



Let the toddlers come

By Steve Jeffery, 15 Nov 2016

If you go to a church like Emmanuel, where the children are welcomed into the main church service along with the adults, you'll have the opportunity to train your (and indeed other people's - see point 5 below) children in the rhythms and habits of worship as they grow up.

This raises some practical challenges, particularly as children grow through the various boundaries that they encounter between infancy and adulthood. One of the most significant boundaries is reached sometime between the ages of 1 and 2, when the children become toddlers, and are old enough to start doing things other than gurgle, feed, vomit, cry, or lie asleep in Mum's or Dad's arms.



At this point, children start being able to stand, sit on chairs, kneel, talk, raise their hands, and so on. However, at this tender age they can't be expected to start participating fully in the service. They can stand, sit and kneel unaided, but they can't do so unprompted; they can talk and sing, but they can't read the words of the prayers and songs; and so on.

So then, how can we help children to increase their participation in the service as they grow through the toddler years? Here are a few suggestions. The first four need a little time during the week, perhaps just a couple of minutes over breakfast or tea, but the investment of time will be well worth it.

1. Teach them the prayers. Long before children can read, they can learn. Start with the responses to the readings ("This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**"), and then move on to the Lord's Prayer, the creed, and so on. Just take one or two lines a week, or even just the final word of each line ("Our Father in **heaven**, hallowed be your **name**..." etc.), and before long they'll know pretty much the entire liturgy by heart. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be the Mum or Dad of a 5-year-old whose first memorised words were the prayers of Christian worship?

2. Teach them the actions. The Bible teaches that the liturgical actions of standing, sitting, kneeling, raising hands, and especially eating and drinking are of profound significance in our worship. Toddlers can't read the 9-point rubric in the order of service, but you can certainly practice all the physical actions and postures of worship at home. Kids love doing this, and it provides a fantastic opportunity to teach them the invaluable principle that what we do with our bodies in worship is important to God. There's no reason at all why a 2-year-old can't kneel for confession, raise her hands in prayer, stand for the prayers, the songs and the blessing, and so on. If you teach her to do so, she will grow up knowing instinctively that she must always worship God (and therefore honour God in *every* way) with her body. I'll leave you to work out the potential side-effects of that crucial lesson for yourself.

3. Teach them to make a noise. One of the very last parts of the service that many children are able to participate in is the songs. The reason is obvious: they're different (almost) every week, and there are so many

words to read so quickly that a child needs to be a pretty good reader to read the words at the speed that they're sung. I suggest a simple solution: forget about the words; just teach your kids to go "La la la..." along with the tune. It turns out that tunes are easier than words for young children to pick up. And frankly, even if they're miles out of tune, who cares?! Enthusiasm in worship is infinitely more important than vocal perfection, and even out-of-tune toddler-singing will no worse than the singing of some adults. (Sadly, the toddlers might even be louder than some adults, but that's a subject for another day.)

4. Practice the words of the songs. As the children get older and start being able to read faster, it's worth giving them a chance to practice the songs beforehand, so that they can participate with more confidence. So get in touch with your Minister or whoever at your church is responsible for song selection (at Emmanuel, that's [me](#)), and ask them to let you know the songs a few days in advance. At the very least, you'll be able to sing one or two of them on the way to church, so that your children will be raring to go once the service starts.

5. Finally, encourage them during the service. The previous four points all need to be done during the week, but once you've done this you'll find that it's a great help to give your kids a few reminders during the service. Hold their hands to remind them to raise them during prayer; stand and sit and kneel with them; and so on. Incidentally, if you don't have kids yourself, please don't distract other people's children; there are few things more frustrating for a parent in church than for someone else to be making funny faces at their two-year-old while they, the parents, are [trying to encourage them to worship God](#)! Instead, make sure that you're a good role model to them. It's one of the best ways to help parents to bring their children to the Lord.

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