



## What Do You Do with Children in Worship? *Cultural Perspective / Strategies*

By Phil Huebner

Side by side the children sat. Old kids. Young kids. Big kids. Small kids. They sat together with *zero* problems. No pinching or poking. No goofing or giggling. No whining or weeping. Not even any parental prodding! They just sat there—looking around from time to time, but otherwise completely focused on message and music.

“How can this be?” you wonder. What enchanted chocolates did they eat? Is the choir director’s baton actually Harry Potter’s wand? How could children of all ages sit together *without parents* and quietly participate in worship without one Cheerio being launched or tear being shed? Surely this is a myth or fairytale!

*How could children of all ages sit together without parents and quietly participate in worship?*

I assure you, this is no utopian fantasy. This was a reality, and I saw it with my own eyes. Sadly, it wasn’t anywhere in the U.S. though. It was in Zambia.

I recently returned from a mission trip in Africa filled with joyful experiences and one unexpected revelation. I’ve spent so much time pondering children in worship, and then I learn an incredible lesson on the other side of the world when I wasn’t expecting it!

The deafening silence from Zambian children in those oxymoronic moments of worship preached a message of magnitude. Children of all ages *can* sit quietly in worship and *can* fully participate—even without threats of time-outs or promises of stickers and screen time!

*Children are expected to be quiet and respectful when required.*

I came to learn that Zambian family culture is starkly different from American family culture. From the earliest moments children are expected to go with the flow, to be obedient, to be quiet and respectful when required. All over children are found cuddled in kangas on their mothers’ backs during daily work. Children are allowed to play near streets and by themselves. Yet they are expected to make good choices, to be safe, and to participate in the chores that support and sustain life. And amazingly, everywhere we went we saw children respectful to all elders in authority—parent, pastor, teacher, or even visiting Americans.<sup>1</sup>

Such a cultural context provided moments that would go unnoticed if not so glaringly different than American culture. I saw those children sitting quietly together for worship (and it was uncomfortable on the dusty ground in a handmade hut-sanctuary). Another day I saw more than two dozen children sit together without any parents, joyfully joining in a one-day VBS of exchanging stories and songs between cultures. Those children ranged in age from two to 14, and there was not one behavior issue for four hours. I even saw twin three-year-olds sitting cramped on their parents’ laps for a nine-hour bus ride. They had no games, toys, or screens, and yet I wouldn’t have known they were there had I not been sitting across from them!

*There was not one behavior issue for four hours.*

Now let's go back to the U.S. again (thankfully without the 23 hours of flying). Here we see children at the epicenter of life. They have painted rooms and hundreds of dollars of toys and accessories waiting for them before they are even born. Parents flinch at their child's every movement from birth on, eager to please Paul and pacify Payton and hopeful to record every moment on their iPhones and boast about it on Facebook. Children learn quickly that it doesn't take much to make mom or dad jump. Appropriately timed tears or tantrums make parents cave-in to buy the toy, to drop important work midstream, and yes, even to take them out of church to the "fun room" down the hall.

*Appropriately timed tears or tantrums make parents cave-in....*

Consider also the surge of stimulants in America. Within months of birth children are plopped in front of *Baby Einstein* with its flashing lights and colors. They're handed tablets and phones not long after—either to get them ahead in learning or to keep them occupied when noise is inconvenient, like at a restaurant. (I've often seen parents hand their kids screens in worship, too). Are we surprised at attention and focus issues when Americans average more than 70 hours per week on screens<sup>2</sup> where images change every few seconds? Add these thoughts to those shared in the previous article on this topic: Americans also have parenting problems due to generational issues, information overload on how to parent, a post-Christian culture, and constant age segregation where *others* are expected to take care of *my* children.

So take a breath and a step back to peer at the portrait of parenting in America. For me the picture became crystal clear when I was immersed in a different culture. We have cultivated a culture of parenting in America that is often inappropriate at best and inept at worst. Unfortunately, we're so lost in our American trees that we don't usually realize the problems until we have opportunity to frolic in a different forest...like in Africa.

## "I Have a Solution!"

Here we are then, steeped in the American parenting culture, and churches are feeling the hurt in worship. Some older members look in disdain at disruptive children during worship. Parents wrestle in the pews, praying for a quick and quiet finish to the service—"Please, can we just once make it through the whole service? Just once, please!" Meanwhile, churches have children who are lost in the mix while the adults are wondering, "What do we do about this?"

