When our four sons grew to be young men, we assumed that the worship-training chapter of our life had ended. But God has wonderful surprises. Our youngest son was twelve when we adopted our daughter, who was just a couple of months old. So our experience with young children in the pew continued a while longer.

We discovered that the very earliest “school” for worship is in the home—when we help a baby be quiet for just a moment while we ask God’s blessing on our meal; when a toddler is sitting still to listen to a Bible story book; when a child is learning to pay attention to God’s Word and to pray during family devotional times.

At church, even while our children were still nursery-aged, I began to help them take steps toward eventual regular attendance in Sunday morning worship service. I used other gatherings as a training ground—baptisms, choir concerts, missionary videos or other special events that would grab the attention of a three-year-old. I’d “promote” these to the child as something exciting and grown-up. The occasional special attendance gradually developed into regular evening attendance, while at the same time we were beginning to attempt Sunday mornings more and more regularly.

I’ve chosen not to use the church’s child care as an escape route when the service becomes long or the child gets restless. I don’t want to communicate that you go to a service as long as it seems interesting, and then you can go play. And I wanted to avoid a pattern that might reinforce the idea that all of the service is good, up until the preaching of God’s Word—then you can leave.

Of course, there are times when a child gets restless or noisy, despite a parent’s best efforts. I pray for the understanding of the people around me, and try to deal with the problem unobtrusively. But if the child won’t be quiet or still, I take him or her out—for the sake of discipline and for the sake of the other worshipers. Then I have to decide whether we’ll slip back into service or stay in the area reserved for parents with young children. It depends on how responsive the child seems and whether there’s an appropriate moment in the flow of the service. If we stay in the “family area” outside the sanctuary, I help my child sit quietly as if we were still in the sanctuary.
By the time they are four years old, our children assume that they'll be at all the regular weekly services with us.

PREPARATION ALL WEEK LONG

Your anticipation and conversation before and after service and during the week will be important in helping your child learn to love worship and to behave well in service.

Help your children become acquainted with your pastor. Let them shake hands with him at the door and be greeted by him. Talk about who the worship leaders are; call them by name. Suggest that your child's Sunday School teacher invite the pastor to spend a few minutes with the children if your church's Sunday morning schedule allows for that.

If you know what the Scripture passage will be for the coming Sunday, read it together several times during the week. A little one's face really lights up when he hears familiar words from the pulpit.

Talk about what is "special" this week: a trumpet solo, a friend singing, a missionary speaker from a country you have been praying for.

Sometimes you can take the regular elements of the service and make them part of the anticipation. "We've been reading about Joseph. What do you think the pastor will say about him?" "What might the choir be singing this morning?" "Maybe we can sit next to our handicapped friend and help him with his hymnbook so he can worship better too."

There are two additional and important pre-service preparations for us: a pen and notepad for "Sunday notes" and a trip to the rest room (leaving the service is highly discouraged).

WHAT HAPPENS DURING SERVICE?

First, I let a child who wants a worship folder have one—it helps a child feel like a participant in the service. And quietly, before service begins, I may point to the different parts of the service listed in the folder.

During service, we all sit or stand along with rest of the congregation. I share my Bible or hymnal or worship folder with my little one, because use of these is an important part of the service.

The beginning of the sermon is the signal for "notetaking" to begin. (I want a child's activities to be related to the service. So we don't bring library books to read. I do let a very young child look at pictures in his Bible, if he can do it quietly.) Notetaking doesn't mean just scribbling, but "taking notes" on a special pad used just for service.

"Taking notes" grows up as the child does. At first he draws pictures of what he hears in the sermon. Individual words or names trigger individual pictures. You might pick out a word that will be used frequently in the sermon; have the child listen carefully and make a check mark in his "notes" each time he hears the word.

Later he may want to copy letters or words from the Scripture passage for the morning. When spelling comes easier, he will write words and then phrases he hears in the sermon. Before you might expect it, he will probably be outlining the sermon and noting whole concepts.

GOALS AND REQUIREMENTS

My training for worship has three main goals:

1. That children learn early and as well as they can to worship God heartily.
2. That parents be able to worship.
3. That families cause no distraction to the people around them.

So there are certain expectations that I teach the young ones and expect of the older ones:

1. Sit or stand or close eyes when the service calls for it.
2. Sit up straight and still—not lounging or fidgeting or crawling around, but respectful toward God and the worshipers around you.
3. Keep bulletin papers and Bible and hymnal pages as quiet as possible.
4. Stay awake. Taking notes helps. (I did allow the smallest ones to sleep, but they usually didn't need to!)
5. Look toward the worship leaders in the front. No people-gazing or clock-watching.
6. If you can read fast enough, sing along with the printed words. At least keep your eyes on the words and try to think them. If you can’t read yet, listen very hard.

**CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT IN THE PEW**

For my part, I try to create an environment in our pew that makes worship easier. In past years, I would sit between whichever two were having the most trouble with each other that day. We choose seats where we can see the front better (while seated, not kneeling on the pew; kneeling leads to squirming and blocks the view of others).

Each child has a Bible, offering money and worship folder at hand, so he doesn’t have to scramble and dig during the worship time. During the prelude, if I notice in the bulletin something unusual for which we need to be prepared (a responsive reading or congregational prayers, for example), I quietly point it out to a child who is old enough to participate.

**AFTERWARD**

When the service has ended, my first words are praise to the child who has behaved well. In addition to the praise, I might also mention one or two things that we both hope will be better next time.

But what if there has been disregard of our established expectations and little attempt to behave? The first thing that happens following the service is a silent and immediate trip to the most private place we can find. Then the deserved words are spoken and consequences administered or promised.

**CLOSENESS AND WARMTH**

On the rare occasions when my pastor-husband could sit with the rest of us, the youngest one climbed right into his lap—and is more attentive and still than usual. What a wonderful thing for a young mind to closely associate the closeness and warmth of a parent’s lap with special God-times.

A child gets almost the same feeling from being next to his parent or from an arm around the shoulder or an affectionate hand on the knee.

The setting of the tight family circle focusing toward God will be a nonverbal picture growing richer and richer in the child’s mind and heart as he matures in appreciation for his family and in awe at the greatness of God.

**ENDNOTES**

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