



What Do You Do with Children in Worship?

By Phil Huebner

Series Introduction

The Look. You know it well. It comes in different shapes and sizes. It comes in different times and places. It comes in different expressions and amounts of seriousness. There are many variations to The Look, but it's all essentially the same.

You certainly have *seen* The Look before. You probably have *received* The Look before. Writing an article first for pastors, I'm quite confident you have *given* The Look before. The location of The Look is churches, exclusively. The object of The Look is parents, specifically.

What is The Look? It's a writhing of the brow, a wrinkling of the nose, and a wriggling of the lips that accent a glassy-eyed, ice-cold stare of death. It's a communication of body language that silently screams, "What is wrong with you? Will you PLEASE shut that kid up?!"

We who are pastors rarely sit with our children, so we might have to go back to seminary or vicar days to remember what it is like to receive The Look. Or we could ask our wives what it is like to receive it (if we dare stir that pot of opinions).

Many times we observe The Look. From the bird's nest of the pulpit we can survey the congregation and see much of what

takes place during worship. We can hear *and* see the child whining as the parent struggles to soothe and wonders how long to hold out before leaving the sanctuary. We can also see the subsequent turning of heads. Who cares if you were making the greatest sermonic point of your life? At least ten people find it completely necessary to turn and find that disruptive family because they need to be given The Look.

Most times we pastors have familiarized ourselves with The Look because we have given it ourselves. You know the times: When Johnny feels like he has to go marching in with all the saints mid sermon. When the new family decided it would be a good idea to bring a Tonka fire truck and *not* turn off the siren. When you are pouring your heart out in a sermon you spent plenty of hours on while some (hopefully) well-intentioned parent thinks waiting out a crying child is ideal during worship. When the stray toddler runs down the aisle and looks like he's going to make a break for the chancel. (All these I've personally experienced!)

Yeah. Those are the times we give The Look. Perhaps we give it with our best evangelical spin. But nevertheless we too give The Look that says, "Go ahead kid. Make my day. Charge the chancel and you'll get the most evangelical death stare you could ever imagine. I'll ban your family from pot lucks from now until the good Lord returns!"

In 2007 Pastor Huebner was assigned to start a new mission church in Palm Coast, FL. In the nine years he served there, Christ the King Lutheran Church and School grew quickly and became known for outreach in the community, with many young people and children. He now serves as the Campus Pastor at Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee, WI where he works with families and children on a daily basis. He received a Masters in Sacred Theology from WLS in 2015 and will finish in January 2019 a doctorate in Missions and Culture from Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN. His dissertation is on what to do with children in worship. Departing from the usual custom, Worship the Lord is offering a four-part series on this topic.

I know. A light-hearted opening. But don't let the satire hide the seriousness. Many times we think about these kinds of things that occur within our walls, and we do laugh it off. We shrug our shoulders and say, "There's not much we can do about that." We relish a change but relinquish effort so as to keep the status quo. After all, there will *always* be children and there will *always* be noise in worship, so we might as well just deal with it.

But I believe this issue is more serious than that and deserves more attention than a roll of the eyes or shrug of the shoulders. Ministry experience has taught me this.

I've been at the door of, or in conversation with, many a prospect who has said something like, "Do you have child care or children's church during your services? If you don't, I'm not coming."

I've been in council meetings that pushed the boundaries of brotherly conversation as opinionated grenades were launched across the table: "I think all children should be separate in their own service during church so we can concentrate," . . . "Well, if that happens, I'm leaving!"

I've had people leave *during* worship *never to return* to worship because of the noise level in church. (Coincidentally, it was my own daughter who stubbed her toe that day.) I've had empty-nesters complain about the noise level in church, and then five of them leave membership within a five-month window.

I've had parents stare in disbelief when discussion on the topic arises, as if they are surprised their noisy kid would ever be considered a distraction. And yes, I've even given my fair share of The Look as pesky peewees pushed my patience while preaching.

This *is* a big deal. This *is* a serious issue. Granted, my former congregation was extraordinarily youthful (40% of 300 souls were under age 12!) *and* our sanctuary was designed for great acoustics. We faced a bigger challenge than most. But every church has children. Every church has visitors and potential visitors with children. No church is exempt from dealing with the issue.

