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# Engaging Children in Worship

## Perspectives for Churches to Consider

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Children's Ministry Catalyzer



How can we engage children as full and equal participants in the worship service? How do we make space for them as active rather than passive participants?

Over the past year, Thrive has been discussing what informs and shapes best practices for engaging children in the worshipping community.

Here we'll explore how children make meaning of their faith and provide suggestions for how

churches can nurture this meaning-making in worship.

As we engage with these ideas, we know that making changes in ministry practice involves both gaining new ministry experiences and letting go of certain valued practices. Though these changes are important to nurturing children's faith, making them can cause us to feel some grief and loss. But our hope and prayer is that congregations like yours will explore and experience the amazing benefits of fully embracing children's participation in your worshipping community.



Every congregation is concerned with the spiritual formation of its members. As individuals participate in the life of the local church, the faith of all members—regardless of their age—is shaped by the church’s efforts. And while the formation of an individual is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit, God also chooses to use people to accomplish this work.

We learn through both intentional and unintentional experiences. We also learn from interacting with other “faithing selves,”<sup>1</sup> which means we are formed in the faith through the relationships we have within our faith community. But what informs and shapes the best practices for engaging children in a worshiping community?

When discussed, the best methods for a child’s formation are often approached from three specific directions: theological, developmental, and contextual.

From a **theological viewpoint**, children are members within the covenant community. The Bible provides multiple examples of children’s participation within the faith community.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Westerhoff, John. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2000), 89.

<sup>2</sup> There are multiple examples in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament to support this. A few examples include children present at the Feast of the Tabernacles

In Exodus 12:21-27, children’s prominent role in the Passover supper demonstrates that not only were children welcome within the faith community, they were also expected to participate in and contribute to the religious life of the family and the community. Still today, at the Passover table children are given the task of asking four questions that address one central question: “Why does this night differ from all other nights?” They not only receive the faith story but are placed in the center of the ritual, calling the larger community to remember God’s faithfulness.

**Developmental theory** has also greatly influenced the church’s work with children. While this theory calls for a high view of children and helps us better understand how they are created, the church has also used this theory to create and embrace an age-segregated form of ministry that promotes the “best” environments and practices for learning. While the intention is good, the practice of age-segregated ministry has some unintended consequences that hinder a congregation’s worship and formation.

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(Deuteronomy 16: 13-14), children present for the reading of the Torah (Joshua 8:34-35), children of all ages present at the worshiping gathering (Joel 2:15-16), and Ephesians 6:1 where Paul writes to the church in Ephesus telling children to obey their parents. It’s reasonable to assume that children would be present to hear this admonition.

Current research shows that children benefit from being among the congregation as they worship.<sup>3</sup> It also suggests that children benefit from listening to sermons, and that the activities that lead to mature faith are rooted in children's participation with their families in worship.<sup>4</sup>

As churches wrestle with how best to engage children in worship, another approach comes from a **contextual perspective**. Churches assess their congregation's needs, often prioritizing the needs of adults over the needs of children. Many parents and other adults in the congregation may voice that a child's presence in the worship service is a disruption. Some children, when not engaged within the communal practices, may complain that the worship service is boring. These complaints often prompt congregational leaders to create a specific experience just for children, separating them from the rest of the worshipping community.

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<sup>3</sup> See chapters by Holly Allen and Karen Marie Yust in *Understanding Children's Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*, edited by Kevin Lawson (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) and David Csinos' chapter in *Story, Formation, and Culture: From Theory to Practice in Ministry with Children*, edited by Benjamin D. Espinoza, James Riley Estep, Jr., and Shirley K. Morgenthaler (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Carolyn C. *You Can Preach to the Kids Too! Designing Sermons for Adults and Children* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997).

This creates a system where the children are not included in the communal acts of the congregation, and leads to them forming different understandings of the



church and the gospel. When the goal is to satisfy the desires of both adults and children, a need-based perspective can feed into a consumer mindset within the congregation if we are not careful.

### **Implicit and Explicit Teaching**

Educators often speak about *explicit* and *implicit* teaching. **Explicit** teaching is the clear, direct instruction with attention to the information that is to be learned (often supported by curriculum). **Implicit** teaching is indirect instruction where children learn not through information but through inference and observation.

When churches hold Sunday school during worship time, the focus is on the direct, explicit instruction that is happening during that hour. Children are learning Bible stories and grasping

theological concepts in age-appropriate ways. This type of education is a good thing. Yet what are we sacrificing in worship for this education?

Worship, education, and service must all be components of a child's spiritual life. What messages do children infer or absorb when they are removed from or

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## What messages do children infer or absorb when they are removed from or not included in communal worship experiences?

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not included in communal worship experiences? What are we saying to children when worship is replaced with Sunday school education about faith?

### **Three Models of Children's Participation in Communal Worship**

As churches grapple with how best to engage children in worship, their plans often land in one of three typical models of children and worship. The first is an *inclusive* model, in which children are fully incorporated into the worshiping

community. The second, a *hybrid* model, allows for children to participate with the worshiping community for a limited amount of time (such as for the music and/or prayers) and then move to an age-segregated activity that is either a continuation of worship or a time of Bible education. The last is an *exclusive* model, in which children attend their own programming for the entire worship service.

#### **The Inclusive Model**

In an inclusive model of children and worship, children participate in the worship service with their families and faith community. Many will argue that this model places the highest value on children as part of the faith community.

But in many churches there is an implicit message given in this inclusive model. Rarely does a child lead in worship. Children are often encouraged to be passive participants in worship—keeping quiet so as not to disturb the adults. Here children are present but are not active participants in worshiping God. They are seen, but not heard.

This model begs a question: If from childhood we are taught to be passive in worship, might we become adults quite content to let ministers and worship leaders do the active work of worship?

### The Hybrid Model

In a hybrid model of children and worship, children participate for part of the service and then go to an age-appropriate activity that has been specifically designed for their developmental needs. The age-appropriate activity varies within congregational contexts. Sometimes it is a continuation of worship for children. Sometimes it includes biblical education such as Sunday school.

There are various curricula that support this type of model, including the worship curriculum *Young Children & Worship* by Stewart and Berryman,<sup>5</sup> which is what the Christian Reformed Church knows as “Children and Worship,” the separate worship time for children.

