

Why encourage children to stay in church?

Our Sunday pattern at Immanuel

Most Sundays at Immanuel start with **Sunday School classes** which run from 9.30-10.15am. Currently we have classes for pre-schoolers, infants, juniors, teens and adults.

Why? Because age-appropriate learning is important for all ages. Just take grown-ups: there are things we need to learn together that can't easily be covered during church or midweek fellowship groups – e.g. theology and doctrine, ministry training, practical discipleship, etc.

Church follows at 10.45am. We encourage **whole families to “do church” together as soon as it's right for them and their children**. We provide a crèche for younger children (often 0-5s). But older ones are encouraged to remain in the congregational gathering. We don't mind a bit of noise and a few wriggles, and we provide learning sheets to help them engage with the sermon.

Why? Firstly, this pattern allows those who teach our Sunday School classes to be in church. Secondly, we believe that it helps the long-term spiritual growth of young people. Thirdly, it reflects the nature of “church” in the Bible.

What is “church” and who is in it? The word “church” simply means “assembly” or “gathering” or “congregation.”¹ But when God gathers His people together who is in that gathering? Take the Old Testament “church” or “gathering” – this is the model which stands behind the New Testament church:

- Deuteronomy 31:12-13, “Assemble the people -- men, women and children, and the aliens living in your towns-- so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”
- Joshua 8:35, “There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.”
- Joel 2:15-16, “Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber.”

So, we believe that Immanuel is most “churchly” when all her members are gathered together. Our culture quickly divides people – not least by age or race. The church has always meant to be an amazing and unified gathering.

Below are three short articles from **The Gospel Coalition** helping us better understand and help children in church. Have a read!

- **Children in worship – let's bring it back**
- **Children in worship – mom tested tips**
- **8 tips for talking to kids about the sermon**

¹ For example Deuteronomy 4:10, “assemble (or “church”) the people before me to hear my words.” Or 1 Corinthians 1:2, “To the church (or the “assembly”) of God in Corinth...”. The New Testament Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*. Its Old Testament equivalent is the Hebrew word *qahal*.

Children in Worship – Let’s bring it back. By Jason Helopoulos²

I remember sitting as a small child in church sucking on wintergreen mints and drawing battle scenes on the offering envelopes (my mother would always give me a tap of correction when the explosions were a little too loud with my scribbling pencil). And though I might have been preoccupied with my wintergreen mints and airplanes dropping bombs on tanks, I was picking things up. Was it easy for my single mother to corral a feisty little boy and his sister in the pew? No, it is a testimony to her patience and grace! But it was good for my soul.

As the church, let’s be open to the idea of inviting our children into worship again. Let’s be patient, deliberate, and wise, but let’s encourage families to have their children in worship as soon as they are able. Not all families or children will be ready to do this as each family functions under different circumstances. So having said this, let’s not go overboard. I think every church should have a well-equipped nursery at least for children under the age of five years old and even beyond if they deem it appropriate. In addition, we must be sensitive to visiting families and those that just aren’t convinced that children belong in corporate worship. So we must be patient and understanding, but it is something we should be aimed at before our children are driving cars! Even if our children cannot understand all that is happening, struggle to sit still, and even are bored at times during the service they are still benefiting from being in the midst of this divine meeting between God and His people (Mark 10:13-16). And at the very least they will come to appreciate the power of wintergreen mints.

I want to offer a few reasons on why we should encourage the children of the church to attend our corporate worship services. Then I will pass along some helpful hints for parenting in the pew. Why should children attend the worship service?