Well, typical to Western civilization and pragmatic American thought, when you have a perceived problem you need a solution. Over the years God's people have attempted various solutions. One might wonder aloud: Do the solutions and services for children in churches come from an American mindset of "please the customer"? Or do the solutions come from genuine evangelical, pastoral, and missiological care for people to hear the

Word of God? In other words, do our solutions show we're trying to keep people happy about children—so no one complains about noise and so parents don't have excuses? Or do our solutions show we're searching for every possible way for the Word of truth to be proclaimed to all people? I'm not sure there's always a clear-cut answer.

What follows then is a review of some strategies and solutions churches have adopted to serve children and families in worship. This is not a comprehensive list, but it does touch on the most popular solutions. Each is reviewed by considering some of the positives and negatives they offer.

## Foolish, Frivolous, and Forced

Liturgical clowns. Yes, they actually do exist. Please don't google it (though I'm sure you will now). This is one of several "solutions" for serving children in worship that would fit into this category. Many creative minds have concocted many "creative" ways to involve children in worship, e.g. liturgical clowns. Another is a suggestion to have children come forward to the chancel and enact letters and words from the Lord's Prayer, much like *Y.M.C.A* by the Village People. Yet another suggestion is to have children lead the entire service via hand puppets they created. You can buy books filled with such ideas. Might it be safe to say that we can agree these are foolish and frivolous ideas, unwise for the sanctity of God's house and the dignity of gospel ministry?

Other solutions spring from a buzzword in children's ministry today—*intergenerational worship*. For many authors, this does not mean simply having old and young people worshiping together. Rather, some force contrived ideas into worship to create intergenerational moments. For example, a grandparent and a grandchild take turns reading the Scripture lessons together.

Not to be misunderstood, intergenerational worship is good and God-pleasing. God wants all of his people to worship together. There are good ways to plan for involving children in worship (children's choirs, children passing out friendship registers, child acolytes, etc.). But we



*Zambian and American choirs share songs. Pastor Huebner in the middle.*



would do well to think carefully about intergenerational moments that might be forced or contrived.

## Nursery / Cry Room

In a recent survey sent to pastors, 84% of WELS churches reported have a dedicated space that functions as a nursery or cry room.

**Pros:** It's a fact of life that every parent knows: some days are just bad days for tots and tykes. Anything from earaches to bellyaches cause a youngin' to be yearnin' for the exit during worship. A nursery can be a great blessing for parents to nurse, to discipline, or to let a child catch a breath and regroup. Additionally, in this post-Christian era many parents may not be familiar with proper decorum for children in church. A nursery could be helpful to visitors as they (and their children) gradually learn more about worship.

**Cons:** Perhaps the biggest consideration is this: What purpose does the nursery or cry room serve? Is it a quiet place for parents to do what is described above? Or is it simply a safe zone for kids to play and let loose? Children learn quickly. Babies know if they cry they'll be fed, held, or changed. Little ones know if they throw the sippy cup off the high chair and you pick it up, they can play that game all day long with you. Children can quickly be trained that if they cry enough they can go to the "fun room" with all the toys. Children should go to the nursery because they *need* to not because they *want* to.

Similarly, caution should be observed if the nursery functions as a drop off zone, as if it's day care during worship. It may be convenient for parents during worship. It may allow them to pay attention

more. It may even be a blessing for those newer to the faith and still learning about the Word and worship. However, God has given the directive first to *parents* to train their child in the way to go.

*Perhaps the best scenario is a nursery that is used on a needs basis, not a convenience basis.*

**Considerations:** A nursery or cry room can be a great blessing. Perhaps the best scenario is a nursery that is used on a needs basis, not a convenience basis. It is probably best to have a room that looks into the sanctuary or that has an audio and video stream of the service. If such a room is staffed by volunteers, it would be wise to have a large rotation so that the same people do not continually miss worship.

## Children's Sermons

In a recent survey sent to pastors, 22% of WELS churches reported having a children's sermon every Sunday, 27% fairly regularly, and 18% on occasion. Others may be considering adding them to worship.

**Pros:** A children's sermon is a fantastic way to show pastoral heart and care. There's something friendly and heartwarming about the Lord's called minister welcoming children as the Lord himself did. A children's sermon provides specific opportunities to preach Law and Gospel on a level that children might understand better. Additionally, they may be great ways to teach about the worship theme of the day or other aspects of worship (liturgy, symbols, rites, rituals, etc.).