While this hybrid model attempts to provide the best of both worlds—the communal experience of worship as well as an experience designed to specifically meet children’s developmental needs—one of the unintended results is that often children are removed from the communal worship experience and given an educational experience instead. Thus, in Sunday school settings which only provide an educational experience,

children miss out on the opportunity to worship.

With this model we must ask what implicit messages are given to children when they are always pulled out of worship before the sermon begins. Are we sending a message that children do not belong with the rest of the community when the Scriptures are read and preached? How does this early childhood experience affect later adolescent or young adult understandings of belonging? We must remember that implicit messages can have unintended consequences.

### The Exclusive Model

In an exclusive model of children and worship, children attend their own age-specific programming during the entire worship service. As with the hybrid model, this time may be structured in various ways. Most churches hold children’s Sunday school during that time, which opens up a bigger problem. If children are only being *educated* on a Sunday morning, how are they learning and participating in the worship of God?

Some churches attempt to solve this problem by creating a worship experience specifically for children, but this solution also has problems. When a congregation implements a children-

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<sup>5</sup> Stewart, Sonya S. & Berryman, Jerome. *Young Children and Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

specific worship gathering that is separate from the larger congregation's gathering, the church contributes to "intergenerational fragmentation."<sup>6</sup> Intergenerational fragmentation is the splitting of church ministry into age-specific categories, which allows



for customization of different ministries but also contributes to children's isolation from the rest of the worshipping community.

As Darwin Glassford and Lynn Barger Elliott note: "By building a ministry based upon age-specific developmental needs and emphasizing the uniqueness of this present generation, we have isolated the generations within our churches from each other and from the wisdom of those who have gone before them. In efforts to target individual needs and to 'market' ministries towards the church consumer, our churches are

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<sup>6</sup> Espinoza, Ben & Johnson-Miller, Beverly. "Catechesis, Developmental Theory, and a Fresh Vision for Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (May, 2014): 8–23.

now finding themselves with multiple silos of ministry that are generationally fragmented and disconnected from the church family."<sup>7</sup> Covenantal children belong within and have a right and responsibility to contribute to the larger worshipping community.

So how can each congregation discern how children might engage and participate in the most sacred of our acts—the worship of God? We can approach this by asking three important questions:

- What is worship, and who is worship for?
- What is the place of children within the worshipping community?
- How do children make meaning of faith?

### **Worship as a Verb**

In order to discuss the place of children within the worshipping community, we must understand the purpose of worship and recognize the acts of hospitality and sense of belonging that are essential to a child having positive experiences in worship.

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<sup>7</sup> Glassford, Darwin., & Elliott, Lynn B. "Toward Intergenerational Ministry in a Post-Christian Era." *Christian Education Journal* 8, no. 2 (2011): 368.

First we should ask this: Who is worship for? Is it for God, or for people?

When we gather as a worshipping community, we are participating in one of the most important and sacred acts of our faith. Worship is an encounter with the Triune God, with whom we are in a covenantal relationship.

The Reformed tradition holds that God is the primary actor in our worship. Thus, our worship, in partnership with the Holy Spirit, becomes an offering to God in response to the grace and love God has extended to us. It is a dialogue—an extension of the reciprocal relationship we have with God.

Worship is not a passive experience. “In other words, worship is a verb. It is not something done to us or for us, but by us.”<sup>8</sup> It is a community action and also an intergenerational and participatory experience. God invites us, the covenant community made up of all generations, to actively participate in the worship that is already happening before God's throne and in the creation around us.

As *The Worship Sourcebook* states, “Worship at its best is intergenerational and invites children to be full, conscious,

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<sup>8</sup> Webber, Robert. *Worship Is a Verb: Celebrating God's Mighty Deeds of Salvation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) 2.

active participants, not just onlookers.”<sup>9</sup> All of God's people are to participate in worship.

Worship is also an act of hospitality involving both God and people. First, the act of hospitality in worship comes from God to us—an invitation as a community to gather and worship. Then we embrace this holy act of hospitality as we make room for one another and for the stranger so that everyone has a place in the community. The body of Christ comes together, united in its focus yet different in many ways, such as gender, ethnicity, education, economics, marital status, and age.

It is through the act of worshipping God that we are joined together. “Worship binds us to one another; this is our reason for being not only as individuals but as a body knitted together in the bonds of Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

Children belong within the congregation in worship. It is their baptismal birthright and their proper place.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *The Worship Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013) 34.

<sup>10</sup> Helopoulos, Jason. *Let the Children Worship* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2016) 18.

<sup>11</sup> As the CRC Synod document “Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith” states, “The recipients of baptism are publicly welcomed as members of the covenant community” (p. 555). [crcna.org/sites/default/files/2011agenda\\_appendixA\\_0.pdf](http://crcna.org/sites/default/files/2011agenda_appendixA_0.pdf)

But having children in the worship service does not mean that the worship service must be entirely child-focused. As John Witvliet states, “The goal is to make the celebration child-welcoming, without feeling the need to make it child-centered, to both accommodate children and their developmental capacities, but also to challenge them to grow.”<sup>12</sup>

Within worship we both tell God’s story and find our place within that story. In worship, children find a place to belong to God as well as to God’s family, the church. Through the acts of worship—its rituals, liturgy, and storytelling—the congregation creates an environment of belonging, a shared experience that shapes our faith identity both as a community and as individuals.

Through worship, the Spirit forms and then sends out the whole people of God—children and adults alike—to be the church in the world. By removing children from the formative experience of communal worship, the church comes dangerously close to embodying an anemic vision of who belongs among God’s people, a vision that is normalized through repeated practice both for

those inside and outside of the worshiping community.

When children are not part of the worshiping community, they lose the connection to a larger church family, and adults lose their connection to the concerns, voices, and faith expressions of the younger generations.

### **The Place of Children within the Worshiping Community**

Historically, children have held an important place within the worshiping community. Jewish children had roles in the community’s worship experiences. There is evidence that in the early Christian church, children were present at worship.<sup>13</sup> When we look throughout church history, we can see that children have always held a place in the faith community’s worship practices.

In the last 40 years, ministry with children has emerged as a vocational ministry field, embracing a programmatic model of ministry with children. A programmatic model provides positive and enriching experiences for a consumer of the product. The challenge is that programs can become the focus,

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<sup>12</sup> Witvliet, John D. “Children at the Table: Some Provisional Answers to the Practical Questions,” *Children at the Lord’s Supper*, *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum*, 2007, <https://legacy.calvinseminary.edu/wp-content/uploads/forums/07spring.pdf>.

