“Give each child one pipe cleaner. Have them form a prayer. For example, a child might form an airplane to pray for family traveling. Prayers may be left on the Children’s Chapel altar, put in the offering plate, or taken home.”

What To Do With Children’s Chapel?

Many churches offer a weekly or monthly Children’s Chapel time. In the Episcopal Church, children are invited to a separate space during the first part of the church service, the Liturgy of the Word, and are returned before the celebration of Eucharist. In the 25 minutes between entrance and exit, children have an opportunity to hear and experience scripture in developmentally appropriate ways.

There are many ways to do Children’s Chapel well. Here are eight important areas to consider:

1. **Leadership**

   We recommend three adults to help with chapel each week. One person, the chapel leader **should be in the space before the children arrive**, ready to welcome. The other two people model appropriate participation, take children to the bathroom, or back to church if needed. One of these helpers should lead the children from church to Children’s Chapel, and then back. A youth may fill some of these roles. Provide job descriptions with clear expectations for adult and youth leaders. Don’t forget to find someone to help alert you when it is time to go back into church!

   Finally, buy-in from your clergy leadership is vital to a successful Children’s Chapel program. Worship leaders should all be on the same page regarding Children’s Chapel and the exit and re-entrance procedures.

2. **Coming & Going**

   Like adults, children need structure and reminders in liturgy. Decide who will announce the time for Children’s Chapel, and how children will know when and where to go. Perhaps a crucifer will lead them out of church.
Entering the children’s worship space should be intentional. One idea is to have children pause at the door and enter one at a time. Likewise, returning to church should also be intentional. Try singing a song as you walk back to church. If you have to wait outside the sanctuary until the appropriate time to re-enter, be prepared with a few additional songs.

Christian educator Erin Redden says:
“We leave during a hymn. An acolyte carries a cross, and a Children’s Chapel leader processes down the center aisle with the children to the chapel space. Once we make it to the doors of the chapel, the acolyte gives the cross to a child who leads the procession into the chapel, completing a figure eight around the space. An usher keeps us abreast on the time. At “the Peace” the children return to their parents.”

3. Expectations

Children behave better when they understand the expectations for their behavior. Develop a few simple norms and repeat them each time. You can make an interactive poster with the group norms, inviting children to help name them. Here is a simple example, using the acronym CHAPEL:

- C - Cooperate
- H - Hands and feet to yourself
- A - Always raise your hand
- P - Please respect yourself, others, and our space
- E - Enter calmly
- L - Listen while others are talking

4. Sacred Space

Sacred space is about intentionality. A few simple props can almost any space sacred. We suggest a table covered with a cloth that matches color of the liturgical season, candles that the children take turns lighting each week, and a liturgical calendar with a movable arrow. A rug that marks the space as different and/or plants can make your chapel area special.

Christian educator Sue Van Oss says,
“Our children’s chapel is in a large space that has two areas, one spot has low tables and small chairs for craft activities, and the other half is carpeted, with an altar at one end. We try to enhance the space with colored banners; seasonal banners, and a large quilt made up of square blocks that each child designed; along with pictures of...
Children’s Chapel: 8 Ways to Make it Great

children's chapel through the years. We also had parishioners make child-size vestments in liturgical colors, so that children can take turns trying them on.”

Christian educator Erin Redden says, “We have an altar in the children’s chapel space that has a seasonal runner, a wooden cross and two battery operated candles. We would prefer to use real candles, but the dripping wax was problematic.”

5. Scripture

The heart of Children’s Chapel is introducing children to the stories of our faith. The leader should choose the story (perhaps from the lectionary), decide how to tell the story, and practice it. The leader and children might sit together on the floor for the story. If time allows, have children respond to the reading. Here are some suggestions that work with different size groups:

**Bible Story Simon Says**
Chose a few actions from the story and get the children to act them out all at the same time. For example, “Simon Says, pretend you are fishing like James and John.”

**Reflection and Response** (works best with medium group of 10-20)
Ask open ended questions about the story. For example, “Can anyone tell us what was happening in this story?” or, “Did you have a favorite part of this story?” or, “Was there a part of this story that was the most important part?”

**Re-enactment the Story** (works best for a small group)
Assign children different roles from the story and have them act out the scene. You can do multiple re-enactments so that everyone gets a turn at more than one role.

6. What Bible to Use for the Story?

Two schools of thought here:
1. Children need to hear scripture in the same way that they hear it with their parents in church. There are times when children deserve the full Word of God as opposed to a watered-down interpretation. Indeed, these are the words that we hope will guide them throughout life. So consider reading the Bible passage directly from the Bible, unless the story is much too dense or too long.
2. Children’s story Bibles present stories in engaging language designed for young ears. In this way, children can grasp and respond to Bible stories without being confused by concepts that may be over their heads. Consider the Lectionary Story Bible, or the Spark Story Bible. Whatever story Bible you choose, read the story beforehand and make sure you are comfortable with the author’s re-telling.

7. Prayer

Children benefit from hearing the same words again and again. Consider using the same opening and closing prayer each week or for a season. Call and responses such as, “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy,” work well, as do single stanzas of psalms, e.g. “This is the day that the Lord has made...”

Children also love to express their own prayers. This can be a great opportunity to let children move around. Here are some suggestions:

- **Prayer Wall** (works especially well with a large group)
  Give each child a crayon and sticky note. Have them draw or write a prayer and stick it on a large poster or wall that says “Prayer Wall.”

- **Pipe Cleaner Prayers**
  Give each child one pipe cleaner. Have them form a prayer using their pipe cleaner. For example, a child might form an airplane to pray for family traveling. Prayers may be left on the Children’s Chapel altar, put in the offering plate, or taken home.

- **Prayers in Clay** (works especially well with a small group)
  Give each child a piece of playdough or clay – Model Magic is very good. Invite children to mold a prayer, then let each child share what they made and why.

8. Singing

Singing together is a powerful form of Christian formation. Like prayer, you might want to sing the same song each week. For example, you might sing “Go Now in Peace” every time you leave chapel. Another option is to rotate songs with the liturgical season, for example, singing “O Come O Come Emanuel” in Advent.

Christian educator Sue Van Oss says, “For our singing time, we decided to invite our music director or someone from the
“choir to come down and lead the group in a song; they select various songs according to the season.”

**Sample Children’s Chapel Routine (25 minutes)**

1. Children reverently enter the Children’s Chapel space
2. Welcome to Children’s Chapel & review expectations (3 minutes)
3. Light candles, move arrow on liturgical calendar, opening prayer (3 minutes)
4. Scripture passage/story & response (8 minutes)
5. Prayers & intercessions, including active prayer sharing/activity (8 minutes)
6. Closing Prayer & Song (3 minutes)

**Resources**

**Creative Ideas for Children’s Chapel**

A series of three books by Sarah Lenton, providing fresh ideas and activities for a children’s chapel program. The books follow the Revised Common Lectionary, years A, B, and C. Each book includes a CD of music and detailed ‘scripts’ for each Sunday. In addition, the author sets the stage for planning and preparing a children’s worship setting during the Liturgy of the Word.

Sarah Bentley Allred is an MDiv. student at Virginia Theological Seminary. Previously, Sarah served for four years as Director of Children’s and Youth Ministries at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in High Point, North Carolina. She loves local coffee shops, board games, the beach, and exploring new places with her husband, Richard, and their dog, Grace.
Special thanks to Sue Van Oss, Director of Christian Formation at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Duluth, Minnesota; and Erin Redden, Children and Family Formation Director at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Columbus, Georgia.