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features

KEEPING CHILDREN INVOLVED IN CHURCH

The Youth and Families Pastor at King's Church, Chessington, shares five ways to help

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photo: iStock

Yes, we can meet again as a church family gathered together on a Sunday! Yippee!

And yet many churches will be unable to run a socially-distanced children's ministry. This may seem a disadvantage, but far from it. This is the opportunity of a lifetime to encourage the church to recognise all ages in their congregation. And, yes, I do live in the real world! I work with children and have my own too. I really do think this is a brilliant opportunity. I hope to explain why and then give five tips to help your children engage with church.

Let's go back a few months, to before the coronavirus crisis. It was far too easy to be a consumer at church. As a dad I could go to church, drop my kids off to a children or youth ministry, plug in to church myself, pick the kids

up on the way out and carry on with life. Yes, I knew I should read through what they were taught and take them through what we were taught, but most weeks life rolled on and I didn't... and I am the Youth and Families Pastor!

Then – Covid! Suddenly, we cannot go to church. No children's workers came crashing through the windows as a SWAT team to help us on Sunday morning at home. We had to make do and get through as a family... And suddenly I realised this is, in fact, far more like the Biblical pattern.

The church is a family. It literally started as one family (Abram's) and has been growing ever since. It is made up of all ages and stages of life. There is a time and a place to break off for teaching that is geared towards one age, but there is also the need to express the fact that we really are one family. In our own church, we chose to do this at a couple of points of the year with everyone. On Christmas Day and Good Friday we do not run age-segregated youth and children's work so that we can really see the whole church family gathered. Children's and youth work is great, but we do not want them to be the only way children connect with the message of Christ. As they grow up, we want them to increasingly see themselves as being part of the wider church family.

Ephesians puts this really helpfully. The whole book is to the church (Eph. 1:1). It expects fathers to be present (Eph. 6:4), it expects wives to be present (Eph. 5:22) and it expects children to be present (Eph. 6:1). We are not given a manual on what exactly this looked like, but we do know from the culture that families were much more of a working unit than they tend to be now. I am challenged by the role fathers have in encouraging the spiritual nurture of their kids. Dads! If we are around, we should be present and leading in this. So often I am asked questions by the mums, when really it should be led by us dads.

One day the security blanket of the youth and children's ministry will be taken away for good, not just for a short time like we have had with coronavirus. Dads – are we ready for that day? What do we need to happen for us to be ready? Having children in church over the summer, and indeed beyond in some churches, helps us see where we are and where we are heading. It reminds us of the church family we should be, even if we are not quite there yet! Each week there should be something to rejoice in and something to work on. So I hope the following five tips help you and your children in a church service.

1. Speak to your kids about being in church.

Speak to them *before* you go to church. 'Hey kids, today you get to stay with us in church. You get to see the whole of the service.' This will often lead to a longer conversation. It is all a good chance to see where they are at and to explain what church is.

Speak to them *during* the service. Some people are overly sensitive to not cause a disturbance to those around you. I had a Dad speak to me after church last week, saying: 'Sorry if I disturbed you, whispering to my son.' I hadn't actually heard him once! Speak to them during the service, help them follow along and be there to explain when they feel a bit lost.

Speak to them *after*. It is quite right that we make an effort to adjust the service because kids are in. Make sure you adjust your afternoon as well. Speak to them about what they saw, what they understood. Make it a precious time to look back over the service. Make it about what 'we' all learnt, not about how 'they' behaved. That takes us on to the next point.

2. Model worship to them in and out of church.

Church is not just about a church service on a Sunday! We are meant to live what we believe the rest of the week. By having your kids in church you invite them to see you. They will see you in the church service and they will notice a little bit more out of the service. This is a glorious opportunity for their good and for yours, but have a think what you model to them. What do you model in attending the service? Are you there on time? Do you love to be there? Why? How do you sing? How well do you concentrate? Do you write anything down? How about after... ? Do you seek to put things into practise that you hear in church? Are you keen to wrestle with issues during the week?

3. Use an activity sheet.

We give children in our church something to help them. Whatever that is in your church, use it. This week we are using a handout that you could use with your children, wherever you live, and whichever your church, every week. [Download the handout.](#)

4. Praise your children for doing the right thing.

I know, we are sometimes better at catching kids doing the wrong thing than the right thing. Why not reverse it this week? Keep a list of all the times that they do the right thing and then praise them for it. They just may be doing more that is helpful than we think.

5. Be in it for the long run.

The goal is to produce an adult, not a perfectly obedient child that stays a child. Let's be honest, this week may be really tough. It may be difficult for a while. We don't know where it will go, but think about learning a musical instrument. Many parents endure the pain of listening to their child practicing an instrument in a tuneless and discordant way, and then eventually passing Grade 1 in their music exams. Often, after a few years, sudden progress in the instrument takes place. If we endure that for the sake of learning an instrument, is it not worth much more investment in a family that will live for eternity?

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