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<sup>13</sup> Bunge, Marcia J., Fretheim, Terence E., and Gaventa, Beverly R. eds., *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).



rather than the people who engage with them.

As opposed to a relational or person-centered approach, a programmatic model, which removes the child from the worship service, may inadvertently dehumanize the child, which creates unintended consequences, such as these:

- The process or product is valued over the person.
- The adult's experience, free from responsibilities or distractions, is prioritized over the child's experience.
- We inadvertently teach children that the worship service (and by extension the church) is not a place for them.

When children are removed from worship, the assumption is that children have nothing to contribute to us or to our worship of God. Jesus told us to become like little children (Matthew 18:3), but how do we grow in childlike faith if children are not with us? Along with being fellow worshipers, children have a role to play as teachers, as living examples of childlike faith from which adults can learn much.

The question the church must ask is not how to *remove* children from worship,

but how to better *engage* them in the actual experiences of worship.

Our covenantal theology is a communal one that embraces children as an essential part of the community. Children are a blessing to the community, not a burden or distraction.

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When a church is able to shift from a program-focused ministry and embrace a person-centered approach, we show that we value individuals (regardless of their age) over programs or content.

When we embrace this view in our planning of a worship service, we demonstrate that all generations and all people are valued and seen as essential in contributing to the worship experience.

## Why Make Room for Children within Worship?

As we consider the children in our midst, it is important to understand how they uniquely make meaning of their faith experiences. How do children form understandings about God, themselves, and faith?

This discussion must first include a conversation about our attitudes toward children, because our attitudes impact how children understand their place among us.



Are we indifferent to their presence, seeing children as the “future church” and not as part of the congregation here and now? Or can we admit that maybe we hold a low view of children, where we see them as disruptions and hindrances to our worship experiences?

What does it mean for a church to hold a high view of children, believing that the Holy Spirit is interacting with children as much as with adults? Can we embrace

children as equal participants in the worshiping community?

The gospel of Mark provides a glimpse into two distinct attitudes toward children. In Mark 10, parents are bringing their children to Jesus. This passage doesn’t specifically describe the little children who came, but anyone who has been with a group of children can imagine what it was like.

Children in this group might have been quiet or rambunctious. Some were probably shy. Others were likely bold. Some children might have had sweet smiles on their faces; others may have had runny noses. The passage specifically states that parents were bringing young children, so we can imagine there were infants and toddlers there too.

Whatever the size or shape of the children, however loud or quiet they were, their parents brought them because they desired Jesus to bless them. What good parents don’t want that for their children?

The disciples, on the other hand, opposed this gathering of children around Jesus. Their low view of little ones, common for that time, emboldened them to rebuke the parents.

Did the disciples think children were a disruption to Jesus? Did they worry that their presence would hinder his work with adults? Or did they think that children were simply not important enough to gain an audience with Jesus?

Whatever attitude the disciples held, Mark tells us that Jesus was “indignant” with them. Indignant is a strong word that depicts anger toward injustice.<sup>14</sup> The disciples’ attitude toward children was wrong, and Jesus let them know it.

As we see in the gospel story, Jesus invites the children to come to him, desiring to be in a relationship with them. He values children—the quiet and the rambunctious, the shy and the bold, the ones with sweet smiles as well as the ones with runny noses. Jesus values children just as they are.

This beautiful gospel story offers us a moving picture of the attitude toward children that Christ wants us to cultivate. While he admonishes the disciples for keeping children away from him, Jesus welcomes, embraces, and blesses the children in his presence. “In blessing them, Jesus was including these children in the movement of God. This reflects his trust that these children are taking

their place in the kingdom.”<sup>15</sup> These children that Jesus embraces are also created in the image of God. As Grobbelaar states, “To be the image of God is not something you become when you grow up into adulthood, but all children already—from the day of their birth—bear the image of God in all its fullness.”<sup>16</sup>

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## When we welcome and receive a child, we are also welcoming Jesus.

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How do we welcome children in our congregations? The questions we must start with are attitude questions. Do we embrace children for who they are, or do we simply tolerate them?

Scripture reminds us that when we welcome and receive a child, we are also welcoming Jesus (Matthew 18:5). “A space is opened up where God can work. It is a space where God in Christ

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<sup>15</sup>Droege, Michael. “Growing Together,” in *Engage All Generations: A Strategic Toolkit for Creating Intergenerational Faith Communities*, ed. Cory Seibel (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2021), 62.

<sup>16</sup> Grobbelaar, Jan, “Some Theological Perspectives on Generativity,” in *The Generative Church: Global Conversations about Investing in Emerging Generations*, ed. Cory Seibel (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 44.

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<sup>14</sup> “indignant.” Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster, 2020.

not only transforms children's lives but the adults in the space as well."<sup>17</sup>

Welcoming the children in our midst doesn't just shape and form each child's faith; it shapes the faith of adults too.

When Jesus says the kingdom of God belongs to children (Mark 10:14), he implies that they understand and do something that we adults do not. Children do not just bear the image of God; they also have something to give us. As Droege points out: "Faith formation happens when all ages are included in the core life of a congregation and all members, regardless of age, are understood theologically as playing a vital role."<sup>18</sup>

## How Children Make Meaning of Faith

For children, the process of meaning-making is serious work, and their ability to make meaning of God is influenced by the attitudes they experience within the faith community. But that is not the only influence. Through our worship experiences we pass on theological concepts, language, and understandings.

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<sup>17</sup> Fitch, David E., *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2016), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Droege, Michael. "Growing Together," in *Engage All Generations: A Strategic Toolkit for Creating Intergenerational Faith Communities*, ed. Cory Seibel (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2021), 63.

These insights come through the music we sing, the words we speak, and the actions we engage in.

"Children do not passively absorb information about God."<sup>19</sup> They are actively making meaning about God, themselves, and their community through their participation within the faith community. Thus, a child's *experience, exploration, and environment* are vital avenues for spiritual transformation and meaning-making.

### A Child's Experience Matters for Spiritual Meaning-Making

Children make meaning through their experiences and their personal reactions to those experiences. As they observe what is happening around them and initiate or respond to actions, these experiences leave an impression.

What impression does the church leave on children? What welcome do they encounter when they are in church? How are they accepted and encouraged? Are they coached and instructed, or pushed to the side?

