

YOUR CHILDREN IN CHURCH

Is it hard to keep your children occupied in church?
Here are some tips for making worship more meaningful for them—and for you.

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“Mama!”

“Shhh! Sit down and be quiet!”

“Mike, quit punching your sister!”

“Susie, get up off the floor. You know you’re not supposed to climb under the pew when we’re in church.”

Caroline tried to ignore the sideways glare of the gray-haired woman beside her. Exasperated and frustrated after the service, Caroline burst out to her husband, Bill, “That woman acted like she had never seen a child misbehave in church before. I suppose all her children were perfect little angels. Maybe I should just stay home with the kids next week!”

Like many parents, Caroline and Bill believe their children should be hearing the Word in the context of the Divine Service, but they spend so much time quieting them that they wonder if the children ever hear or learn anything. Not only are these parents upset, but they worry that others are distracted by their little ones, also.

Parents have come up with various ways to keep their children occupied during worship. But too often these solutions cause other problems. A toy car may keep a toddler busy, but the noise from running it up and down the pews can block out the sermon for everyone nearby. Some parents try cereal snacks or mint candies. However, sometimes the snacks themselves can be noisy and messy.

Others hand out paper and pencils, but this may become a problem when young artists enjoy it so much that they constantly pull at Dad to look at a picture or giggle aloud about the drawings with a sibling.

How can parents get away from shushing and other distractions and help their children learn the meaning of the worship service at a young age? Here are some suggestions:

- 1.** Start before you leave home on Sunday mornings. In fact, begin today. Explain why you go to the worship service, what happens there, and how to behave appropriately. Use positive action words—sing, pray, hear God’s Word. Avoid focusing on what children see as negative words—sit down, be quiet, don’t move.

- 2.** Sit close to the front of the church. This is a tough one for most parents. They are used to sitting at the back to be able to get out quickly if their child gets too loud. The truth is, if a child is disrupting the service, the congregation will hear him no matter where he is seated. It is also true that parents sometimes need to take a child out. This is easier if they sit near an aisle, preferably a side aisle, even when seated near the front. Why move closer? Because your children need to be able to see what is going on and be involved in the service. They need to see the altar, the cross and the banners. They need to watch the pastor, the acolytes, the crucifer, etc. What can they see when they're seated in the last pews? Envision your eye level several feet lower. You too would tire of seeing only other people's backsides!
- 3.** Teach expected behaviors. Explain these to your child at home, and then be a model for him during the service. For example, you could say, "When the pastor says, 'Let us pray,' we bow our heads, close our eyes, and fold our hands," or "When the Gospel is read, we all stand and listen."
- 4.** Explain the meaning of communion as well as the actual procedure used in your service. For a young child, it can be as simple as, "Mommy and Daddy go to Communion because Jesus gives his body and blood with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins. The pastor will put his hand on your head and ask a blessing for you, too."
- 5.** Teach the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. Even very young children can learn to memorize these, although the younger they are, the smaller the portion you will want to work on each week. You can make this a part of your family devotions.
- 6.** Help your children participate in hymn singing. As soon as a child begins to recognize numbers, he can start to find the pages in the hymnal. Help him memorize a few lines from the more common hymns at home.
- 7.** Teach the "Kyrie," and "Offertory," the "Agnus Dei," or whatever you deem appropriate for the child's age.
- 8.** Teach about baptism. Mention beforehand that "Today is baby Emily's baptism." Be sure to sit so that your children can actually see the baptism. Then let them see the baby up close after the service. Celebrate your children's own baptismal birthdays. Don't duplicate the biological birthday party, but do recognize these special days. Make it a family celebration, perhaps letting the child pick the dinner menu or a favorite dessert. Light his baptismal candle, sing his favorite hymn and read a scripture verse chosen especially for the child.

Implementing these suggestions may not eliminate all the wiggling and restlessness of your child, but it will help your family worship together more joyfully.