1. **Our children are members of the covenant community (the church):** Corporate Worship on Sunday morning is the primary activity the covenant community engages in together (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 10:24-25). Therefore, our children as members of this community should be included in this crucial aspect of covenantal life.
2. **Our children will be present in the midst of the means of grace:** Our children benefit by being where the Word is preached (Romans 10:14), the sacraments are administered (Matthew 28:19-20), and corporate prayer is practiced (Acts 2:42-47). These are the chief means by which God pours out grace upon His people. Why knowingly rob our children of this blessing?!
3. **Our children will be present in the midst of the entire congregation:** Our children benefit greatly by being in the presence of Christians of various ages. They are able to see that the faith of their parents is not a faith that they own alone, but is a faith that is important to all of these people who are gathered around them on Sunday morning. This only reinforces what Mom and Dad are modeling and teaching when they see this incredible gathering of people reading the Word together, praying together, confessing together, and singing together (Deuteronomy 31:9-13). They need to see the body in action.
4. **Our children will be present with their parents:** Worshipping together as a family helps to counter the current trend in our society of fragmenting our families. If our children join us in worship from four years of age until they are eighteen they will worship with their parents in 780 Sunday morning worship services! Think about the cumulative effect of a family worshipping together, in the midst of the means of grace, meeting with God for 780 Sundays in a row.
5. **Our children will witness their parents worshipping:** It is the Biblical role of parents to disciple their children in the faith (Deut. 6; Psalm 78; Eph. 6). What a benefit there is when children witnesses their mother or father singing with conviction, praying in reverence, listening intently to the sermon, or receiving the Lord’s Supper in joy. In these moments a child witnesses the importance of faith and worship. There are few greater encouragements to a child’s faith then seeing their parents worship God with reverence and joy. (Exodus 12:1-28; Deut. 4:9-11; Deut. 6; Psalm 78; Ezra 10:1; Nehemiah 12:43; Joel 2:12-17; Acts 16:33).
6. **Our children will learn the rhythms of church life:** Teenagers in our culture often balk at attending corporate worship. But how many of our teenagers have we setup for this reaction, because we did not consistently include them in worship until they were a teenager? If attending church for years has always meant coloring Bible pictures, singing songs to a cd, playing games, and doing crafts—then we should not be surprised that our young people find worship to be odd, uncomfortable, and even boring. I love good children’s songs—they ring through my house. I love good children’s Christian crafts—they decorate my study. But if this alone is the rhythm of church life we have set up for our children week in and week out, we have done them a great disservice. They must see, know, and learn that the singing of the great hymns of the faith, the preaching of the Word, reading of confessions, corporate prayers, etc. is anything but boring. It is the gathered life of the community of faith. It is our weekly rhythm—appointed by God, designed by Him, established for the ages—this is what we want them to know, because we want them to know and worship Him.

² <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2012/03/06/children-in-worship-lets-bring-it-back/>

Children in Worship – Mom Tested Tips. By Jason Helopoulos³

1. **Focus on this moment throughout the week:** Talk about Sunday morning worship all week long. Help your children to see that each week begins with this privilege (Acts 20:7; Hebrews 10:24-25).
2. **Model excitement about the Lord's Day:** Children learn a great deal by watching their parents. If Mom and Dad reluctantly go to church, then the children will reluctantly go to church. If Mom and Dad are critical of the preacher, sermon, etc. then the children will most likely be critical. Wake up early on Sunday morning and prepare for worship. Let the children see your joy and excitement.
3. **Implement family worship at home:** A family that worships together at home will find it much easier to worship together in corporate worship. A child will find it natural to hear the Word of God, to read the Word of God, to sing the hymns, etc. This will also help our children to learn to sit still, to understand the importance of worship, to focus during prayer, etc.
4. **Read the passage during the week:** Most sermon series are an exposition of one book of the Bible. This means that you know what you are going to hear read and preached in the week's service—the next passage. Read it throughout the week and converse about it around the dinner table or during family worship. The children will then be familiar with the text that the pastor is preaching on. With this knowledge, give them some things to listen for in the sermon.
5. **Start early:** Many believe that it is harder to introduce a five year old to corporate worship than a twelve year old, but this is not true. A five year old is in the formative years of training. They are not yet "set in their ways." A few months of struggling with a four or five year old teaching them how to sit in corporate worship yields benefits for the rest of their lives.
6. **Use Moments in the Service:** Use transitional moments in the service to whisper in your child's ear how much you loved a certain verse in a hymn, how you need to remember to pray for the sick person mentioned, or how you were convicted by that application. It keeps them engaged and allows them to see you participating intently in the service.
7. **Use the Obvious Helps:** We often forget to use the helps that are already available to us. For example: have an older child find the Bible passage or guide your finger over the text as it is read for a younger child. Use the bulletin and show your children where the service is at. Have them read the confession as you point along with each word.
8. **Sit near the Front:** Children are easily distracted, so sit near the front where there are less distractions.
9. **Create an atmosphere in your row:** Encourage your children to pay attention, to stand when everyone stands, to sing when they are to sing, to bow their heads in prayer when the congregation is to pray, etc.
10. **Enlist the Support of Other Members:** Ask another member to lend a helping hand by sitting with your family. Surround yourself with other families that you have enlisted to provide you encouragement and not to fuss if your child is a little restless.
11. **Stop Worrying:** Many parents are concerned about what other parents or members of the congregation think of their parenting skills or how annoyed someone else is with their child's fidgeting during the service. DON'T! Commit as a congregation to welcome children into your services. This means that not only do our children have to adjust, but so do the adults. *In reality, it is adults who have to adjust the most!* Let's just learn to have a little more tolerance on this front. If a baby is a little fussy, papers are rustling, or a few things are dropping on the floor it is o.k. As congregations, we need to willingly and joyfully join in this great privilege of welcoming our covenant children into corporate worship. And that takes some minor adjusting on our part.
12. **Affirm Your Children:** When you leave the service and are on the way home, affirm your children. Ask them questions about the service and relay how the Lord blessed you. Encourage your children if they were well-behaved and let them know how wonderful it was to worship alongside of them.
13. **Be Consistent:** It will take time for your children to learn how to sit still, sing the hymns, etc. Be consistent in your expectations and desires for them during the service.
14. **Do Not be Overzealous:** *Be patient with your children and shower them with grace.* It takes children time to adjust and different children adjust or accept on different time tables. Your child may come into the service and sit attentively and quietly within a few weeks or you may have to help your child with this for months or even years (as has been our case!). Be patient! Love them and do not compare them to other children. God has blessed you with this little bundle of joy!