What children experience within the church and the Christian family greatly impacts their understanding of God and

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<sup>19</sup> Hood, Dana Kenamer, "Six Children Seeking God," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004), 240.

the growth of their faith. In *Where Faith Begins*, C. Ellis Nelson observes:

Faith is an experience which can be thought about but cannot be produced by thinking. It is like hope and love in that it comes into our being through our associations and is strengthened through experience in our daily living. Put in practical terms, a person learns the meaning of love and how to love as a baby through his relation to his parents....There is no way to tell a baby about love—it is something that has to be inculcated through the actions of the adults who surround the child.<sup>20</sup>

Children’s experience within the community of faith is crucial to how their faith develops, including their understanding of God and of the covenantal community. We cannot just *describe* a community to children. We must provide opportunities for them to fully experience the faith community around them.

“Children discover what it means to be a part of the community of faith through being the body of Christ; they are not merely taught what the body of Christ is,

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<sup>20</sup> Nelson, C. Ellis, *Where Faith Begins* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1967), 106.

they experience it fully.”<sup>21</sup> As an 18-year-old explains in the book *Growing With*, “The adults in my life didn’t tell me *what* to believe but *how* to believe.”<sup>22</sup>

Children are watching and learning more than we realize. As children journey with us in the worshiping community, they observe what faith practices we engage in, what we focus on, and how we behave.



Explicitly, children make meaning through the questions they ask and the guidance they are given. Implicitly, children make meaning by observing and copying the behavior of the adults around them. Meaning-making is a collaborative process between children and adults.

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<sup>21</sup> Allen, Holly Catterton, “How Parents Nurture the Spiritual Development of their Children: Insights from Recent Qualitative Research,” in *Understanding Children’s Spirituality: Theology, Research, and Practice*, ed. Kevin Lawson (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 216.

<sup>22</sup> Powell, Kara, & Argue, Steven. *Growing With: Every Parent’s Guide to Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Thrive in Their Faith, Family, and Future*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019, 142.

Within the worshiping community, children's understanding of and engagement in worship more readily flourishes when we give them support as they participate in worship. Worship is where a child's religious identity is rooted within the community.

The older process of evangelism and discipleship used to follow the pattern of Believe/Behave/Belong. But the process has shifted towards a more hospitable approach: Belong/Believe/Become.<sup>23</sup>

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## Children catch a vision of who they can become by belonging to a group of believers.

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With this approach in mind, children are not first instructed in *what to do*; instead they catch a vision of *who they can become* by belonging to a group of believers. Among other worshippers, children's faith and commitment are both formed and strengthened as they connect through relationships with

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<sup>23</sup><https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2017/january/church-growth.html> and <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/428-belong-believe-behave-2/>

other community members and actively participate in the worship experience. As Laura Keeley and Robert J. Keeley point out: "It is not enough to be told that we belong. We need to feel it."<sup>24</sup>

In our discussion of experience, it is important to note that repetition within the experience is extremely important in a child's faith development. Every Sunday, as a child experiences the community's worship service, he or she is learning how to worship.

A child needs to be introduced to the practice of worship and learn what is expected in worship. It is important for a child to gain an understanding of what we do and why we do it. If understood, the repetition experienced in a worship service is not boring. Faith formation is nestled within these repeated church practices in the context of a community that shapes and shares those practices.<sup>25</sup> Studies have shown that repetition is critical for learning development.

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<sup>24</sup> Keeley, Robert J. and Keeley, Laura. "Building Blocks of Faith," in *Faith Formation Practices & Approaches* Volume 8.1 ed. John Roberto (Lifelong Faith, Fall 2014), 5. [https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/bb\\_lifelong\\_faith\\_-\\_keeley.pdf](https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/bb_lifelong_faith_-_keeley.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Mercer, Joyce Ann, Matthews, Deborah L. & Walz, Scott, "Children in Congregations: Congregations as Contexts for Children's Spiritual Growth," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004), 249-265.

The more children are with us, experiencing the rhythm of our worship services, the more they are learning what it means to come and worship God—both personally and corporately.

### **A Child’s Exploration Matters for Spiritual Meaning-Making**

Experiences are not the only factors that influence a child’s spiritual meaning-making. Children’s urge for exploration—their curiosity and discovery—provides them with fertile ground to make meaning of their faith experiences.

Through exploration, children learn by doing, by testing out ideas, and by trying things out. Their questions, curiosity, imagination, and wonder are engaged through the exploration of worship.

“For children, the shared meanings of corporate worship need to be experienced and explored within the context of that worship. They need to know the meaning of the cross and of candles. They need to be told the reason for prayer and confession. They need to understand the elements of worship and their importance to the historic and ongoing telling of the faith story.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Morgenthaler, Shirley K., Becker, Peter M. & Bertels, Gary L., *Children in Worship: Lessons from Research* (River Forest, IL: Pillars Press, 1999), 53.

For children, this exploration is not just a cognitive act. It also requires a physical exploration of their surroundings as they exercise their curiosity. What’s behind the pulpit? Where does that door lead? When I touch the altar, is it rough or smooth? What does it feel like to sit in a different place in the sanctuary?



If guided in their exploration, children’s sense of space helps them feel that they belong to the family that lives there.

It is important to note that play is a vital act of exploration, and it is how children make sense of their world. Play engages the brain and the heart, allowing children to learn both intellectually and emotionally. Play opens up a world of learning where children are free to explore and express themselves as they engage in wonder, storytelling, peace-making, and imagination.

The church often undervalues play as a serious means of learning. But play can be a sacred activity, as it can nurture a

child's understanding of faith and be a "means of discovering one's spiritual potential."<sup>27</sup>

For a child to play within the church, there must be space for the child to learn and practice the acts of the worshiping community. Some churches in England and Sweden have placed portable "play churches" in their sanctuaries. These spaces include a



Photo: Grace Lutheran Church, Apple Valley, Minn.

cupboard-like structure that contains child-size robes, "toy" communion elements, baby dolls and plastic baptismal fonts, and seasonal items for a child to explore and play with while they are enfolded in the worship happening around them.

Some American churches are embracing the concept of a "playground,"<sup>28</sup> a place in the front of the church sanctuary where young children can see clearly what is happening "up front" and in the

congregation as they interact with materials to engage them in worship.

By "playing church" or engaging in other spiritual practices through a playful approach, children are able to explore what they observe in church and practice the acts of worship as they develop understandings and make meaning.

