



Teaching Your Child about Worship

How to help your child grow in the understanding of—and participation in—our worship services.

Introduction

Early in the Hebrew faith, which was the foundation for our Christian faith, Moses told the people, “Everyone must come—men, women, children, and even the foreigners who live in your towns. And each new generation will listen and learn to worship the LORD their God with fear and trembling and to do exactly what is said in God’s Law.” (Deut. 31:12–13, CEV). Jesus openly included children. On one occasion as he taught his disciples, he put his arm around a child and told the disciples that welcoming a child was much like welcoming him (Mark 9:36–37). There are many instances in the book of Acts where we read of whole families being baptized into the church. There were no babysitters or child-care facilities for early Christian families. They included children in every phase of the community. The children learned by participating and by asking questions.

Today’s children are no different in the way they learn. Any qualified teacher will tell you that children learn best as they experience life. True worship brings us, no matter what our age, to experiences with God. Therefore, what

better way can we help our children grow in their relationship with God than through worship?

Children naturally function in the first two styles of faith, and worshiping with the whole church family nurtures these.

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In his book *Will Our Children Have Faith?* John H. Westerhoff suggests four styles of faith that help us grow spiritually:

- Experiential faith—We act, react, observe, explore, and copy.
- Affiliative faith—We relate to other people, developing an understanding of belonging.
- Inquiring (or searching) faith—We question and develop our own belief patterns.
- Owned faith—We have a deep relationship with God and are open to others’ points of view without being threatened by them.¹

Older youth begin to move into the inquiring or searching style of faith. As we move through these styles of faith throughout our life, we never leave one behind. Like the rings of a tree, we cannot pull one out and say, “I’ve been through that, and I don’t need it anymore.” A maturing Christian continues to find experiences, affiliations, and searching opportunities throughout life.

There is a window, through about the third grade, when children want to do things that their parents do. After that they begin to put more emphasis on their peers. Consequently, it is important to involve them in worship during these early years. If they learn the songs

1. John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1976), chap. 4.

and hymns, the creeds and prayers, and understand the various parts of worship, then they will most likely continue to appreciate worship.

Suggestions for All Ages

Recognize that worship is an active verb. It is like a show, but we are not passive observers in this show. Consider the congregation as the actors, the leaders as the prompters, and God as the audience.

- Become familiar with and discuss the various symbols we find in a place of worship, such as candles, which represent Christ as the light of the world. Some churches use a large Bible and may bring it forward at the beginning of the service to signify the importance of the Bible in our lives. The cross reminds us of Christ's death, and an empty cross represents the resurrection. Check out the resources listed on page 3 for books that can help you with these and other symbols and seasonal colors that we use in worship.
- Look at the architecture, too, as some of the symbols will be built into the structure itself. Some worship areas are built in the form of the cross, and some churches may have a cross or a chalice designed into the cancel (front) area. Squares represent the four gospels and triangles represent the trinity. Circles remind us that God's love has no end. Stained-glass windows were first used when most people could not read. The windows helped them remember Bible passages.
- Get to know the worship leaders personally.
- Get to know your place of worship. Visit it when there is no service and give the children an opportunity to sit where various worship leaders sit. Sit in a pew and talk about what's around them.
- The different colored fabrics (paraments) we use on the altar or Communion table and the stoles the worship leaders wear represent the different seasons of the church. Celebrate the Christian seasons at home by using these seasonal colors.
- Decide on persons you wish to pray for during worship. Point out this time to your child.
- After worship, reflect on what you experienced together using positive words. Remember that your attitude toward worship will be adopted by your children.

Suggestions for Nonreaders

Young children naturally move about and can become unruly. Consider the suggestions below, but if these don't work, do not hesitate to take the child out for a period of time or even leave for that day and try again another time. If the church does not seem to accept children in worship, speak to the pastor and see if he or she can affirm children in worship from the pulpit. If this is not an option, then perhaps your family needs to find another church that does accept children in worship.

True worship brings us, no matter what our age, to experiences with God.

- During worship, sit close to the front and point out various things. Children need to see what's happening. You might even use a booster seat to raise the child above the pew backs or have the child sit on your lap. If the child's shoes are clean, feel free to have him or her stand on the pew while you sing, using your arm to hold the child close.
- Arms are for hugging. Let worship become a time when the child remembers feeling emotionally warm.
- Practice whispering ahead of time and explain that the child can ask questions, but we must whisper so as not to disturb others.
- Provide quiet toys if needed for the sermon time or suggest a nap.
- At home and in the car, use songs or choruses that you use in worship. Explain unfamiliar words.
- Use the common prayers that you pray in worship. Practice the Lord's Prayer. (See "Discussing The Topic with Your Child" below for definitions of words in the Lord's Prayer.)
- Prepare for worship ahead of time so that Sunday morning begins without rush and frustration. Have an adequate breakfast. Visit the restroom before going into worship.

Suggestions for Beginning Readers

- If you use hymnals, locate the hymns ahead of time and mark them with bookmarks.
- Use a file card to follow the words of a hymn in the hymnal.
- Find the Scripture in the pew Bible and use a file card to follow the words.
- Mark the bulletin with different colors, indicating the actions of singing, praying, listening to music, and hearing God's word.
- Encourage the child to take notes or make drawings about what is said and done during worship and discuss it later. You might have a worship journal for this.
- Decide ahead of time what money the child will give as an offering and prepare an envelope.

