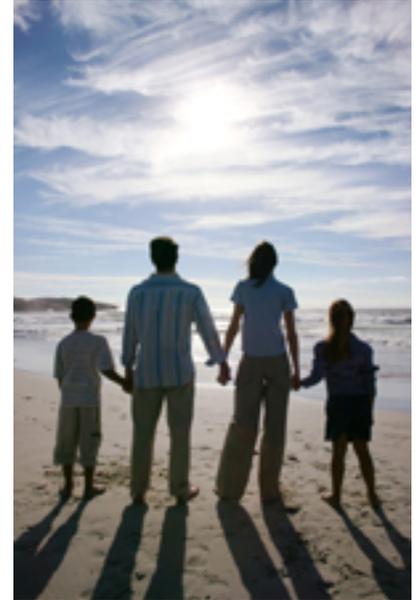




GOD And Children In Worship

They have never darkened the doors of a church before. Dad and mom have three children and are looking to answer their curious questions about God and faith so they brave their first attempt on Sunday morning. As they enter the building, a man gives them a warm welcome and instructs them children go into these classrooms while adults go over to these other rooms for Bible study. Dad and Mom think to themselves, "Ok, they probably know what they're doing." After Bible study they go to pick up their children to take them into the worship service but yet are told again they do not go there together either; they go to a different place. After worship the parents drive home. Dad asks Mom, "I just have one question. Why are the families never together at church?" The mom has no response.



Have you ever wondered about this scenario? Today's families live fragmented lives. In some cases both parents work outside of the home while children are at school and perhaps daycare. The average American family spends very few hours together during the week. In addition, the church often segregates children from its worship and community life. This trend is ironic because it would seem that the Scriptures address the issue in quite a contrast.

Mark 10:13-16 says, "*People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.*" Jesus allowed children direct contact and gave them attention while they were in his presence. He even used their example as an illustration to those surrounding listeners. From the life of Jesus, one can clearly recognize great significance to having and involving children in the worship of God with adult worshipers.

Pastor John Piper writes,¹

"Worshipping together counters the contemporary fragmentation of families. Hectic American life leaves little time for significant togetherness. It is hard to overestimate the good influence of families doing valuable things together week in and week out, year in and year out. Worship is the most valuable thing a human can do. The cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with Mom and Dad between the ages of 4 and 17 is incalculable. Parents have the responsibility to teach their children by their own example the meaning and value of worship. Therefore, parents should want their children with them in worship so the children can catch the spirit and form of their parents' worship. Children should see how Mom and Dad bow their heads in earnest prayer during the prelude and other non-directed times. They should see how

¹ John Piper, "The Family: Together in God's Presence", can be accessed at: http://www.desiringgod.org/library/topics/family/family_worship.html

Mom and Dad sing praise to God with joy in their faces, and how they listen hungrily to His Word. They should catch the spirit of their parents meeting the living God. Something seems wrong when parents want to take their children in the formative years and put them with other children and other adults to form their attitude and behavior in worship. Parents should be jealous to model for their children the tremendous value they put on reverence in the presence of Almighty God.”

George Barna writes,²

“Our national surveys have shown that while more than 4 out of 5 parents (85%) believe they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children, more than two out of three of them abdicate that responsibility to their church. Their virtual abandonment of leading their children spiritually is evident in how infrequently they engage in faith-oriented activities with their young ones...-1 out of every 20 [families]- have any type of worship experience together with their kids...”

The Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) performed a College Transition Project with over five hundred youth over a six year time span. The closest “definitive silver bullet” to finding lasting faith among this young age generation was that “High school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity.”³

In fact, this group of surveyed college students looking back at their youth ministry experienced wanted more “1. Time for deep conversation, 2. Mission trips, 3. Service projects, 4. Accountability, 5. One-on-one time with leaders.”⁴

Notice that at least three of the five desires directly involved relationships with the implied element of intergenerational connection. Likewise, the spiritually mature teens do not just want to receive from an older generation but they want to give to the next younger generation, with those students who “participated in leadership with middle school or elementary kids showed stronger faith three years later than those who didn’t.”⁵

The FYI’s survey showed that by far the number one way churches made teens feel welcome and valued was when adults in the congregation showed a genuine interest in them.⁶

A genuine interest goes beyond the typical Children & Youth Ministry experiences to adults asking questions, developing relationships, cultivating trust and rubbing shoulders together through ministry service together. When such relationship occurs there is a statistical difference in “sticky faith”.⁷ According to a Lifeway study, teens who had five or more adults from the church invested in them during the ages of fifteen to eighteen were less likely to leave the church after high school.⁸

You may be asking, “What is your point?” The point is that children understand much more than adults give them credit. Children need an environment where they can see, hear and grow in understanding and commitment to the things of God. This does not mean children will understand everything. Undoubtedly there will be times when parents will have to explain what is happening or

² George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, p. 77-78.

³ Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011): 75.

⁴ *Ibid*, 141.

⁵ *Ibid*, 142.

⁶ *Ibid*, 77.

⁷ *Ibid*, 78.

⁸ “Lifeway Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church” <<http://www.lifeway.com/article/165949>>

even engage in disciplining a child. This should not be viewed as a disadvantage but as an opportunity to teach and nurture a child in the ways of God- *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1)*. Through this setting, children will be able to sense that worship is far greater than crafts, games and coloring pages but is about a lifestyle that honors God.

These insights are not meant to communicate there is not a place for fun activities and developing age appropriate and creative learning environments for children. However, it does mean that children at age appropriate levels (perhaps when they start school) are able to observe and participate in an “adult worship” service. Below is a list of reasons why children should be in community worship gatherings rather than a separate “Children’s Church” program. I encourage you to review each of these reasons with the Scripture references and prayerfully consider the value of children worshipping with the rest of the church body.

The VALUE of Children Worshipping WITH their FAMILY in Church

It supports the biblical charge to parents as primary faith nurturers (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:18-21; Psalm 78; Proverbs 4-7; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:20). Parents who allow their children to worship with the entire congregation, rather than continually sending and segregating them throughout their childhood from the life of the church body, show they are accepting their God-given responsibility. Rather than usurping parental authority, our church must learn to partner with parents to assist in their God-given responsibilities.

It enhances the biblical principle of unity in the church body (1 Corinthians 11-12; Ephesians 4). Children need the encouraging fellowship from each member of the church body just as much as adults. When children are absent from the unified worship experience, both the children and adults miss a key ingredient God expects in His church. When children are never with the whole church they may not sense that they are a part of a ‘church family’. Also, in significant moments of the church community life (baptism, communion, deacon ordination, parent-child dedications, mission trip testimonies, etc.) the children will have interesting questions for which parents can use in explaining and discipling them. Children who are not present during these moments will miss such experiences.

It promotes the biblical task of telling and developing the next generation of faith (Psalm 78, 2 Timothy 3:14-15; Titus 2:1-8). Every congregation needs to be reminded of its future and their responsibility to make disciples and develop the next generation of faith. The presence of children is a tangible reminder to keep a church from becoming self-absorbed in only meeting their own immediate needs. The church should strive to have an even balance of age groups as well as ethnic groups that make up its community. Furthermore, when children are not present, adults can miss a fresh perspective that children often have to a worship practice long taken for granted.

It enlarges children’s understanding of God. When children remain in worship with the rest of the church body they sense something larger than themselves. When the church gathers every week everyone is reminded they are part of the universal Church; and even more, that God has a grand plan and is at work in the world around them.

It accelerates maturity and skill development. Children learn and develop more quickly in the context of mature, growing adults. Early exposure to advanced vocabulary, advanced concepts and modeled mature behavior all accelerate the rapid development of children. Likewise, the opposite is true! Children who remain in the segregated context of their peers have slower growth and development. The formative years in children start early. Do we really desire to delay children’s intellectual, social and spiritual development?