### A Child's Environment Matters for Spiritual Meaning-Making

Along with experiences and exploration as essential elements for meaning making, the environment children grow up in, whether it is the home or the church, shapes how they understand and experience God. This environment can be the physical space a child is in, but it also includes any attitudes the child encounters within that space. For a child to engage in thoughtful meaning-making, this environment should contain three different yet significant characteristics: space to learn, gentle instruction, and hospitality.

First, the environment should contain **space** for a child to try out behaviors with the ability to succeed or fail without shame or punishment. It is important to remember that children are learning how to worship. This is new to them and it is essential that they are encouraged to be active in their worship

<sup>27</sup> Donald Ratcliff, "The Use of Play in Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 6, no. 2 (1985): 26.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on Playgrounds, see Traci Smith's article in the Selected Resources section.



experience. When a child's initiative is hindered, shame and discouragement are common responses. For a child's sense of initiative, he or she must have the freedom to try new things and explore without fearing that their actions will bring undue attention, shame, or even punishment. When the church community responds to a child in that manner, it shuts down the openness to learning and trying something new, which can produce consequences for faith formation.

A second characteristic that helps children engage is meaning-making is **gentle instruction**. Remember what learning to drive was like? A positive experience includes a non-anxious parent sitting next to you, coaching you and helping you be attuned to what is happening on the road. In worship, it is important that we come alongside children, coaching them to pay attention to and participate in the acts and experiences of worship. God interacts with people regardless of their age. As Robbie Castleman observes in her book *Parenting in the Pew*, "When children are trained to worship, when they are helped to develop as spiritually attuned people, they can begin to encounter God in powerful ways."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Castleman, Robbie. *Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children Into the Joy of Worship*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 1993), 55.

A positive environment for spiritual meaning-making is also a **hospitable** environment for both children and adults. In a positive church environment, we accept children as they are, including when they whisper questions or observations (sometimes softly, but often loudly), when they mimic behaviors they observe (both the good and the bad behaviors we demonstrate), and when they react to their experiences (sometimes appropriately and sometimes a little differently than we would desire). These explorations, observations, behaviors, and responses are all part of a child's meaning-making.

We want the church to be a hospitable and authentic environment where people are welcomed as they are. This means we extend hospitality to all children, so parents need not feel embarrassed by their energy-filled child, and we also create space for the child's energy to be expended in meaningful ways during the sermon.

Hospitality also includes the ways we view children and their contributions to the community:

- Do we allow children to be themselves, or do we unrealistically expect them to be mini-adults?

- Do we incorporate children into the worshiping community, or do we just expect them to sit there and behave?
- Do we only see children as performers? A child's comment during a children's sermon or a spontaneous outburst in worship often comes from an authentic expression of their faith. Do we belittle this authentic expression by laughing at it or clapping? What does that behavior communicate to children?

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## A child's faith formation is about *becoming*.

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The children in our churches are brothers and sisters in Christ, dearly loved by God. The environment the church creates and in which children engage either draws them closer to God or pushes them farther away.

### **A Vision for Who Children Are and Who They Can Become**

It is essential that the local church captures a vision of who children are and who they can become. A child's faith

formation is not about the accumulation of biblical information. A child's faith formation is about *becoming*. "To grasp the nature of spiritual formation, when it is Christian, we must grasp the significance of taking on the name and identity of Christian."<sup>30</sup> A child's Christian identity is nurtured through participation in the communal worship experience.

By being present with us in worship, children experience the faith of the people around them. Whether we're engaging in praise, lament, Scripture reading or exposition, confession, sacraments, prayers, creeds, symbols, or rituals, the elements of our worship communicate our faith to children.

When children ask why we do something, they are seeking to make meaning of what their nuclear family and church family hold important. When we take children out of the community's worship experience, they lose part of their vision for who they can become.

In order for children to engage fully within the worshiping community, our participation with children matters. We must encourage, and not hinder, the sacred in the child. "When our children attend corporate worship, they dwell in

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<sup>30</sup> Johnson, Susanne, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 19.

the midst of these effectual means of grace.”<sup>31</sup> Children hear God’s Word preached. They lift their voices in song. They observe the sacraments of grace being acted out. As they sit with their families and in the midst of the congregation, we pass on God’s story—our story. And “...nothing engages our children more with the redemptive story than their participation in the worship of God.”<sup>32</sup>

Too often we focus on children’s lack of attention or their inability to comprehend the depths of theology as a reason to dismiss them from worship. Yet Jesus’s admonition rings out: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16). Children do not receive a half-portion of the Spirit just because they are young. The Holy Spirit works in, through, and with children.

So what would it look like if the church embraced the developmental reality of a child’s lack of attention and saw it as a muscle that can be strengthened? We strengthen muscles by stretching and training them. Yes, children can have boundless energy. But what if we allowed that energy to expand in certain parts of the worship service (like singing

and greeting) and then encouraged children to contain that muscle of energy during other parts of the service?

Children are curious about everything. Just sit with a young child and you will be constantly asked “Why?”: Why do we bow our heads? Why do we pass a plate around in the middle of the service? Why does the pastor talk so long . . . and what is he or she talking about?



We must not be bothered or annoyed by these questions. These questions (and others like them) give the child the opportunity to explore and understand.

Barbara Newman writes, “So often we react to another individual’s behavior with a consequence, lecture, correction, punishment, or pat phrase. Sometimes this is appropriate, but many more times when an individual acts in a certain way it’s because he doesn’t know what to do.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Helopoulos, *Let the Children Worship*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Helopoulos, *Let the Children Worship*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Newman, Barbara J., *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Friendship Ministries, 2011), 77.

Children do not always know what to do in church. They ask questions because they want to understand what is happening around them. When we make space for questions, a child's capacity for spiritual wondering is expanded, not squelched. We are developing their muscle for sacred wondering. And when done within the faith community, this kind of experience doesn't just help a child's faith—it helps us all remember why and how we worship God.

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“When children are prepared with the language, symbols, narratives, and rituals of faith, they can join the congregation in a full worship experience.”

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### **Engaging Children as Full Participants in Worship**

To engage children as full participants in the worshiping community, the church must be intentional, hospitable, and collaborative. Let's explore each of those aspects here.

### **Being Intentional with Children in Worship**

To be intentional with children in the worshiping community requires us to plan for their presence and welcome their participation. Engaging children by entertaining them or keeping them both busy and quiet is not the solution.

