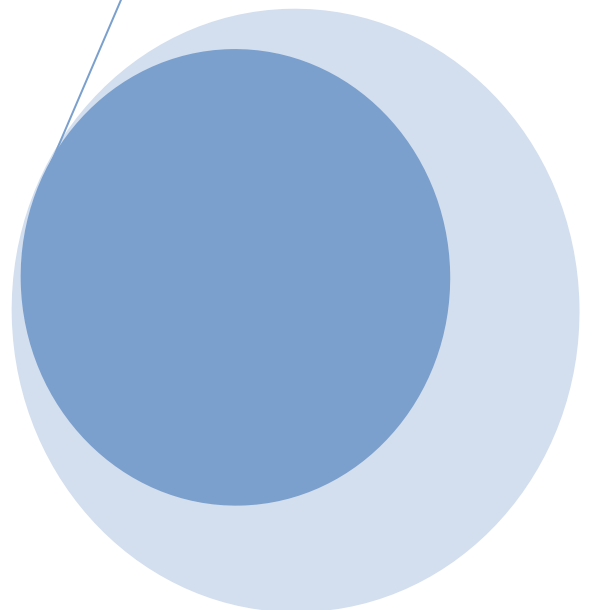
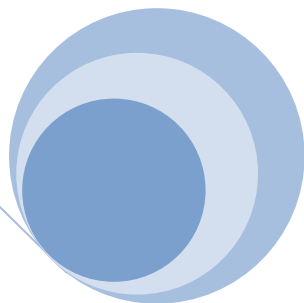
Kids and Church:

A Family Survival Guide

This booklet has been prepared by the Children's Ministry at Church of the Apostles as a resource to our family of faith.

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Kids and Church:

A Family Survival Guide

Help for making church a worshipful experience for the entire family

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Going through a Good Phase

As far as seasons of church-going with kids are concerned, my family's enjoying a good one. But being prepared with this great resource will help the summer of church-going continue.

My kids love church—at least they do lately. Instead of the hysterical tears we faced for six solid months, my daughter now gleefully greets her friends in the church nursery. Instead of the stonewalling that used to accompany any attempt to separate him from us during church, my son now runs to children's worship and comes out brimming with Bible stories, songs, crafts, and usually a good tattletale about a fellow preschooler.

After church, while my husband and I try to fellowship with friends, both my kids join a pack of preschoolers for a game of follow-me-as-I-scoot-through-the-pews. Thankfully, I go to a church where this, for the most part, is seen as training up children to love church and not as disrespectful sacrilege. At least, it is as long as I hold my conversations within eye-shot of the sanctuary and can stop too many tiny pencils from leaving the pew racks.

But I'm not foolish enough to think the good times at church will last. While we may have weathered the agonizing crying-in-nursery phase, I realize plenty of other anti-church phases have yet to come in the life of my children. The "I'm too sick." The "it's too boring." The ever-troubling, "you don't have to go to church to prove you love God."

In this Survival Guide, we packed in six practical articles on ways you can make going to church not only enjoyable for your kids but enlightening as well. From ways to help them pay attention to ways to keep them safe and evaluate the effectiveness of your church school programs, we hope this helps improve the church-going experience for your entire family.

God bless!

*Caryn Rivadeneira
Managing Editor, Women's and Family Resources
Christianity Today International*

Kids in Church

Sure they squirm, giggle, talk, and wiggle, but including your children in the worship service is worth the distraction. Here's how to help them stay tuned in.

by Michelle Leise

My days of quiet contemplation at church ceased three and a half years ago when my first child, Elise, was born. Before we had kids, my husband and I were able to pray with reverence and concentrate on every word of the readings. Now, church is one long hour of multitasking. I pray with one eye on my kids. I listen to the sermon while retrieving granola bars from the floor. I sing along to hymns as I fish children's books out of our backpack. Some weeks, my most worshipful moment is thanking God that my one-year-old son, Jonah, is intrigued by the new candles up front.

Most of the time, we're willing to go through this inconvenience because it's important to us that we worship as a family. But some weeks I find myself thinking: *Maybe we should give up and start shipping them to the nursery.*

To decide if our efforts to keep our kids in church are worth it, I asked parents, pastors, and religious educators for their opinions. They were unanimous. "One of the most important parts of parenting is teaching your children how to worship," says Georgene Burt, minister of child education at First Baptist Church of Ellisville, Missouri. "It's hard sometimes, especially if you have a child who's very active. You may even have to realize that you're not going to get very much out of the service. But, remember, like everything else, this stage, too, will pass."