Practical Suggestions for Family Worship

Family worship goes much deeper than the doors of our church building. It starts when fathers and mothers make a decision to follow Jesus Christ in everything. Parents are living examples to their children, whether they are at church or at home! Therefore, the greatest example you can give your children is a life deeply devoted to Jesus. As one person has said, "You cannot impart what you do not possess." Start today in developing your relationship with Jesus. If you do not know where or how to start, your pastor and ministry leaders would love to help you begin your journey in walking with the Savior, becoming deeply devoted disciples.

The following are a list of ideas to help you prepare your family to worship together.

Discipline your Saturday nights. This involves getting a good night sleep, having clothes picked out, and other items ready to help the morning time contain less stress and conflict. Help your child anticipate and see the worship service as a special experience.

Prepare your Sunday mornings. This involves getting a good breakfast, turning off the television and preparing your heart to corporately worship God. Pray with your family, read Scripture together, listen to praise music.

Unite your family. This involves sitting together with your children. Try sitting up close where children can see what is taking place in the service. Don't be afraid to explain what is going on. Help them participate in the worship service by discussing what will take place as you look in the bulletin. Bring a special notebook/crayons/pens, etc. for children to "take notes." Tell them to write/draw things they enjoy in the service or write questions. Make a list of items for them to draw or words for them to listen for in the music and sermon. Model the process of taking notes and have them watch what you are writing and doing during the service. Remember, you are the living example!

Another point to note is that your family can serve in the church together. Children can hand out bulletins, greet and shake hands, read Scripture, sing and be involved in various other aspects of the worship service.

Summarize your Sunday. Praise and encourage your children when they have behaved well on Sunday morning. Ask your children what they learned. Move beyond "yes" and "no" questions to seize the opportunity in teaching and nurturing your child. Be creative and do a project that was based on the sermon. Make use church material or Sunday Bible Group pages that are sent home from church to enhance discussion during the week.

Pray for/with your family. It is no coincidence that Paul discusses spiritual warfare following his instructions concerning family relationships in **Ephesians 5-6**. There is a battle being waged against your family and the greatest weapon your family has is prayer. Pray for and with your family- make it a habit even beyond the family meal.

Remember your calling. Training a child to love God and enjoy corporate worship is not easy; it's counter culture. It will take significant time and effort to shepherd your child's heart over the course of his or her life. The key is to remember your calling before God and trust God for the results. The benefits you will receive far outweigh the challenges you will face in knowing you are investing in the next generation to know and serve the Lord.

Cultivate your friendships. Make opportunities for your child to talk with the worship and song leaders, greeters, ushers, and pastors. Invite them to your home or out to eat so that they will understand feel that the adult leaders are approachable and friendly.

Process and Patience

At Severna Park Baptist Church we understand that it is a process for God to teach all (children and adults) of us to become focused worshipers. We seek to be a church that equips worshipers and focuses on the gospel of Jesus more than valuing a perfect “worship experience”. In other words, each worship service will have imperfections – things wrong on the platform, audio/sound, and also in the congregation, perhaps a child talking too loudly or upset. Imperfect families are normal and welcome to our church!



Children’s learning to worship God is a process and our church family isn’t there to embarrass but to encourage you in the journey. For those families who need and desire to have childcare during the worship service we provide such up to age five. An usher can direct you to the children’s wing located on the lower level of our building. Currently we have three age groupings: Infants (0-18mo), Toddlers (19mo-3years), PreK (4-5years). They have a scheduled Bible activity and free play during this time. All our volunteers have a background check & screening to provide a safe environment for children.

We do ask that you speak with our Extended Session Coordinators to receive more information about this ministry and registration process.

“We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done...that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children.”
Psalm 78:4, 6