We must move past seeing their childlikeness as a hindrance to our worship and instead find ways to engage the childlikeness in all of us to strengthen our community's worship.

“The surprise for the congregation is that worship need not be limited to silence, stillness, and cognitive thought. Movement, ritual, sound, and even noise is appropriate when it comes in response to the Word as it is spoken, read, preached, and sung. . . . When children are prepared with the language, symbols, narratives, and rituals of faith, they can make appropriate response to God's call to worship and join the congregation in a full worship experience.”<sup>34</sup>

The key here is our *preparation* of children and of the adults surrounding them.

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<sup>34</sup> Chaffee, Rebecca, "Embodied Faith Formation," in *Story, Formation, and Culture: From Theory to Practice in Ministry with Children*, eds. Benjamin D. Espinoza, James R. Estep, and Shirley K. Morgenthaler (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 225-226.

What are the ways in which we can prepare and equip children to engage well in worship? What are the ways we can encourage parents in this endeavor? And how can we impress on the congregation their responsibility to welcome and support these younger members?

It is essential to prepare and guide children for their participation in worship. But this is not just about proper behavior. It is about opening the world of the faith community's worship and love of God to a child. It requires adults modeling worship practices for children as well as embracing their ability to worship.

In this task, it is essential to hold a child's capacity for meaning-making in the forefront, asking questions such as these: What aspects of worship can children comprehend, and what needs more explanation? How can we equip children to fully participate? And how can we foster both an exploration of the place of worship as well as the wonder that occurs in worship for children?

Empowering children as full and active participants does not mean simply keeping them quiet in the pew. The church can look for ways to enable children in worship leadership. This not only provides ways for them to

contribute to worship now, but prepares children for leadership in the future.

Children can be nurtured and coached into worship leadership in age-, skill-, and gift-appropriate ways. Apprenticing children in these tasks is vital, and we ought to err on the side of overestimating, rather than underestimating, a child's capacity. If coached and mentored properly, a child can easily be involved in the welcome, Scripture reading, prayer, music, and extending God's blessing to others in a worship service. This takes dedicated time and energy, but the rewards are many.

Because a child's experience of worship relies heavily on others, it is also essential to equip those who worship alongside children. It is vital for the church to help and coach parents and families as they guide their children through worship.

Notes in the bulletin that welcome children also remind parents that children are part of the worshiping community and express hospitality toward both the parent and the child. Resources like the book *Parenting in the Pew*<sup>35</sup> help parents understand their role as faith-nurturers and cast a vision of

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<sup>35</sup> Castleman, Robbie, *Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

what joyful worship with children looks like. As the author states, worship for families becomes a process where the parent says to God, “Daddy, I’d like you to meet my children.”<sup>36</sup> Churches can either recommend or give this book to parents or establish small groups who study the book together.

The child’s experience of worship also includes the congregation surrounding them. Ministry leaders must cast a vision for congregations where all generations come before God and worship together. Adults must form intentional relationships with children, incorporating them fully into the life of the worshipping community. It is through this enculturation that a child’s understandings of God, themselves, and faith are formed. “The experiences a congregation shares together, the stories we tell and retell, the celebrations and actions in which we participate, all transmit, expand, and sustain faith.”<sup>37</sup>

Through observation and imitation (both significant means of meaning-making), children are apprenticed in the faith,

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<sup>36</sup> Castleman, *Parenting in the Pew*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Morgenthaler, Shirley K., Keiser, Jeffrey B., and Larson, Mimi L. “Nurturing the Infant Soul: Spiritual Formation and Very Young Children,” in *Story, Formation, and Culture: From Theory to Practice in Ministry with Children*, eds. Benjamin D. Espinoza, James R. Estep, and Shirley K. Morgenthaler (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 111.

learning how to worship and identifying with the worshipping body. Congregations must understand how significantly their actions impact a child’s faith.

These efforts described above are all for naught, however, if both pastoral and ministry leaders do not embrace children as part of the worshipping community. God calls on pastors to care for God’s sheep, and this includes children and the youngest among us.



It is vital to keep a child’s perspective in mind when planning a worship service. This does not mean we “dumb down” the service or make it child-focused. “Child-accessible” is not the same thing as “childish.” Just as we accommodate those in worship who have physical challenges such as hearing impairment, we can make the worship service accessible for children.

Identify the areas where children might need help in participating in the worship service. Welcome children and use language they understand. These actions

convey not only that children are welcome, but, more important, that they belong and are a valuable part of the worshipping community.

Finally, taking delight in children communicates that their presence matters to the pastor as well as to God. A genuine commitment by the leadership of the church can shape the experiences of all involved.<sup>38</sup>

### **Being Hospitable with Children in Worship**

It is important for congregations and ministry leaders to envision a better place for children among the worshipping community. As we embrace children as fellow worshipers, we create a culture of hospitality where there is room for all levels of worship engagement. This welcoming posture, by the way, not only affects children—it also impacts other populations such as people with intellectual disabilities or autism.

In her book, *Autism and Your Church*, Barbara Newman outlines the strategy of “thinking alongside the person,” where adults are encouraged to “hop inside the head of the person”<sup>39</sup> and looking at a situation from their

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<sup>38</sup> Attached at the end of this paper is a preliminary list of resources that churches can use to help engage children in worship. It is the goal of Thrive’s to create an online toolkit focused on how to engage children in worship.

<sup>39</sup> Newman, *Autism and Your Church*, 49.

perspective. This skill is important for those who work with children in the church. What is it like to be three feet tall in a world where everyone else is much taller than you? What can you see? What can you reach? What does it sound like? Asking those questions helps us understand what it is like for a child in the church.

“One mark of a congregation’s capacity to welcome and nurture the spirituality of children may be its creativity in constructing positive communal practices that make room for a variety of levels and types of engagement rather than prescribing a fixed type—such as listening with full cognitive comprehension to the sermon—as necessary for legitimate participation.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Collaborating with Children in Worship**

As children experience worship, they are constantly making meaning of their experiences, and this theological meaning-making can be highly collaborative. One scholar describes it as a “jazz improvisation, a highly relational enterprise.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mercer, et al., “Children in Congregations,” 262-263.

