

Rona Orme reflects on her conversations with children about worship and offers some tips to about planning worship when children are present.

Children and Worship

The organ starts playing the introduction to Tell Out My Soul, and Katy, aged 2, edges out from her pew onto the uneven bricks of the main aisle and begins to dance to the music. She continues without pause until the final verse comes to an end. Katy is caught up in worship.

O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!
Your glory is higher than the heavens.
You have taught children and infants to tell of your strength,
silencing your enemies and all who oppose you. Psalm 8:1-2

LILY (aged 12) 'Worship is where any person respects and admires God. They may show it by praying which is a way of communicating to God, they may talk to him... Another way of worshipping is by reading the Bible/go to church. It helps them by learning about God's beliefs and what Jesus did.'

Leading worship with children is a privilege and a blessing. There are five main settings where this may happen:

- in church at a main service – either an all-age service where the needs of children have been considered in the planning, or at an 'adult' service where they may not have been expected
- in school, when we are invited to lead collective worship
- in a children's group, either on Sunday, midweek or in a holiday club
- in church at an occasional service such as a funeral
- in a 'fresh expression' of church

In each of these settings we are called to lead worship that is attractive and appropriate for the children present, as well as fitting for God. Children are born with an innate ability and desire to worship. They are created in the image of God, and one thing we know about Jesus is that he worshipped his Father. Unfortunately, adults often get in the way of children and the worship they want to express.

Child theology encourages us to look through the eyes of a child, rather than to impose our adult views and understanding upon them. What children need to help them worship is not so different from what adults need to stimulate worship, but somehow we have decided that the needs of children are more complex or difficult to meet.

When we look at our own church families, do we see youngsters enthused by their faith and playing a full part in worship? Do we see them growing in faith? At best, adults often do not expect or encourage children to worship fully and, at worst, sometimes prevent them from taking part.

What things hold children back from worshipping fully? Some of this list will also apply to adults with limited literacy, people new to faith or starting explore Christianity, and those who are frail or aged.

- Vocabulary Children love learning and using technical words such as 'intercessions' once they understand what they mean. Otherwise they have no idea what is expected of them. Part of our role is to help children acquire the religious understanding and language to express themselves.
- Reading age The average reading age in the UK is ten years old so many adults as well as children struggle to decipher complicated written words. Check the readability of any material by using the SMOG reading test at www.literacytrust.org .
- View It is hard to follow what is happening at the front of the church if you cannot see over the pew in front or beyond someone's back.
- Pace Things happening very slowly soon become boring if you have a short attention span. It is reckoned that the average attention across the entire population is just 4 minutes. On the other hand, sometimes the pace can be so fast that it is difficult to find the right page in time to join in.
- Clutter Children can be distracted by too many books or papers to hold.
- Confusion If there is not a clearly-focused theme for the worship, children can become confused about what they should be pondering.
- Being told what to think Jesus did not explain his parables but left people to reflect on his teaching. Leaders often do not leave any space for the Holy Spirit to speak to the children. When questioned, children ask for adults not to explain everything or tell them what to think.

We must also take care to avoid the misuse of power in worship. We must be careful not to make children look foolish because of their lack of knowledge; not to expect them only to contribute sound effects or other gimmick involvement; not to be used as token participants but without real involvement. This issue is well-addressed in CORE Skills for Children's Work.

A Good Childhood – Searching for Values in a Competitive Age published in 2009 recommended that 'Children should be helped to develop the spiritual qualities of wonder and inner peace – and the sense of something greater than themselves... No child is complete without some passionate spiritual engagement.' If you look around your church, do you see children showing this passionate spiritual engagement as they worship?

Like adults, not all children enjoy loud, active songs all the time. Many welcome the opportunity to sing quieter, reflective material. Many enjoy singing more mature songs. If they only ever learn songs that involve spaceships, pussycats and dragons, we should not be surprised if children opt out of church as they decide they are no longer children. Just as we expect children to grow in their understanding of mathematics by offering them new material and greater challenge, so our expectations of their religious development should be no different.

LUCY (8) 'For me to worship best I would like everyone to be quiet most of the time so I can spend more time with God. Praying helps me to worship God because I can talk to God without people interrupting [sic].'

Holy Cross, the parish church of Daventry in the East Midlands, has taken the findings and recommendations of A Good Childhood to heart. Their children's leaders, backed by a prayer support team, are taking every opportunity to consult children, to invite them to participate in as full a range of church activities as possible, and to listen to their views. The leaders have been amazed by the insight of the children, and amazed that the young people have so much to teach the adults. The congregation is discovering ways for every person, whatever their age, to encourage the development of discipleship of others in the church family.

BRUCE (4) 'I like sitting with Mummy and Daddy in church.'

ALEX (7) 'I like the Upper Room [children's area where they withdraw for children's activities during some services]. We do fun stuff.'

These comments remind us that not all children want to do the same thing – any more than adults do.

When we are creating opportunities for children to worship we must remember that God has created 4 year olds, for example, to act and be 4 years old. We must resist any desire to expect them to behave as if they were 54 years old. Four year olds have lots of energy and may find their feet and bodies moving to any rhythm they pick up in music. They may find themselves fascinated by dust caught in a shaft of light or the worn edge of the hymnbook spine. Equally they may find the confines of a pew or row of chairs exhausting.

What things help children to worship?

- Seeing other people worship – we often learn by watching role models and imitating them
- Clear expectation – do we make it clear that this is a time to focus on God?
- Range of styles – just as some adults prefer quiet reflection and others like exuberance, children have similar preferences and may not be able to worship if all they are offered is in the 'wrong' style. We need to remember that generally boys, and men, need activity and challenge rather than emotional engagement
- Mix of verbal and non-verbal elements – so they are not restricted by unfamiliar or overly-directive words
- Playfulness – younger children learn by playing and acting out what they are discovering.

PATRICK (10) 'Holiday Club is the best kind of worship because it's fun.'

My own top tips for planning worship that enable children to participate are:

- Start by making a link with something that children have experienced. For example, lead into a session about Jesus feeding 5,000 people by asking if anyone has ever been to a picnic. What would have happened if there had not been any food? If the focus is a Psalm of ascent, such as Psalm 122, discuss an occasion when it has been exciting to come to church.
- Include at least one song or hymn that is repetitive, such as Be still and know that I am God or has a repetitive chorus, such as All creatures of our God and King, so non-readers can join in.

- Use visual aids, props or movements to help children to be involved in any reading from the Bible. Many of the Psalms with creation themes can be illustrated with props such as water poured from watering cans, swathes of fabric to represent clouds, and model sheep.
- Make space for structured silence.
- Avoid asking children to do anything that you would not feel comfortable to invite over 40s to do.
- Expect children to join in the worship. Confident leadership enables everyone to relax into being in God's presence.

Finally, make good eye contact with children – bending down to their level when possible – and address them by name. Make sure that the children are properly thanked for any presentation – and not just their leaders who have facilitated their work.

VIOLET (11) For me to worship best I would like to have Sunday School more often, children to help in some services. Worship is thanking God for what we have and to help forgive sins and to learn about things to do right.

I would like to thank the children of churches in Daventry and Paulerspury, Northamptonshire, for telling me what they think about worship and church (and their parents and leaders for facilitating our dialogue).

Rona Orme is Children's Missioner for the Diocese of Peterborough