³ <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2012/03/07/children-in-worship-mom-tested-tips/>

8 Tips for Talking to Kids about the Sermon. By Joe Holland⁴

They sit there next to you and their feet don't even hit the floor. You're thinking, "What, if anything of this guy's sermon is sinking into my kid's head?" And with that little thought you've already decided not to engage your child about the sermon. But it doesn't have to be that way. Let me introduce you to the most important rule when talking to your kids about the sermon: **They retain more than you think they do.** The second most important rule is like it: **They understand more than you think they do.**

In the interest of these two truths I'm writing this brief guide on how to talk to your kids about a sermon. I'm writing it both as a **preacher** and as a **parent** of four boys under the age of 8. I've failed, succeeded, and failed some more at talking to my kids about Jesus. Hopefully the tips you find below will help you as they've helped me. At the heart of the gospel is Jesus introducing us to his loving Father. In worship we get to make a similar introduction—we get to introduce our kids to Jesus. Don't miss that opportunity.

1. **Remember the outline.** It doesn't matter if you keep written notes or not. Remember the gist of what is being taught. If your pastor preaches for 40 minutes, then try to make a mental note of what you've covered at the 20 minute point. Don't be discouraged if you can't get every point. Get as many of the big ones as you can.
2. **Know the one, main point.** Every passage and every sermon—no matter what your pastor says—has a main point. Grab it when you see it go by and don't let go. And as a word of caution, every preacher has a bad day. Sometimes the structure of the sermon looks like a piece of abstract art. If so, do the best you can. But don't let the guy close in prayer without having a main point in your head.
3. **How is Jesus the hero?** Now that you have an outline and main point, make sure you have Jesus too. How was Jesus the hero of the sermon? Kids are incorrigibly self-centered—and so are a few adults. Make sure you have a ton to say about Jesus, no matter what the passage or where the preacher went with it. Without an emphasis on Jesus your little saints will grow up thinking that the Bible is all about them.
4. **Engage your kids with open ended questions.** You know the outline and you can keep to the main point. You know you're going to talk a ton about Jesus. Now engage your kids with any kind of question you can think of... except ones that can be answered, "yes" or "no". Here are some examples:
 - *In the story questions:* "What would have thought if you were an Israelite soldier and saw big ol' Goliath walking up to little David?"
 - *Emotions questions:* "If you were blind, how would you feel if Jesus put his hands on your eyes and fixed them so they could see?"
 - *Leading questions:* "The rich young ruler was wrong because he thought he could earn God's favor. Why is it silly to think we can earn God's favor by doing enough good things?"
 - *Action questions:* "What would you have done if Jesus had made a hurricane turn into a cool breeze right in front of you?"
 - *Application questions:* "If Jesus has forgiven you, do you think you can forgive Tommy when he wings a Tonka truck at your head?"
 - *Use your imagination questions:* You know your kids best. Make up some questions.
5. **Make sure the gospel is clear.** *Jesus died for sinners.* It's very simple and can get very complex. But no matter the passage, don't you dare teach your kids moralism. Tell them that Jesus has done everything necessary for them to know that God is overjoyed with them. When you tell them to do something, feel something, or think something, show them how those things are motivated by God's love and not by fear, guilt, or pride.
6. **Be the first to pray and confess.** Talking to your kids about the sermon is as much letting them watch you learn from the sermon as it is teaching them about the sermon. If the preacher is helping your congregation diagnose sin, show your kids how it affected you. You could say, "You know, sometimes, daddy struggles with being angry. And it's then that I realize I really need Jesus." And when it comes time to pray, let them pray after you. Model for them what it looks like for a Christian to talk to God.
7. **Chase rabbit trails.** Your kids will lead you down them. Go with them. You'll find out a ton about how they think. And you may just enjoy the unexpected stroll off the beaten path.
8. **Remember the first two rules.** After all this, it may be you feel like it was a complete waste of time. It's at that point you must remember the first two rules:
 - *They retain more than you think they do.*
 - *They understand more than you think they do.*

And I promise you this, they will remember these times with you. They will forget a ton. But they won't forget Sunday afternoons with daddy and mommy talking about Jesus.

⁴ <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2011/02/25/8-tips-for-talking-to-your-kids-about-the-sermon/>