Some Christian educators believe that including children in the worship service is more than just a nice idea; it's essential to their spiritual development. Myra Arnold, who teaches religion to two- to six-year-olds at Messiah Episcopal Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, says, "Jesus intended for us to bring children into this celebration. Being part of the community of faith is the basis of us being able to live a Christian life, and children are a part of that community. The two-and-a-half-year-olds I teach love church. That seems to be the beginning of their sensitivity to spiritual things."

Even if we firmly believe that our children should participate in the worship service, we often worry about what other people will think. But according to Eric Carlson, pastor of First Lutheran Church in Stoughton, Wisconsin, that's a worry we can let go of. "It may be distracting [for other parishioners] to hear a baby cry or a toddler say something," he says. "But remember that Jesus welcomed the little ones. I often think of the time the custodian told me that it looked like it had been a great Sunday morning because there were so many Cheerios in the pews. He was right."

Making Family Worship Work

While worshipping as a family sounds great in theory, in practice it can be tough to pull off. But there are ways you can make the task easier. For toddlers and preschoolers, the key is making them feel like an important part of the church community. Encourage your child to be involved in the service. Let her hold the hymnbook and put the money in the collection plate. In the week before the service, learn some of the songs you'll be singing on Sunday so she can sing along. Sit in the front row so your child can see what's going on and you can explain to her what's happening. If she feels welcome and loved in church, she'll have a more positive view of worship, and that can last all the way to adulthood.

Remember, though, to have realistic expectations for your young children. No two-year-old will sit quietly for an hour, so you'll need to find ways to keep him occupied. The First Baptist Church of Ellisville makes "worship bags" for its little ones filled with crayons, coloring pages, and other quiet activities. If your church doesn't have something similar, put one together yourself. Include stickers, books, and a small snack. Help your child decorate the bag and pick a special place at home to keep it during the week. You can make the bag extra exciting by telling your child that the bag is especially for church.

Older children get bored more quickly, so helping them enjoy church means keeping them occupied. The worship bag (or backpack) idea still works for elementary kids with a few adjustments. Some churches provide kids' bulletins filled with word searches and other worksheets that make good additions to a worship bag.

If you want to go a step further, you, your pastor, or a group of volunteer parents could make worksheets that use words and ideas from each week's readings or theme. Or come up with your own idea using the talents of your congregation. At Carlson's previous parish, a member who was an artist made coloring books with drawings that depicted areas of their church. This gave parents an opportunity to teach their kids about the physical structure of the church, while giving the children something constructive to do during the service.

The Other Six Days

Don't limit your prep work to Sunday morning. Talk about church throughout the week, and tell your children about any special symbols or rituals that will be present the coming Sunday. Or consider creating a prayer table at home that displays items that coincide with the church's calendar, such as a nativity scene or Easter eggs. It will take a little time to educate yourself, but one of the benefits of teaching your children about faith is that you're forced to learn a lot in the process.

Children of all ages learn a great deal by repeating what they've heard. Toddlers and preschoolers like playing "pretend church." Let your three-year-old pretend she's the pastor or choir director or mommy to her stuffed animals (she might love teaching them to be quiet).

For older children, Deb Bradley, a mother of three children who directs the religious education program for children at her church, offers this tip. "If there is someone you know well who doesn't attend church—a spouse, a homebound grandparent, a good friend, or neighbor you see on Sundays—give your child the job of telling that person what happened in church and what the message was that day," she says. Your child will feel important about her task, she'll listen better, and you'll get to hear exactly what your son or daughter understood from the service.

Living in the Church

It also helps to think of your goal on a bigger scale. Instead of making church a one-hour-a-week commitment, make it a greater part of your family's world. You may want to start a program at the church where families pair up with an elderly person and sit together during the service. (Your child will look forward to seeing "Aunt Rose" each week.) Do community projects through your church, and get involved in church festivals and events. Eventually, your church will feel like a community to your child, and in turn, he'll probably respond to the expectations of that community.

All of these ideas can help get your children involved in worship. But the most crucial step you can take is also the most obvious: make church a joyful ritual. Don't go just because you think you should. Let your

children see you prepare for church with enthusiasm. Make sure they hear and see you getting excited about being part of a Christian community. "It's the parents' job to open their children's hearts to God," says pastor Tom Walker of Red Wing, Minnesota. "Children learn by repetition, by seeing that Mom and Dad are in church every week."

Brenda Dickel attends church every week with her husband and their two-year-old daughter, Grace. She says, "It's true that it's hard having children in church with you. But not having them there is hard, too. My daughter is a part of our family and when she's missing, part of the foundation of our family is missing. I don't like being in church without her."