<sup>41</sup> Csinos, David M., “The Faith Worth Making: Understanding the Cultural Nature of Children’s Theology,” in *Story, Formation, and Culture: From Theory to Practice in Ministry with Children*, eds. Benjamin D. Espinoza, James Riley Estep, Jr., and Shirley K. Morgenthaler (Eugene, OR Pickwick Publications, 2018), 200.

When we view meaning-making this way, we encourage children to actively construct knowledge through a collaborative process, bringing together their own efforts with the influence and guidance of the adults surrounding them. Here, we ask children to “actively produce their own theology as they engage in and reflect on their congregations, their life experiences, and the theological ideas that are shared by the people in their lives.”<sup>42</sup>

When children have agency over their meaning-making, they own these understandings. These ideas are not just “imparted” to them or “handed down.” The understandings of God, faith, and worship become part of who they are, rooted deeply in their souls.

When children actively participate with us in worship, a dialogical relationship is established within the community. We call to children to rise up and devote themselves to God. They call back to us, reminding us what it means to be a child of God.

“When we are fully present and open to another, we will be changed. Our own childhood self will be offered the invita-

tion to connect with God.”<sup>43</sup> Both adults and children are changing and being formed through the interactions with one another.

## **Embracing Universal Design**

Universal design is a concept that invites people to construct an environment in such a way that everyone who enters the space can easily use it, understand how it works, and be involved, regardless of age, size, or ability.

An example of universal design is a “curb cut” that allows easy access for wheelchairs, strollers, or walkers when moving from the sidewalk to the street level. In classrooms, the concept of universal design helps ensure that the curriculum is effective for and inclusive of all learners.

While many churches embrace universal design in their buildings, what might it look like if we also embrace universal design in our worship planning?

As Barbara Newman outlines in her book *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*, employing universal design in worship requires first getting to know people and understanding their unique needs.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Csinos, “The Faith Worth Making,” 203.

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<sup>43</sup> Borgo, Lacy Finn, *Spiritual Conversations with Children: Listening to God Together* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Newman, Barbara J. *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship* (Wyoming, MI: All Belong, 2016) 11.



How might we do that with children? Instead of discussing what a child cannot do, what if we asked what a child *can* do in worship? How does this child learn? What physical acts of worship can a child engage in? What are the ways a child communicates to others and to God?

To paraphrase Newman’s words in this particular setting, to embrace a universal design in worship, we should ask, “How can we set up a worship environment so that children can connect with the gospel message and grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ?”<sup>45</sup> How can we remove planning-related barriers that have the potential to become spiritual barriers?

### **Baptismal Implications**

Recognizing children as full participants within the intergenerational community helps shape their faith identity. They find a community that values them and in which they belong. Children who feel valued can step into their role as full-fledged members of Christ’s body—a right given to them at baptism that means they are not lesser-than or “members in the making.”

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<sup>45</sup> Adapted from Newman’s question “How can we set up an environment where persons with disabilities can connect with the gospel message and grow in relationship with Jesus Christ?” (Newman, *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship*, 3)

Children stand with us in worship as our Christian brothers and sisters and as full participants of the worshipping community.

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## How can we set up a worship environment so that children can connect with the gospel message and grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ?

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It is vital to reject the temptation to diminish a child’s presence within the worshipping community. The communal worship service is fertile ground for a child’s faith. “Children may not grasp the fullness of every symbol and act of worship, but those symbols and structures of worship create the constructs from which children understand themselves, their world, and their God. Worship is the place for faith in the making.”<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, the process of being shaped by rituals without full

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<sup>46</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom, Michelle A. & Bjorlin, David D., *Incorporating Children in Worship: Mark of the Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 33.

understanding does not only apply to children. James K.A. Smith says that something very similar happens in adults. Adults are often inattentive to how rituals and practices create constructs for our own spiritual formation. We “fail to recognize that they are forming in us habits and desires, oriented to particular ends, that function to draw us toward those ends at an affective, unconscious level such that we become certain kinds of people without even being aware of it.”<sup>47</sup>

## Counting the Cost

As we embrace change, including the changes encouraged here, there is always a cost. Every change sparks some pushback, because it can feel like a loss. As Tod Bolsinger writes in his book *Canoeing the Mountains*, “We protect what we cherish. Love drives us to hold on to what is dear and cling to what gives us meaning and life.”<sup>48</sup> But as he points out, this love is a paradox. It is also because of this love that we are willing to change. We love the children God has given us. So we are willing to let go of things we hold dear to embrace

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<sup>47</sup> Smith, James K.A., *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 85.

<sup>48</sup> Bolsinger, Tod. *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territories* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 81.

new ways of worshiping that will encourage children in their faith development.

Change creates disequilibrium. As they navigate change, people may feel loss, grief, and disappointment. It is important to name the losses and face the grief we feel. But this season of disequilibrium also provides us the opportunity to ask deeper questions. “This moment forces us to face and clarify our own core beliefs.”<sup>49</sup> Good leadership helps people navigate the loss and disappointment in ways they can handle.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Helping children become active participants in worship is an ideal we want to embrace, but we recognize that every church will enter into this process at a different place, and congregations may not know how to achieve this. What is the next step for a congregation to embody this vision? How do we embrace it in practical ways?

A good place to start is with the selected resources at the end of this paper. These resources can help you develop a framework for welcoming children fully into the worshiping community. Additional appendices will be developed to

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<sup>49</sup> Bolsinger, p. 95.

accompany the philosophical framework outlined in this paper.

If your church wishes to have someone come alongside to encourage and equip them, we invite you to contact the regional catalyzers of Thrive.

We know that not every strategy works in every context. We also acknowledge that each context has distinct cultural differences as well as generational differences. Our invitation is for churches to assess how they engage children in worship and identify a “next step” they can take. The entry point into this journey is different for each congregation. But begin by asking the question “What does it mean for us, as a family of God, to honor the children in our family as full image-bearers of Jesus Christ?”

Our hope is that congregations will explore, experience, and embrace children as full participants within the worshiping community.

## Conclusion

Jesus called for children to come to him and cautioned adults not to hinder or harm them. In our worship of God, it is vital that the church remembers that worship is a communal act—a place for all of God’s people, including children.

Children have a baptismal right to a place among the worshiping community.

Understanding that faith formation goes beyond worship and can be bolstered through educational opportunities appropriate for their cognitive levels, many churches remove children from the worship experience, claiming that children will be better served elsewhere. The question the church must ponder is this: If children don’t participate in worship when they are young, why would we expect them to join us there when they are adults?