So if many parents and prospects are looking for something for their children during worship, and if children can often be very distracting during worship, and if other worshipers can easily become distracted and upset with distractions . . . ***What Do You Do with Children in Worship?***

Contributions to the Current Situation

This question has taken me on quite the journey. Initially I was searching for that silver bullet that would silence the congregational alligators, hush the zoo of children, and let God's people go back to focusing on mission and ministry (and worship!). There must be some solution to knock off these three birds with one worship stone! I asked around. I researched. I read. I tried new things. I read some more.

Then, years later, it finally hit me in a lightbulb moment that felt somewhat embarrassing. How could I have been so foolish? I've been looking in the wrong place the whole time! It's not about the children! It's not like children are suddenly born "worse in church" in the 21st century—as if there is another degree beyond total depravity that children have now reached! No, it's not about the children! This is really all about the adults!

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Take a few moments to consider only a few challenges in the world of adults and parenting today. First, there have been tectonic shifts in generational stability within our country. "The Greatest Generation" carried us on their backs through the Great Depression and WWII. They gave birth to the Baby Boomers who led us toward the '60s. But it was the pivotal generation that came next—Generation X. This is the generation that grew up in Vietnam Days, embraced free thinking, embarked on the sexual revolution, and then embodied rebellion against authority and discipline. Perhaps much of their cultural shift stemmed from what was happening at home. Over 50% of those in Generation X experienced some form of childhood abuse and more than 60% grew up in a broken home without both mom and dad present.¹ Today, the youngest of this Generation X (those born closer to the 80's) has children mostly in grade school, with some having high school or preschool children.

Generation X, a conflicted and confused generation, then gave birth to those notorious Millennials. Millennial parents primarily have early elementary or preschool aged children today. That means that these young children coming up through school today are now *two generations removed* from any kind of parental stability or normality. It shows, too. James M. Pedersen, a principal in New Jersey, wrote a book² describing in great detail 55 different parenting styles identifiable today.





What's the point? Many parents today struggle in knowing how to be parents—how to discipline, how to interact with and communicate with their children, and thus obviously, how to have them behave in worship.

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It doesn't help that these parents are immersed in a post-Christian America. Some 50% of Americans identify as "post-Christian" today. More than 60% of Americans are unchurched or dechurched. And for those that do go to church, almost 40% of Christians today are "not too familiar" with the liturgy (19%) or have "never heard of it" (19%).³ So not only are children growing up in homes without much discipline or parental stability, they are also growing up in homes that are not familiar with being in church. Thus, proper church decorum can often amount to, "What threat, reward, or sticker can be offered in order to keep my kid quiet for an hour?" And if that doesn't work, "Here, play on my iPhone" often becomes the solution.

There are many more challenges for parents with children in worship today, such as diminishing attention spans due to the 70+ hours Americans average in front of screens per week. But one more challenge deserves a bit more attention here—the age segregation of society.

We are in an era when everyone has their own place or group. There are geriatric and pediatric specialists. There are YMCA camps and programs for every age level. Even churches have

senior groups, teen groups, youth groups, Mommy and Me groups, singles groups, young professional groups, and more. But no segregation of society is more significant than between children and adults.

Parents today train themselves to being accustomed to others taking care of their kids. As soon as a child is "old enough," it's off to day care or preschool—sometimes for 10-12 hours a day. When school is done, then Shelly is chauffeured and Cara is carted off to gymnastics or swimming or basketball or karate where others continue to take care of the children. But that's not all. Grabbing a quick couple nuggets at McDonald's or Chic-Fil-A? No worries! Kids can go to the play place. Need to get a quick workout in? Not a problem! The Y has childcare, too. Need to shop for the newest Swedish-designed lamps? You're in luck! Even Ikea has childcare! It has become a strange norm today that parents pass off the parenting.

Let's put this all together then. If a majority of American parents today are "post-Christian" and also non-church going, and if a majority of parents today struggle to know what it means to parent or discipline, and if a majority of parents today have become accustomed to passing off parenting to others, then should we really be surprised in worship that wiggling, whining, and wailing from children have climbed to epic heights while flustered and frustrated parents have bottomed out at miserable lows?

What Does This Mean?