I feel the same way, and now I'm re-energized to continue teaching my children how to worship. Slowly I'm seeing progress. Elise loves to sing the songs in church, and she gently quiets Jonah when he gets noisy. I hope that in time, both my children will be attentive not only to the service, but also to the basic virtues of their faith. For me, that's worth a few Cheerios in the pews.

— Michelle Leise is a writer and the mother of two. She and her family live in Minnesota. This article first appeared in the Spring 2003 issue of Christian Parenting Today.

THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- *What are your biggest challenges regarding your kids and church?*
- *Did this article give you ideas that might be beneficial? How so?*
- *What are your thoughts on having your kids in the church service versus using a church nursery or children's worship program? Did this article change or influence your view at all?*

Busy Bodies

Doing a little work ahead of time will help church go more smoothly and in time lead to better behaved children. Try these ideas and make up some of your own.

by Michelle Leise

1. Make your own fun worksheets. Talk to the church office to get a list of the readings or sermon theme for the following Sunday. Make up word games like fill-in-the-blank sentences or quick questions with short answers. If you wish, find a few families who want to do the same and trade off weeks, then share the worksheets.
2. Create an "I Spy" list with things your child can try to find during church. Be sure to include special symbols, colors, or items on display that week. You may also want to include random objects such as "baby," "man with a blue shirt," or "something purple."
3. Ask your child to draw a picture of something she sees at church. Whatever she draws, you'll discover what has captured her attention.
4. Play a quiet counting game. Before the service, write down words such as "candles," "windows," and "church helpers," then ask your child to count each of these things and write the number down next to its name.
5. For an older child, write a list of words and ask your child to find those words by flipping through a songbook or prayer book. He can cross them off his list as he finds them.
6. For a younger child, bring a few books he hasn't read often so they grab his attention. You may also want to save a special quiet toy for church so he's excited to play with it. (A felt book with different animal, people, and object pieces to move around is a great option—it's colorful, creative, and makes no noise, even when the pieces are dropped.)
7. A few quiet snacks, such as raisins, are good for keeping toddlers happy. Put the food in a snack cup at home so you're not opening loud plastic packages during the service.

Michelle Leise is a writer and the mother of two. She and her family live in Minnesota. This article first appeared in the Spring 2003 issue of Christian Parenting Today.

THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- *Which of these tips seems doable for you and your kids?*
- *In what ways might you tweak some of these ideas to especially suit your child's personality?*

Purpose-Driven Pew Games

These 5 fun games will not only help your children make it through the service, they'll help make church an enjoyable part of daily life your whole family can share.

by Barb Jenista and Sue Miholer

Combine a squirrely child with an early morning and an hour-plus service and it's no wonder a young child can have a hard time paying attention during church. You've probably tried distracting your child with toys, bribing him with snacks, even threatening him with a look that says, "Be quiet right now or you'll spend the rest of your life in your room."

But helping your child enjoy church doesn't have to be difficult. With a few creative worship-related activities up your sleeve, you can encourage your wiggly one to pay attention to the service and even understand what's happening.

Try using a couple of these suggestions each week. All of them work best if you arrive several minutes before the service begins.

1. Go to the Head of the Class

To limit distractions, help your child choose a seat near the front of the church, with a good view of the altar and pulpit. This allows him to watch the musicians and feel "up close and personal" with the pastor. Before the service starts, talk about the different parts of the church—the altar, the pulpit, the baptismal area, the communion rail, or anything else that might be interesting to your child. Encourage your child to notice how the pastor uses these different parts of the church during the service.

Bonus Points: During the week, take a field trip to the church. Introduce your child to the pastor and other members of the worship team. Let him explore the equipment and different vantage points in the sanctuary. This cuts down on the squirming involved in a visual exploration of the sanctuary during the service itself.

2. The Ungame

Buy a notebook for every family member and let everyone personalize his or her own notebook. Tell your kids they can use their notebooks to record sermon notes, write word lists, and note questions they might have about the service or sermon. Then, before your family leaves for church, have your children write out one question you'd like them to answer in their notebooks: "How does the music make you feel?" "What are three things you enjoy about church?" "If you could ask the pastor one question about today's sermon, what would it be?"

Bonus Points: During the week, use everyone's notes to review the message. Talk about ways you can apply what you've learned and discuss questions or misconceptions.