It is essential that we make a place for children in worship, not only as partakers of the experience but as contributors as well. As we encourage children to become full participants in the worshiping community, the whole congregation benefits. “Children set an example before the covenant community.”<sup>50</sup> They are not a distraction to our worship. In Christ’s eyes, they are an example of who we are to be in relationship to God, for the kingdom of God belongs also to them.

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<sup>50</sup> Helopoulos, *Let the Children Worship*, 49.

# Engaging Children in Worship

## Selected Resources

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Children's experience in the community of faith is crucial to how their faith develops, including their understanding of God and of the covenantal community. We cannot just *describe* a worshipping community to children. We must *provide opportunities* for them to fully experience the faith community around them. The following resources will help you and your congregation develop a framework for welcoming children fully into the worshipping community.

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### Understanding Children's Spirituality

- The helpful handout [Spiritual Characteristics of Children and Teens](#) from Thrive provides a basic overview of how spirituality develops.
  - [Will Our Children Have Faith?](#) by John H. Westerhoff III (2000, Morehouse Publishing) is a classic exploration of faith formation in children.
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### Children in Worship

- The article ["It Takes a Congregation...to Nurture the Children"](#) by Steve Burger (*Reformed Worship* #76) offers ideas for making worship welcoming to children.
- ["Both Seen and Heard: Why Children Belong in Worship"](#) by Robert DeVries in *Reformed Worship* #36 observes that worship is for the entire family of God.
- The one-hour workshop [Children in the Worshipping Community](#) by Mimi Larson at the 2020 Calvin Symposium on Worship explores how children make meaning of their worship experiences and how we can engage children in worship.
- In the book [Incorporating Children in Worship: Mark of the Kingdom](#) (Cascade Books, 2014), Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom and David D. Bjorlin argue "that children's full participation in worship signifies not only a vibrant, faithful communion but also offers a critical window into the Spirit's work of linking the church to Christ."

- [Let the Children Worship](#) by Jason Helopoulos (Christian Focus Publications, 2016) “encourages the church to embrace the important part children play in the life of the church and unfolds the enormous blessings to be found in having them present in the worship services of the congregation.”
  - [Children in the Worshiping Community](#) by David Ng and Virginia Thomas (Westminster John Knox Press, 1981) “provides insights on child development theories as well as practical strategies for involving children in worship.”
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### Assessment Tool

- The [Intergenerational Worship Survey](#) from Thrive helps churches evaluate whether their current worship patterns fit people of all ages.
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### Resources for worship planners

- John Witvliet’s book [A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship—A Sourcebook for Christian Educators, Musicians and Clergy](#) (Choristers Guild, 1999) covers strategies for teaching children about worship and planning worship services that involve children more fully.
- In the article “Worship That Is Friendly to Children” [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), Howard Vanderwell and Normal de Waal Malefyt share ideas for examining worship patterns, preparing children to worship, and singing and praying together.
- Jonathan Aignier’s article [How to Make Worship Kid-Friendly](#) offers tips for ensuring that traditional worship is also nurturing for children.
- The article [“Objectification and Cute Kids”](#) by Christian Gonzalez is a reminder that treating children as performers in worship can damage faith development.
- John Witvliet’s article, “Children at the Table: Some Provisional Answers to the Practical Questions” in [Calvin Theological Seminary’s Forum: Children at the Lord’s Supper](#), provides responses to the most common questions of welcoming children to the table. For more on this topic, see the [Welcoming Children to the Lord’s Supper toolkit](#) from Thrive.

- In the article [Vibrant Worship for All Ages](#), Sarah Bentley Allred shares six traits of congregations who practice worship that connects with people of all ages.
  - The website [Worshiping with Children](#) is a lectionary-based blog designed to help worship planners who want to include children in worship.
  - In the article ["For All God's Children: Nine Practices for Engaging God's Word and Forming Faith"](#) (*Reformed Worship* 140, p. 26), Karen De Boer discusses how to engage children with Scripture and preaching.
  - Written by Carolyn C. Brown (of the [Worshiping with Children blog](#)), [You Can Preach to the Kids, Too! Designing Sermons for Adults and Children](#) offers simple and easy ways to help make sermons suitable for both adults and children.
  - Barbara Newman has written several books on creating an inclusive worship environment, including [Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship](#) and [Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#).
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### **Innovative Ideas for Churches**

- You'll find dozens of ideas for all-ages worship in the [Intergenerational Church Toolkit](#) from Thrive.
  - Traci Smith introduces eight inspiring stories from churches all over the U.S. in the article ["Church 'Pray-grounds'"](#).
  - [Teresa Cho's blog](#) is a must-follow for worship planners interested in [intergenerational worship](#).
  - Create a children's guide for worship that is specific to your congregation, like [this one](#) created by Teresa Cho for her church.
  - This article [Pew Cards: 4 Approaches to Communicating "Children Welcome,"](#) from Buildfaith.org provides four ways to use pew cards to communicate that your congregation wants children to be present and active in worship.
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## Resources for Parents

- [\*Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship\*](#) by Robbie Castleman (InterVarsity Press, 1993) is a classic guide for parents who want to help kids worship, not just pass the time in church.
- The handout [Ten Ways For Families to Engage Kids in Worship](#) helps parents make Sunday worship as meaningful as possible for their children.
- [You're Invited](#) (Faith Alive, 2012) is a one-week family devotional that helps parents or caretakers explain what the Lord's Supper is all about, get children ready to participate, and encourage the whole family to respond in gratitude for this very special gift from God.

## Children's Books

- [At Your Baptism](#). Using simple, clear text adapted from the French Reformed Church liturgy, *At Your Baptism* provides the perfect way to show young children that baptism is a sign of God's love and promises.
- [En la escuela de los Salmos / At Psalms School](#) is a Spanish/English children's book on the psalms, which teach us how to listen to and talk with God in worship, at church, and every day.
- [En la mesa de Dios / At God's Table](#) is a Spanish/English children's book that explores the richly symbolic communal practice of the Lord's Supper.
- Designed for ages 4-8, [God Made Me For Worship](#) is written to help children understand all the different parts of worship using the vision of Isaiah 6. This book includes an opening letter to parents and caregivers as well as resources for churches and parents on how to teach kids to worship every day.
- For ages 3-6, [What Is Worship?](#) is a rhyming book on the various ways we can worship God.

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