

The Goodness of Gathering With Children

May 7, 2021

by Jared Bridges

Next Sunday (May 16), our plan is to go outside for worship at 8:30am. Sunday School will follow at 10:30am. You can read about the details [here](#). These details include a hiatus on childcare during service when we are outside. (We will offer childcare for little ones when we are inside).

We recognize this might be a change for some in the church body, and if you are concerned about how to bring your little ones to church during the summer, let us know. We would be happy to help think of some creative ways to help you.

A few years ago, we encountered a similar childcare challenge, when we invited children into service. And when we did, we offered many helps, including two blogposts to offer [reasons for children to come to church](#) and [tips for doing so effectively](#). Both of these posts are evergreen, and we offer the second post here again to help offer some perspectives on how to bring little ones into the worship assembly.

For the rest of the church, especially those without children in attendance, let's look for ways to care for, encourage, smile at, and help those with little ones. It is always a joy to hear the sound of children in service, for those noises are sounds of life. As Zechariah 8 pictures it, God's city is filled with children. And we give thanks for the many families who, with their children, gather with us at OBC. So to that end, here are some practical thoughts on how to gather outside this summer with your little ones.

How to Help a Child Attend a Worship Service

By Jared Bridges

In my [last post](#), I wrote about *why* we should take our kids into the Sunday worship service. Easier said than done, right? Now, let's take a look at the how.

It's seldom a good idea to begin writing with a disclaimer, but in this case, I'll make an exception. *I am **not** an expert at helping kids adapt to the worship service.* So, following a few of my own thoughts, I've included some sage advice from some experts who have been on the front lines: **moms**. 'Cause we all know that when it comes to this kind of stuff, moms rule.

So I'll begin by walking through different parts of a service with some things that have worked with three of our kids (we have one more to take through this transition in the next couple of years). I won't dwell on what *doesn't* work – there's plenty of that to go around, and you won't have any trouble finding it. Families aren't one-size-fits-all, so these may or may not work with your family. But remember, having our kids by our side as we worship the living God is a difficulty worth having.

PRE-SERVICE

It's no secret that getting to church with just one kid and all his or her accoutrements is about as easy as getting a budget passed in the U.S. Senate. Add multiple kids into the mix and it often seems as if the battle is over before it's begun. Stay the course. When they're really young, make sure each kid has something to occupy themselves with – a notebook, pencil (not pen, unless you want to turn the pew into a quasi-tattoo parlor), etc. A pre-service bathroom trip for your child is advisable, whether or not they need to go.

Little children are not accustomed to sitting and listening to an adult preach for half an hour. Go in knowing this. Your child is likely to misbehave at some point. They will not take ordered notes the first time. Not the second time either – or the tenth.

PRELUDE

As the service begins, map out your seating arrangement. Your kids' attachment to their seats will probably ebb and flow during the service. You may indeed have to remove the child from the service temporarily if they decide to do what I call "going audible." It's important to make this removal temporary, so you can instruct them. If they see that they get to leave for good if they make noise, you have a long road ahead for your family. Access to the aisle might be a good idea.

PRAYER

During prayers, our family requires that even the youngest kids observe the proper decorum. We're corporately talking to God. So no drawing, talking, squirming on the floor, etc. during prayers. Depending on who is praying, it won't last too long anyway, so it should be an attainable stretch of silence for them.

SINGING

This was always the easiest part for our family. Even little kids love music, and it's noisy already – without your kids' intervention! As the congregation stands, you'll probably need to pick some of them up (remember, lift with your legs) so they can feel more a part of what's going on.

OFFERING

Make sure the kids know not to *take* from the offering basket. Trust me on this one. I like to let our kids put our family's offering into the basket as it's passed around to help them participate.

SERMON

Yep, this is the hardest part. Attention spans are short, and sermons are long. That's why I recommend a gradual approach. It could take a few years before they're listening to the whole sermon. Don't despair.