3. Guesstures

Words and concepts used in church are almost a foreign language to many of us (especially children). Allow your child to whisper to you when he hears an unfamiliar word. After a quick explanation, write down the word to talk about later. When the pastor talks about something your child is familiar with, point it out to him. For example, if your family likes VeggieTales and the minister talks about facing problems, you might whisper, "That's just like 'Dave and the Giant Pickle.'"

Whisper praise when he's listening well. After church, talk with him about ways to apply what he's heard to his own life.

Bonus Points: During the week, encourage your child and his friends to "play church." Let them be in charge as you take the role of parishioner. This is a great way to see what your child thinks church is all about and clear up any misconceptions he might have. Your conversations become a natural extension of the sermon.

4. Win, Lose, or Draw

Bring a sheet of paper and a crayon or marker and help your child take "notes" during the service. She can start with simple pictures of what she sees and hears, moving to words as she gets older.

If your child is very young and needs help drawing, take some time before the service to draw stick figures to represent the pastor and any other "players" in the service. If the Scripture readings are based on a Bible story your child knows, such as Daniel or Noah, draw the people and animals from the story.

After church, ask your child to tell you about her pictures and write down what she says. You might even save these "worship notes" in a special scrapbook.

Bonus Points: During the week, prepare listening guides with your child. Find pictures of words he'll probably hear during the service: church, cross, Bible, Jesus. You can find these kinds of pictures in computer clip art, church-related publications and stickers from a Christian bookstore.

5. Password

Look over the bulletin together. Ask your child to help you find and circle activities that might involve your whole family, such as songs, prayers, or readings. Underline unfamiliar words you can discuss later. If the order of service is listed, draw an "up arrow" for when to stand and a "down arrow" for when to sit.

Star the songs she knows or have her look them up in the hymnal before the service starts. If there's a song sheet, discuss words she may not know. Teach her the refrain of any new songs, so she can participate.

Write out a list of words the minister might use during the service and have your child listen for them, putting a star by the ones she hears. If your child can't read yet, use pictures instead. To make this a competitive activity, put the pictures or words on a bingo-like grid and let your kids race to fill in their lists. But remind them not to yell, "Bingo!" during the service.

Bonus Points: During the week, help your child make her own word lists. Help her think about words she usually hears in church and write them down or draw pictures on a small sheet of paper. Increase the number and complexity of the words as her understanding grows.

And the winner is ... everyone! These games will do more than simply help your children make it through the service. They'll allow you to integrate church into daily life so that each complements the other. And you'll enjoy a wonderful closeness with your child in this special area of life.

—Barb Jenista and her sister Sue Miholer co-authored this article based on a workshop Barb developed entitled, "Kids in the Kongregation." This article first appeared in the November/December 2000 issue of Christian Parenting Today.

THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- *The authors end the piece by saying that these games can help integrate your family's church and personal lives. How can you see one or more of these doing that for your family?*
- *In Luke 18:16, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." How might making church more interesting to your child help them "come to" Jesus?*

Sunday Morning Showdown

What to do when you hear, "I don't wanna go to church!"

by Rhonda Rhea

I felt battle-weary as I limped from my preschool daughter's Sunday school room. She had started church as a member of the newborn class—a pastor's child, no less. My husband and I had worked to help our children love church. But little Allie was shifting into battle mode, complete with her own air-raid siren, as soon as her classroom came into view.

Well-meaning friends gave plenty of contradictory counsel. "Just let her cry it out, hon." Around the next corner I'd hear, "Never force her to go. She might hate church for the rest of her life." I carried the additional burden of trying to get to *my* class with this cute, dimpled child wrapped tightly around my left leg!

If you're like most parents, you have experienced at least one of those leech-like moments. Or maybe your deathly ill child has made a miraculous recovery as soon as he's sure it's too late to leave for church. Maybe you've experienced the "pew slouch" or the classic "eye roll" from your 10-year-old.

We can force our children to go to church, but can we make them like it?

Make a List

A good place to start is asking your child why she doesn't want to go to church. Help her talk about her feelings, remembering that they can be difficult to express. As she talks, make a list. Then you can begin to work through her concerns, item by item.

While you're listening, carefully guard your responses. When I hear, "My Sunday school teacher doesn't like me," my natural response is, "Of course your teacher likes you." Instead, I can guide my child in a positive way: "I'm sorry you feel your teacher doesn't like you. Can you tell me why you feel that way?"

Cindy Layman, a 13-year children's ministry veteran, says parents should check to make sure there isn't a legitimate problem with the class or Sunday school teacher. Investigate by asking specific, but non-

offensive, questions, and try sitting in on a class. If you notice areas that need improvement, speak privately with the teacher. If the problems persist, express your concerns to the church's leaders.

