



Mendota Bible Church

Help! My kids won't sit still in church!

Perhaps this is your first encounter with a church with a Family Integrated philosophy of the church worship service. If you're wondering why we might take such an abnormal approach, then please check out our article on Children in Worship for a brief explanation of the 'why' of our approach to the worship service. However, if you have read that, and are seriously questioning our sanity, thinking, "No one will ever be able to pay attention to a song or sermon with a bunch of kids squirming around in the sanctuary," then this is for you. We want to offer some practical advice for helping your children to learn to engage in the worship service alongside of you.

1. **Relax.** Don't stress about it! God designed kids to do some wiggling. It's hard for them to sit still for long periods of time. The younger they are, the more they will want to move about. A church that values children's presence in the worship service will appreciate that kids are going to do some moving around, and even some noise making. We are not expecting that all the children in our worship services or prayer meetings will sit without moving or making a sound for the whole service. If they did, we'd start to wonder if they were alive! A child mimicking the song leader or the pastor in his gestures or even trying to answer a question is a welcome engagement of a young mind in the worship. Having our children in the service alongside us is about teaching them to engage in the worship of God. It is not about avoiding embarrassment for Mom and Dad.
2. **Have Reasonable Expectations.** A hungry six month old is going to cry. No amount of encouraging her to keep quiet will succeed. She needs food! A lively two year old will not sit without a move or a peep for an hour at a time. He'll probably shuffle and squirm, and at times ask, 'When is this going to be done?' Even an adult may fall asleep once in a while! Have reasonable expectations for what your children are capable of doing. This should also take into consideration how long they have been coming to church. A child that has never sat through a worship service is not going to be able to engage in it quite as effectively as a child that grew up going to church every Sunday. Start where you are, and don't set unreasonable expectations for your kids. It will only frustrate both of you, and hinder the whole family from engaging in worship.
3. **Teach them to engage.** Worship doesn't come naturally. We're sinners, after all. We worship the Lord as we learn more of His greatness, His majesty, and His love for us as

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shown in Jesus Christ. The same is true of our children. For now they may only be going thru the motions, but time and exposure to the Word of God, and faithful teaching and modeling by Mom, Dad, Grandma and Grandpa will shape them spiritually.

- a. **Prepare them for worship ahead of time.** Make sure they get to bed at a good time on Saturday night so that tiredness and fatigue don't affect their enthusiasm for church. This is good advice for grown-ups, too! Make sure a breakfast is sufficient to ensure hunger is not a distraction. Talk about your own excitement to come to church and to fellowship with other believers. Enthusiasm is catching, especially for children. If they see that you genuinely enjoy your worship of God, they will eventually catch on. And don't take their grumblings and complaining too seriously. After all, we all know kids in their childishness would rather play games and watch TV. You'll eventually convince them of the importance of worship, and of the blessings of it. Remember, you're in this for the long haul!
 - b. **Stretch their Worship Skill.** Help them to learn to sit as still as they can, while being understanding that they are children. If we never require them to sit still they will never learn to. Children rise to what is expected of them. If they get to a point that they can't sit still and are being a distraction to others, then maybe it is time for a quick break. Take them to the foyer, or the bathroom, or the nursery. Give them a few minutes to play it off. Then, explain that it's time to go back into the service, and bring them back in for another round. This way they will learn that worship is important, and acting up will not get them out of it!
 - c. **Encourage Participation.** Encourage them to sing the songs, and to think about the words. For young children, encourage them to draw a picture of some scene the Bible passage described. Our church has a small pamphlet available for kids which asks them to circle words they heard during the sermon, or pick their favorite song, or draw a picture relating to sermon. These are great resources for parents to give their children a productive outlet for their energy during the service, and to see what their children are understanding from the service. Ask them questions after the service about the meaning of the lyrics, or whether they appreciated the sound of the organ piano or guitar. Ask your children about the pictures they drew. Your interest in their understanding is a great encouragement to them. Ask them what their favorite song was and why they liked it. Probe a little to see how much of the sermon they understood, and see if you can help answer any of their questions. Who knows? Your child may have understood a point that you missed! As the parent you have the profound blessing of responsibility to teach your children how to engage in a worshipful relationship with God.
4. **Be considerate of others, but not afraid of them.** If your child is acting up in a way that
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is a major distraction for other people, then consider leaving the sanctuary out of respect and love for them. Sometimes kids do need a break, and sometimes they do need to be disciplined for disobedient behavior. That's for you as their parent/grandparent to decide. If you need to leave for that reason, then quietly do so, deal with the problem, explain to your children what they are doing wrong, and try to come back to the service as soon as possible. But I implore you, never leave out of a feeling of shame, or fear that other people are judging you. If they are, they are the ones doing wrong, not you.

5. **Focus on the goal, not the distractions.** Remember that bringing your family, little children included, to church and into the worship service is a fulfillment of the God-given responsibilities to 'train your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.' God has tasked parents and grandparents with this most solemn charge. The hearts and eternal souls of these little people are in your hands, and the Lord Jesus has delegated to you the task of tuning their little hearts towards him. Like every responsibility God gives us, there is potential for abundant blessing if we rise to it. Watching your children adopt the faith you taught them, and over the years learning to worship the Lord because *they* love Him, and not just because you make them, is a joy beyond description. As John said, '*I have no greater joy than to see my children walk in truth.*' Your kids will eventually learn to sit reasonably still without making you feel as if every head were turned in your direction, and every person secretly wishing you would leave. Just remember, despite your fears, people are not thinking that! They are probably looking your direction because they enjoy the life and vitality that children bring to corporate worship. And on the off chance that they are irritated by the noise, then they are the ones missing the blessing of children.

On a personal note, I am the father of 6 children. I know well the challenge of bringing little ones to church and keeping them in the worship service with Mom and Dad. I want to encourage anyone reading this that it is possible, and that there is immense reward in doing so. To be sure, there is a lot of work, and there will be days you get home feeling as if you gained nothing from the pastor's sermon because you spent the whole time correcting and controlling a small person. But He is worth the work, and He pours out His blessing upon us to enable us to do it, and to enjoy the fruit of it. As you watch your children grow over the years and see them begin to adopt as their own the faith that you taught and modeled for them, your own heart may burst with joy! So as Jesus said, '*Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the Kingdom of God.*' Moms, Dads, Grandparents, bring those little children and teach them how great God is, how deserving of our worship, and how greatly He loves us.