

**“CHILDREN IN CHURCH-
HOW TO KEEP KIDS ENGAGED
(OR AT LEAST QUIET!) DURING WORSHIP”**

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BEFORE CHURCH:

1. Convey your expectations about appropriate behavior in church before arriving. Make a game out of explaining different church symbols on the altar and in the hymnal (e.g. “I wonder how many candles we can find, “Let me know when you see a red cross in the hymnal, “I wonder what color the paraments will be today, I wonder which pastor will be preaching?”).
2. Consider offering an incentive for appropriate church behavior to be redeemed after church (e.g. lunch at McDonalds, trip to park in the afternoon, etc..).
3. Pack a “church” bag with new toys and quiet activities that your child does not get to play with at any other time during the week. Explain to your child that he/she may play with one toy at a time during church.
4. Pack a snack and/or drink. Tell your child that snack will come out during the sermon only if he/she has demonstrated appropriate behavior prior to the sermon.
5. Take a final trip to the bathroom. Explain to your child that you will not allow them to be excused during church for a bathroom break (if you know they can go 1 ½ hours between bathroom breaks).

DURING CHURCH:

1. Sit near the front of church so your child can see the altar. He/she will be more engaged in the service and will learn to follow along quicker if he/she is near the front.
2. Allow your child to complete/draw/write in the Children's Bulletin. Point out how the theme of the sermon and texts relates to the bulletin, the drawing on the front, the hymns, etc...
3. Use stickers as non-verbal reinforcement when you “catch” your child listening or playing quietly. Smile, “thumbs up,” gentle touches can all convey your pleasure at appropriate church behavior.

4. Encourage your child to interact with others by shaking hands and maintaining eye contact.
5. Encourage your child to participate in the service by teaching him/her when to cross self, say prayers, sing hymns and follow along. Use your finger as a guide under the words in the book, even if your child is too young to read. This will encourage your child to stand next to you, to follow along, and will actually help your child learn his/her way around the book. Older children can be challenged to find the hymn by using the hymn number.
6. Bring out only one toy at a time. Put it away when your child has lost interest and you bring out the next toy. Do not allow your child to rummage through the toy bag-havoc will ensue and you will lose the control to monitor and limit choices! Reinforce with non-verbal behavior to show your child you are noticing his/her compliance.
7. Do not bring snack out until the sermon and require your child to sit on the pew to eat. If you are consistent with this expectation, it will not take long for your child to "get the hang of it" and he/she will sit quietly during the sermon with the snack. If your child gets down off the pew, temporarily take the snack away until he/she climbs back up and sits quietly. (Explain and if necessary, practice this at home BEFORE church starts). Snacks that require some effort will "stretch out the fun" and keep your child's attention longer (e.g. small boxes of raisins, cheerios on a string, string cheese pulled into small strings). Avoid bringing sweets and candy. Smile often to show your child you appreciate how quietly he/she is sitting.
8. It is never too early to teach and model nice manners such as having young boys step behind in aisle to allow mother and sisters to go ahead of him up to communion. (I admit it, I'm old-fashioned!)
9. If your child becomes disruptive or is not engaging in appropriate church behavior, remove him/her for a brief "time-out". Take your child to the music room or downstairs hallway and have him/her sit facing the wall for 3-5 minutes. DO NOT allow your child to play, run around, look at books in the church library, etc... Your goal is to return to church with a compliant, quiet child as soon as possible and this will not happen if it is more fun for them to be out of church. If you have had to remove your child from the service, make sure that he/she does not get any rewards or special privileges when you get home. It is important to teach that there are consequences for misbehavior.
10. If your child has shown appropriate behavior, make sure and praise him/her after church and in front of others. This is a wonderful way for people sitting around you to reinforce good behavior to your child and even for the pastors to compliment your child on being a good listener.

AFTER CHURCH:

1. Praise your child for appropriate behavior. Point out specific examples of when you "caught" him/her listening or participating.
2. Use the car ride home to discuss the service, theme of the sermon, etc... Try to apply a theme from the sermon to your upcoming week (e.g. "The sermon was about serving others. How can we serve others this week?") Talk about how you noticed other children being great listeners. Don't discuss other children's misbehavior- it will teach your child that misbehavior gets your attention. Likewise, don't gossip about others or make negative comments about the pastors, sermon length, "boring" hymns, etc... Where do you think your child will develop a negative attitude about church and will begin to show resistance to going?
3. Don't be discouraged if it has been a challenging morning. Don't give up! It is being consistent and faithful that will help your child learn most quickly and the people around you that may have been distracted have probably been through it with their children as well!
4. Take any toys out of the toy bag that did not engage your child or hold his/her interest. Replace with another toy and put the bag away for the week.
5. Follow through by providing the incentive that you promised before church, if your child "earned" it.

THROUGHOUT WEEK:

1. Incorporate the theme of the sermon, daily bible readings, etc... in your family devotions or discussions around the dinner table.
2. Don't convey an attitude of "obligation" about church- "We HAVE to go to church on Sunday." Instead, convey an attitude of thanksgiving- "On Sunday, we GET to go to church to learn about Jesus." "We're so lucky that we can start our week off by worshipping Jesus with our church family."
3. Don't be afraid to elicit help from others. If you generally sit in the same area of church around the same people, consider calling them during the week to ask for their help, support and prayers in teaching and modeling the expected behavior for your children in the pew.
4. Above all, remember this verse: "*Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.*" (Prov. 22:6, NIV)