

Welcoming Children in Worship



St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow
open, inclusive, welcoming

“Then Jesus took a child and had him stand in front of them. He put his arms around the child and said: “Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me, but also the One who sent me.” Mark 9:36-37

Some people wonder why little children are brought to church, but bringing children to services is like inviting children to eat with their household at dinner at home. Even when their behaviour is childlike, it is hoped that, given time and exposure, they will become comfortable participating in Christian rituals in their own meaningful ways. In the meantime, children are still an integral part of the congregation and so they belong here alongside everyone else.

Small children giggle, poke, squirm and swing their legs simply because they are children. But they can also learn to sing, pray and listen as they are able. They absorb so much more than many adults can imagine. This brochure is written to help all at St Mary’s Cathedral continue to welcome, include and value the presence of children during worship.

As children worship along with us, they are also learning:

- It is important to come together with other believers as part of their faith heritage.
- They are God’s people and therefore belong and are most welcome to share in the worship of God’s household.
- The sights, sounds, smells and feel of this holy place are good to experience, even when we don’t understand everything.
- Something is expected of them here and they are invited to respond with us in song, prayer and in offering their gifts.

The pre-school child

Some adults may question the wisdom of including preschool children in worship. It is true that they may sometimes distract those around them or distress parents or carers with their behaviour. However, they are vital members of the community of faith and the gathering at God’s table is incomplete without them – noise and all.

The preschool child comes to worship with:

- A short attention span
- Seemingly endless energy
- A curiosity about everything

The combination of the above ingredients can test the patience of even the most understanding adult, but there are several things parents can do to help make the experience more relaxed and enjoyable for everyone:

- Sit near the front of the church where children have a clear view of the sanctuary. Ask what they see, or play “I spy” before the service – help them notice the colours, fabrics, candles, windows, pictures, crosses, designs, etc.
- Prepare her/him for different parts of the service, explaining special events like baptism ahead of time and also answering “right now” questions in a calm whisper.
- Allow a preschooler to bring a favourite soft toy, picture and colouring books or other quiet toys to the service. Make use of Baby Space and the resources available in that room.
- Try to encourage small amounts of adult-like behaviour. Choose one or two things to focus on – such as standing or kneeling when the rest of the congregation does – and during other times allow him/her to be active within the limits of the situation, being careful not to be too distracting to others.
- Use church quiet time as a chance for special togetherness with your child – time to snuggle them in your lap or keep your arm around them – things there may not always be enough time for during the routine of a busy week. Make church special togetherness time.

The Primary Age Child

The school-age child brings new abilities to worship:

- Longer attention span for attentive listening
- Improving reading skills
- The ability to memorize information

As these aptitudes develop, parents can foster greater participation in worship. Here are some ideas to try:

- Help your child memorize the Lord's prayer or other simple responses such as "The Lord be with you" – "And also with you"
- Look at the service sheet with your child to identify new or difficult words. Make sure to point out those parts where the congregation responds so that your child will be ready to join in.
- During term time Young Church offers children's activities including music making, story telling and creative play during the Sung Eucharist. Those wishing to take part leave for the Synod Hall at the end of the first reading and return for the Peace.
- In school holidays parents/carers may want to hold onto any children's activities until the sermon begins so that there is something new to do during the longest part of sitting still. The early part of the service has more movement and things of interest to a child. If children begin colouring as soon as you arrive, they will likely be finished before the sermon and the intercessions.
- Help your child with the words and tunes of the hymns and other music. Children this age can understand the difference of verse and music to other written texts. Many can follow the hymns fairly well with the help of a finger – either their own or a parent's. Young Church includes music making and for some children this can lead to an interest in joining the choir.
- After church, ask what your child saw or what they liked best. It's amazing what children can absorb, so be ready for questions about how Jesus rose from the dead or why we believe in the holy "catholic" church. Encourage questions. If you don't know, say so... and assure them you will try to find out if you can't answer right away.

Hassle and Hope

Sometimes bringing a young child to church may be a real test of a parent or carer's patience. Many facets of parenting can be aggravating, but when something is important, persistence is worthwhile. Of course parents and carers do not want to be disruptive or hinder the worship in any way, but all are reminded that children are an essential part of this church community.

Children may have difficult moments during a service, but it is their birthright as Christians to worship with the whole church. In Baptism, everyone vows to do all in their power to support the newly baptised in their life in Christ. Being welcomed and included in worship and learning about liturgy helps establish lifelong practices that will help children develop a strong faith of their own.

Children and Communion

The Scottish Episcopal Church encourages full participation in the liturgy and children of all ages are invited to receive communion. When children are baptised they are welcomed them into God's household, just as they have been welcomed into their individual families. It may be years before children understand the history or values of the church, but they are nonetheless valuable members. Likewise in church, children may not understand all the mysteries of communion (who does?) but they are learning how the community of God breaks bread together and receives sustenance for life's journey – so as soon as any child is physically able to ingest solid foods, they are welcome to participate in the Eucharist.

A child is best prepared for communion by discussion at home. Parents and carers may explain in their own words what the Eucharist means to them. This may include how each person remembers Christ's life and how they believe Christ is present. Talk about the practicalities too - including how to receive communion: to hold out crossed hands to receive the bread and say "Amen" or how to cross their arms over their chest if they do not wish to receive that day but instead receive a blessing.

ABC's of Ideas of Worship with Children

ARRIVE in time to use the toilet, get water, and find a good place to sit – a place where your child can really watch what is happening. When possible let children sit near the front or on the aisle, so they can see.

BRING quiet toys or books for young children and gradually increase the amount of time you ask them to pay attention. Children can usually be expected to participate in most of a 60-minute service by the 2nd or 3rd year of school. Remember it is important for parents and carers to actively participate in the worship themselves. Children will see that what people do in church is important and will take their cues from what they observe and sense.

CREATE some home rituals about church. Spend some time “playing church” at home, practicing periods of silence, singing songs, etc. Consider using the Lord’s Prayer or other words at home before meals or bedtime.

DECIDE on a personal signal to let children know when to settle down. Go over the service with your child or softly whisper hints about what happens next. Children like to be ready, so help them see what happens next.

EXPRESS joy at having children here! During the Peace, welcome any children near you. Include them in conversation before or after the service and try to send an occasional smile their way. Children might not remember every word of a service, but they’ll retain the experience of being a valued part of a faith community.

FEEL FREE to leave the service at any time if your child is crying or restless...and do make use of the BabySpace or Synod Hall, but also know you can come back in at any time. Taking a break in BabySpace is often a good alternative to leaving the service completely. Times that are particularly easy to move with a child might be during a hymn, during the Peace or when the congregation stands to say the Nicene Creed.

GIVE your child a chance to explore the church with you after the service is over. Although there is a holy mystery surrounding the altar, familiarity with the physical setting may make children more at ease. Do ask one of the clergy to give you a tour of the church.

Questions or Concerns?

The clergy, BabySpace or Young Church Convener are always available to talk things through – either in person, by phone or email. And they may be contacted by phoning the office on 0141 339 6691 or email: office@thecathedral.org.uk

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