**Cons:** One of the biggest considerations for children's sermons is how they are carried out. Far too often this time during worship turns into a pause from the sanctity of divine service for moments of trite and trivial hilarity. I've seen garbage cans, balloons popped by lighters, puppets and more appear in the chancel before the holy altar of God Almighty. And inevitably, there are also the awkward moments—Johnny revealing a little too much about home life, or Susie hiking up her dress to reveal Elmo undies. Yes, these could be considered cute moments of "kids being kids," but what are we subtly teaching the congregation about reverence and awe? What does this "time out" do to the ebb and flow of worship, the back and forth interaction between God and man that is the liturgy?

*Careful planning should be exercised so that we not give children a cartoon version of Jesus.*

**Considerations:** A children's sermon can provide great personal time with the pastor for children as they have opportunity to hear a clear and concise point about the Gospel, the worship theme, or some other liturgical lesson. However, caution and careful planning should be exercised so that we not give children a cartoon version of Jesus instead of the true Alpha and Omega, King of kings Jesus.

## Children's Church

In a recent survey sent to pastors, 4% of WELS churches reported having a Children's Church service that runs in a separate location from the sanctuary during part or all of the regular service. However, anecdotal evidence suggests this is a growing trend in our circles.

**Pros:** In theory, a Children's Church service could serve good purposes. This service could be used to directly and specifically apply the Law and Gospel from that Sunday to children. It could be used to teach children about the liturgy as well as the words and songs of the liturgy. Children's Church could provide parents an opportunity to focus more during worship. In some settings this may be a greater need than others. For example, on one Easter Sunday at my previous parish we had over 300 people in worship. Nearly half of those were visitors, and over 75 children were under age 12. It was so loud you could barely hear me read the Easter Gospel! Could a Children's Church service have provided an opportunity for more focused Easter worship so that all the visitors could clearly hear about resurrection hope and joy?

**Cons:** You note how I stated that Children's Church could be good *in theory*. It is my estimation that the possible pros are far outweighed by the cons. Is it wise to separate the body of Christ during worship? Is it wise for others to usurp the parents' responsibility for training children in the way they should go in a society where parents are already so accustomed to others raising their children (see the previous article)? If children, especially young children, learn best from watching and mimicking, when will they see dad sing or mom confess her sins or both with tears in their eyes after receiving the body and blood of our Lord? And finally, what are we subtly teaching children about their value and abilities in worship when we send them down the hall?

**Considerations:** While there are potential blessings from offering a Children's Church service, there should be great caution here. Too often Children's Church becomes play time or song and craft time in a "more fun" room down the hall. More importantly, Children's Church potentially communicates subtle messages of great gravity that we ought to consider carefully.

## Concurrent Sunday School

In a recent survey sent to pastors, 7% of WELS churches reported having Sunday School or a children's program running concurrently with worship that children could go to instead of the regular service.

For the sake of brevity, most of the pros and cons for this are the same as for Children's Church. However, this question must also be asked, "If children go to Sunday School during worship, when will they worship?" Worshiping the Lord of Hosts is considered

neither optional nor age-specific in Scripture. God wants everything that has breath to praise the Lord in worship.

Parents may make strong comments about Children's Church or concurrent Sunday School such as, "I was finally able to concentrate. I get so much more out of church now." However, though these comments are well-intentioned, we must recognize that parents are the ones God has given the task of training their children to do the very thing God wants *all people* to do—worship.

## What is Beneficial?

When considering a few of the solutions that have been offered for serving children in church, we do well to heed the words of Paul: "*I have the right to do anything,*" you say—but *not everything is beneficial*. "*I have the right to do anything*"—but *not everything is constructive*.<sup>3</sup> We surely have Christian freedom to do many things, but not everything is beneficial or constructive for children.

Some may be noticing that I have been burying the lede a bit with this article and the previous. The topic is *What to Do with Children in Church?* But no answer has clearly been given yet. This is done purposefully. The intention was that we first ponder the struggles many congregations and parents have with children in worship and then consider what many are offering as solutions. With these thoughts in mind, in the next article we will turn to the Scriptures for both prescription and description regarding children in church.

May the Word of truth guide us clearly as we serve all who worship the Lord!

---

<sup>1</sup> Some in the broader secular culture—not only Christians—recognize the issues. See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-overprotected-american-child-1527865038> and <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/02/spoiled-rotten>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/19/health/children-smartphone-tablet-use-report/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:23