Suggestions for Older Elementary-Aged Youth

- Encourage the child to take active leadership in worship, such as an acolyte, musician, choir singer, or

reader. Be sure the child is well rehearsed so as to do a good job.

- Look through the hymnal together, making note of all the different rituals, readings, creeds, and indexes.
- Provide a journal or note cards for the child to take notes on the sermon. Make notes yourself so that you can discuss different points.
- Recognize and help your child see that some of us with music, some through oral expressions, and others worship best through visuals. Some of us appreciate a high-energy service, whereas others appreciate something with more form and ritual. And some prefer a quiet service.
- Learn about and appreciate the different forms of worship from various denominations and independent churches. Stress the importance of worshiping God, even in different ways from your own.
- Above all, enjoy worshiping with your child. The way you welcome your child in worship and your actions toward him or her create the story of Christianity—the story that all are welcome in Christ's

church. See the worship room and everything that is happening through the child's eyes and interpret what they can't understand. Help them feel a part of the entire worshiping community, standing when others stand, singing with the congregation, and praying and giving as a part of the church.

- Remember, we worship God because of our gratitude, and you can worship through your ministry to your child. Notice the awe and joy that your child has as he or she learns to take part in worship. This will happen if your family worships regularly with God's covenant community. Take this opportunity to follow the example of the One whom we worship when he took children into his arms and blessed them (Luke 18:15–17).

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For More Information

David Ng and Virginia Thomas, *Children in the Worshiping Community* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

MaryJane Pierce Norton, *Children Worship!* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998).

Delia Halverson, *Children's Activities for the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

Delia Halverson, *How Do Our Children Grow? Introducing Children to God, Jesus, the Bible, Prayer, Church* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 1999).

Robbie Castleman, *Parenting in the Pew: Guiding Your Children into the Joy of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Carolyn C. Brown, *Sharing the Easter Faith with Children: Helping Children Observe Lent and Celebrate Easter* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

Marcia Stoner, *Symbols of Faith: Teaching the Images of the Christian Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).



Discussing This Topic with Your Child

With Young Children

- When we go to worship, we spend time with other Christians who are our special friends.
- When we worship, we praise God. Praising is like clapping a lot when we enjoy something.
- Ask if the child can see the wind. We cannot see the wind, but we know how the wind makes us feel, and we know the wind is there. We also can't see God, but we know how God makes us feel, and when we worship, we can feel close to God.
- We do not know all there is to know about God, but we do know that God loves us and we think of God as very special.

With Elementary-Aged Children

- Ask what the child likes best about worship and share the part of worship that you like best. Help the child

recognize that different people enjoy different parts of worship more than other parts. Explain that as they grow older they may find different parts of worship more meaningful to them.

- At home, read the Scripture for the upcoming Sunday and discuss it. (Or if you do not know the upcoming Sunday's Scripture, use last Sunday's.)
- Talk about those who prepare the worship service—the amount of time they spend in preparation and the training they have gone through to be leaders. Pray for them.
- Talk about points in the sermon that you may or may not agree with.
- Talk about how God spoke to us in the words of the sermon and how that will make a difference in our lives.

Go through the Lord's Prayer with your child and talk about the meaning of the words. Use the chart to guide your discussion.

Words from the Lord's Prayer	Explanation
Our Father	God is like a good parent.
who art in heaven,	"Art" is an old way of saying "is."
hallowed be thy name.	Many years ago they used the word "hallowed" to praise God. Today we might use the word "Holy" or "wonderful." "Thy" is an old way of saying "your."
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.	We are praying that everyone on earth will live together, loving one another just as God loves us.
Give us this day our daily bread	We know that God made the world with food for us, and God's world is dependable. All the needs we have each day are important to God. The prayer asks for what we need each day, not for everything we want.
and forgive us our debts	Some churches use the word "trespasses." Both are old words that mean sin. The real meaning of sin is any action that keeps us from being close to God. We know that God forgives us.
as we also have forgiven our debtors	Some churches say, "as we forgive those who trespass against us." We tell God that we forgive others who sin against us and we realize that we need to forgive so that we are right with God.
and lead us not into temptation	We ask for help as we follow what God wants us to do, even in times when we think about doing things we shouldn't.
but deliver us from evil.	We know that God will help us follow the plan set out for us.
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory	We close the prayer by saying that God is the greatest in the whole world, in fact, in the universe.
forever.	We know that there is no end to God and to God's love.
Amen.	This word means "I agree" or "may it be so."

Discussion Questions for Parents

Take some time quietly by yourself to reflect on these questions.

- When have you seen a child in awe of something he or she did not understand? How is this like a worshipful awe of God?
- When, as a child, did you feel left out of a community? When did you feel a part of the community? How can you help your child feel a part of the worshiping community?
- What part of worship is most meaningful to you? Is this a part that your child might appreciate too? How can you share your enjoyment of this part of worship with your child?
- Over the years, have you changed in what you enjoy most about worship? How?
- What more do you need to learn about worship in order to not only help your child but also to prepare yourself for a more meaningful worship experience?

Discussion Questions for a Group of Parents

- Has anyone in the group already had the practice of explaining worship to their child? Share that experience with the group, if you are willing, and what you learned from it. How would you do it differently? What worked? What didn't work?
- When, as a child, did you feel warm, either physically or emotionally? This was a part of your experienced faith.
- Who, in the past, helped you understand more about God? This was a part of your affiliated faith.
- What belief did you have in the past that you no longer hold? This is a part of your inquiring faith.
- Whom do you know who has a close relationship with God but continues to be open to new ideas? This person has probably moved into an owned faith.