Often, however, the problem isn't with the teacher or the class. Kids have their own reasons for resisting church, and their struggles usually disappear with time. In the meantime, there are several things parents can do to minimize the battles.

Examine Family Routines

Think about your Saturday-night bedtime and Sunday-morning routines. It might help to try an earlier bedtime, especially if your child is having trouble getting up for church. You can also help relieve Sunday-morning stress with a little advance preparation. With five children, if I don't plan ahead, I end up with ten Sunday shoes but no pairs—and plenty of stress to pass on to my children.

Work ahead on getting ready for church just as you would make early arrangements for a party. And give your kids some choices along the way, such as whether to wear the blue dress or the yellow one. But don't offer the choice to boycott church.

Check Yourself

It's possible your child's objections to church reflect some of your attitudes. To find out, ask yourself these questions:

- *Does my child hear me speak disrespectfully about people at church, especially a teacher or pastor?*
- *Does my child see "duty" or "privilege" reflected in my attitude toward church involvement?*
- *Do I have negative attitudes toward church that the Lord wants to change?*

As it is in many struggles, prayer is your best offensive weapon in the Sunday-morning battle. Pray for your child and for yourself, asking the Lord to make you a good example of positive church relationships.

Plan Special Events

Make an effort to tie fun into churchgoing. One couple encourages their child to invite friends home for visits after church. You can also plan a special family party as a reward for developing a good attitude toward Sunday school.

Since children get excited about giving gifts, let your child choose a gift for her teacher. Also, consider inviting your child's teacher to dinner so they can get to know each other on your child's turf.

To help increase a younger child's comfort level, take him on a field trip to church during the week. Tour the classrooms, including yours, and let him know what you do while he's in class.

Give Good Reasons

Explain to your child why your family goes to church. Read Hebrews 10:25 and show her that your family obeys God by attending church and worshiping with other believers.

Show her the instruction for kids found in Ecclesiastes 12:1: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.” Remind her that your family is able to learn about Jesus and minister to people through the church, as well as receive ministry from others.

Reassure Younger Children (ages three to seven)

When leaving a younger child in Sunday school, tell her where you will be and when you will pick her up. Show her the clock and where the hands will be when you come. Build trust by returning then.

At drop-off time, don't stay in the classroom more than five to ten minutes. Crying usually stops in less than 20 minutes, even though you might see it start up again at pick-up time. Don't give in to those tantrums. Psychologist E.L. Thorndike reminds us, “Behavior which achieves desirable consequences will recur.” If your child likes what happens when she throws a tantrum, she will repeat the behavior. Instead of reinforcing the tantrums, encourage good behavior with rewards.

Inspire Older Children (ages eight to twelve)

“If it's important to you to have your child in worship, it should be important to you to find out what your child is receiving from worship,” says Cindy Layman, who has trained hundreds of teachers. After church, Cindy and her husband ask their children if they remember the points of the sermon, and then they help their kids apply what they heard.

If your older child has trouble understanding the sermon, ask him to write down questions he has. Sometimes planning a special lunch to discuss questions provides a surprising and intimate sharing time.

If your child doesn't have friends in Sunday school, encourage him to invite friends to attend with him.

Don't Give in to Guilt

Should parents make kids come to church? Think about proper health and nutrition. We often have to make our children eat vegetables and go to bed on time. It's not pleasant, but we do it because it's good for them.

Children aren't the best judges of what's best for them. That's one reason God gave them parents. Proverbs 29:15 says, “The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.” Family-life specialist James Dobson has said that forcing a child to go to church won't psychologically mar him for life, cause him to hate you forever, or lead him to rebel against God later in life. If those things happen, it's not because of church attendance.

After Jesus ordered his disciples to let the children come to him, “he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them” (Mark 10:16).

I've seen him bless my children—and I've been blessed, too. Gradually, the battles have died down. We've kept the consistency in attendance, answered a number of our children's questions, and invested much prayer. And now that Allie is back in her class, I've regained the circulation in my left leg.

—When she's not speaking or writing, Rhonda Rhea incites her five children to hassle-free church attendance at the St. Louis-area church where her husband, Richie, serves as senior pastor. This article first appeared the July/August 1998 of Christian Parenting Today.

THOUGHT PROVOKERS

- *Having a child who's unhappy about church can put a huge damper on a church worshipping experience. How has an unhappy child impacted your experience? What steps did you or might you take to improve it?*
- *What sorts of worries run through you mind when your child goes through an "anti-church" phase?*



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