We allow our kids to draw during the sermon, especially at the earlier ages. They're only allowed to begin drawing when the sermon starts. It gives their wiggly natures something to do, while still being a small part of something bigger than themselves. We've tried different tactics like asking them to draw one thing the preacher talks about, etc., but we usually end up with ninjas, dragons, unicorns and flowers (which might be appropriate in Revelation, but I digress...).

The funny thing is that even when they seem to be completely distracted, they actually do hear and remember things from the sermon. I've on many occasions been surprised at the osmotic learning capacity of my kids during a sermon. If they'd only listen to me like that...



[An actual in-church drawing of mine, circa 1980-something. As you can see, I was a really spiritual kid.]

WRAP-UP

Ask your kids about what they thought about the service. If the Lord's Supper was observed, we'll often get asked by our kids about why they couldn't take the elements. It's a perfect opportunity to share the Gospel! And communion won't be the only opportunity (Deut. 6:20). Use these opportunities. Don't miss them.

There will be a lot of trial and error, and like me, you'll probably fail many times. But you'll also succeed in showing your kids that they can be a part of something bigger than themselves. Remember, you're not alone – your church family loves you and your kids.

FROM THE EXPERTS

These experts wouldn't describe themselves as such, but they're not kidding anyone. So if you thought my advice above was rubbish, listen up. I pled for help with this post on Facebook,

and OBC member Cyndi Fillinger and former OBC member Leigh D'Amico (now in Kentucky) answered the call with the sage advice below:

From Cyndi:

1. First, we sat really close to the front. Fewer people for them to look at or be distracted by, and if someone is giving you the stink eye because of your kid's bad behavior, you can't see it because they're behind you!
2. In the early years, we had the "church activity bag"--paper to color on, crayons, cheerios. (Not too hard to clean up if they get spilled and stepped on. And they will.)
3. As they got a little older, they could draw pictures or take notes of what they were hearing. (Always enjoyable to see crayon art of the pastor).
4. Accept the fact that you will have to take them out at least one time every service at first. But don't stay out. Bring them back in. Otherwise it becomes an escape route. Perfect your own "stink eye" to give them when they are acting up and old enough to know better.

From Leigh:

1. Echo Fillingers. Sit in the front. For all the reasons she listed in her comment and because it lets the kids see more. My kids asked to sit in the front because they could better understand what was going on when they could see.
2. Pack gum/mints/etc. that are only available during church and only during the sermon. I kept a whole quart size bag of a variety of flavors of gum in my purse. Once I was visiting my sister and attended a high school Sunday school class with her. One of the students asked if anyone had any gum. When I pulled out my "church bag", his eyes got big. I explained that our church didn't have children's worship. He immediately understood. :)
3. Pack crayons or pencils and blank notebooks. These don't come out until the sermon begins. We never restricted what the kids could or couldn't draw or write. Eventually, they no longer needed them.
4. Bring a good picture Bible. Even kids who are no longer reading at that level will enjoy looking at the pictures and reading the short story summaries during the sermon. A Bible that never sees any action during the week when other things are available becomes fascinating when the child is truly bored. :) Two of my favorites are The Family Time Bible and the Comic Book Bible.
5. Help your child listen for key words in the sermon. When our son was a preschooler, we were at a church in Hawaii with a pastor whose preaching style had a lot of repetition of a key word or words. An outline of the sermon was printed in the bulletin and we could generally guess from the outline what one or two words were going to see a lot of action. When the sermon began, we told our son what the key word(s) were for the day. Every time he recognized one in the sermon, I handed him an M&M. And may or may not have kept one for myself. :) This didn't work as well at our next church because the preaching style was different but it was great while it lasted.
6. Help your kids get comfortable and love on them during the sermon. This is a great time to fill up their "physical touch" love tanks. Rub their back, massage their hands, take them in your lap, let them snuggle up next to you. We would let our young kids even take off their shoes during the sermon so they could get more comfortable. :)
7. All of this stuff (gum, crayons, M&Ms, comfy cozy) was only an option during the sermon. There's enough for them to participate in during the other parts of the service and having something to look forward to helped break the long service into more manageable parts.

So, now you have at least a few tested techniques to implement as you introduce your children to the church worshiping God together as a family. Use them, and take notes on your own, and share them with others.