First, the pastoral heart will have sympathy for those who are struggling with their children. (He will certainly also have empathy if his dear wife is herding a horde of littles each week to worship!) With compassion for these struggling parents, the pastor understands that the culture of Christian parenting has greatly changed over the years. Many may not know well how to discipline because they never experienced it themselves. Many newer Christians have also never really experienced worship, let alone liturgical worship. Thus, the pastor is sympathetic because so many parents today are simultaneously experiencing parenting *and* church for the first time!

Next, the pastoral heart will have sympathy for those concerned about the noise and volume from children during worship, too. We should not be so trite or dismissive as to declare to those concerned, "Well Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me,' so you're going to have to get over it." Remember that such voiced concerns may come from God's people who desire greatly to hear God's Word and concentrate on worship. Even though their concerns are not always voiced with Christian care, they can be heard with your evangelical ear. Considering parents' struggles, some level of distraction is not surprising. The pastor can be sympathetic toward that concern.

Still, the pastor would do well to fully instruct his members about a vow they make so often in worship: "Yes, as God gives me strength."⁴ Time and again God bursts open the floodgates of his grace as he richly pours out forgiveness, life, and salvation on a young child or infant newly buried and risen with Christ in the waters of baptism. Following the rite of *Christian Worship*, the pastor then asks all present

if they are willing to assist *in whatever manner possible* so that the child may remain a child of God until death. Has any pastor ever heard a “No!” to taking up that responsibility? So if the congregation unanimously resounds with the promise, “Yes, as God gives me strength,” then they need to understand what that entails. They need to understand that there will be compassion, encouragement, and support for parents so that *in whatever manner possible* children may be trained in the way they should go. This includes being trained in how to participate in worship.

In the articles that follow in this series, we will take a closer look at how the pastor and congregation can partner with the parents in such an undertaking. Specifically, our focus will be on how to assist parents in engaging their children in worship.

We will review the pros and cons of various strategies proposed by congregations such as children’s sermons, children’s church, and much more. We will look at biblical and historical precedents (both prescriptive and descriptive) to guide us on parenting and the topic of children and worship. Finally, we will consider a specific strategy aimed at helping parents to engage their children in worship—a strategy supported by Scripture, psychology, and science.

God bless us as we help, encourage, and support letting children hear the mighty deeds which God performed of old!⁵

A Preview of What’s to Come

- Biblical precedent for families worshipping *together* in the church
- Biblical directives for parenting and parental responsibility for teaching children to worship
- Historical, psychological, and scientific factors that have implications for what is done with children in worship
- Reviews of common practices with children in worship such as children’s sermons, children’s church, Sunday School held during worship, and more
- Specific strategies for parents and congregations to help engage children in worship
- A clearing house of ideas for child involvement in worship

¹ Statistics from *Revolutionary Parenting* by George Barna

² *The Rise of the Millennial Parents*

³ Statistics from barna.com

⁴ *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 14

⁵ CW: 512

Commissioning new music

Is there a special occasion happening in your congregation in the next year or so? An anniversary, retirement, or facility dedication? Consider commissioning new music to celebrate the event. A list of WELS/ELS composers is available here: welsfinearts.org. Or musicians at your church might suggest another favorite composer.

A recent NPH publication is *8 Hymn Preludes for Organ*, by Jeremy S. Bakken. The collection bears this dedication: “For Phil Becker from his wife, Lois, in recognition of 50 years of faithful service as an organist in WELS churches. S. D. G.” Phil also served for several years on the Commission on Worship, including as vice-chairman.

online.nph.net/8-hymn-preludes-for-organ.html

Organ Chorales of Samuel Scheidt

Forty-Nine Practical Settings

A new edition is edited and arranged by WELS musician Steven Rhode. From online publicity:

The passage of time hasn’t dulled the craftsmanship and creativity in the chorales of Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654). Nearly four centuries after they were first published, the settings still sparkle with innovative harmonies and exuberant rhythmic flourishes. Over time, some of these chorales have changed in common usage from how they were originally published in 1650. This new edition of Samuel Scheidt’s chorales matches the keys, notes, and rhythms of current hymnals while remaining faithful to Scheidt’s musical intent.

online.nph.net/organ-chorales-of-samuel-scheidt.html