

“Elementary school children bring new abilities to worship. They have a greater capacity for attentive listening, increased ability to read, and the ability to organize and memorize information. Children in lower elementary school can begin to follow along in worship with the community. “

Behavioral Expectations for Children in Worship

When the body of Christ gathers for worship, questions often arise about engaging all ages during the service. In other words: how to incorporate children? Options range from nursery care, to activity bags, to children's chapel, to quiet play space – or a combination of the above.

Expectations for children's behavior must take into account developmental stages. This can be tricky for any community. It goes both ways: **Sometimes we expect too much of young children... Sometimes we expect too little of older children.**

Here are some guidelines for children in worship, listed by age group. The following was compiled by the team at the Center for the Ministry of Teaching.

Toddlers (1 and 2 year-olds)

Toddlers come to worship excited to explore with their senses. This age group cannot be expected to sit still for more than a few minutes. Fidgeting, climbing, falling and crawling are all to be expected. Unfortunately, such behavior can be quite distracting. Some toddlers will say little, while others may vocalize continuously. Note that children this age are not yet able to whisper. They may respond to music, prayers, and movements, but they generally show only a passing interest in specific liturgical actions. Some older two-year-olds are able to join in saying a simple repetitive prayer.

This age group can benefit from:

- Patient adults willing to sit with and comfort them
- A few soft quiet toys that have a calming effect
- A dedicated children's space near the worship space for quiet play or movement
- Adults taking them for a walk outside the sanctuary when a break is needed

Preschool Children (3 and 4 year-olds)

Preschool children come to worship with short attention spans, seemingly endless energy and a growing curiosity about everything. This wonderful combination can be a blessing, but also a trying experience for parents and other adults. It is appropriate to allow preschool children to bring stuffed animals, picture books, coloring books, and other quiet toys to play with during the service. (Action toys such as vehicles or superheroes should stay at home or in the car.)

Children this age can begin to participate with the community in worship. For example: kneeling or folding hands during prayers, standing to sing, etc. It is appropriate for a child this age to move around during the service -back and forth from pew to floor, for example. Adults should allow children to be active within the limits of the situation, as long as the activity is not overly distracting to others.

This age group can benefit from:

- Arriving early to find a good seat near the front of church with a clear view
- Preparing beforehand for specific parts of the worship service, or special events such as a baptism
- Answering questions during the service in a quiet whisper
- A variety of quiet toys
- A dedicated children's space near the worship space for quiet play or movement

Lower Elementary Children (5, 6 and 7 year-olds)

Elementary school children bring new abilities to worship. They have a greater capacity for attentive listening, increased ability to read, and the ability to organize and memorize information. Children in lower elementary school can begin to follow along in worship with the community. Parents might bring a few soft toys or church related books to use during readings and sermon.

A note on books/coloring. Children of any age should be allowed to read/color/draw during a sermon, particularly if the sermon is focused on adults. Children are quite good at

multitasking, and may even be able to tell you what the sermon was about on the way home.

This age group can benefit from:

- Arriving early to find a good seat near the front of church with a clear view
- Help memorizing the Lord's Prayer and other parts of the liturgy
- Reviewing the bulletin before the service to identify the parts of worship
- Age appropriate books about worship, Communion, etc
- Help following along in the hymnal, prayer book, bulletin, or on screen
- Discussing the sermon after the service

Upper Elementary Children (8, 9 and 10 year-olds)

Upper elementary school children will vary greatly, but in general children ages 8 and up can be expected to follow along in corporate worship. In other words, they can read from the prayer book/bulletin/screen, and participate in songs and prayers. Older elementary school children can also be expected to kneel, stand and sit at the appropriate times along with the congregation.

This age group can benefit from:

- People around them - parents, other adults, teenagers - modeling authentic and enthusiastic participation in worship

Affirming Children in Church

Children grow - in love of God and love of other - when they feel truly affirmed as members of the worshipping community. While comments such as, "you were so good in church," or "your child was so quiet today" may make children/parents feel good, it's much better to use statements that honor a child's personhood. For example: "I am so glad to see you today," or, "It was wonderful to worship with you." As for what parents and grandparents can say to their children: "Thank you for being with me in church" goes a long way.

The above recommendations were compiled by Sarah Bentley Allred and the team at the Center for the Ministry of Teaching. Portions of this article were taken from a once widely circulated church tri-fold, original author unknown.