

Welcoming

CHILDREN AGED 0-5
& THEIR FAMILIES
INTO CHURCH



 THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND **Loving.**
Living.
Diocese of Leeds **Learning.**

Hello!

Thank you for picking up this guide to welcoming children aged 0-5 and their families into church.

Does your church have quite a few families with children attending? Are you seeing lots of families coming to church asking for their baby to be baptised? Or perhaps your church is beginning to reach out into your community and you want to be ready to welcome families into your Sunday Services?

Whatever your church context, this booklet is a short guide to help you consider the importance of welcoming young children and their families and it offers some practical suggestions to make families feel accepted and part of the worshipping community.

In the guide you will find:

- Why should we make children and their families welcome?
- What is church? What are we welcoming families into?
- What are the messages we want our church to convey to children and their families?
- How can we welcome, include and encourage families to worship in our churches?



Children Matter

Why should we be welcoming 0-5's and their families into church?

We should be welcoming children and their families into church because children matter to Jesus and he commanded his disciples to let the children come to him. We read in Luke Chapter 18 about Jesus blessing the little children:

"People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.'"

Luke 18 v 15 -17 NRSV

Children were brought by their parents to Jesus so they could know him and be blessed by him. Children need church to welcome them in so they can begin a lifelong journey of friendship and faith with Jesus.

Jesus said 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as little child will never enter it'. Adults need children remind them to seek Jesus like a child, with awe and wonder.

Children need adults to share how they live out their faith with them to help them grow in faith too.

Parents also need support not only to grow in their own faith but to help raise their children in faith.

Church attendance is declining, particularly amongst children and young people. The Church of England has set a goal to double the amount of children and youth disciples by 2030 so we need to think carefully about how we respond to this challenge. We need to encourage children and their families in faith and to feel a part of our congregations and we need to be welcoming. We need to think about the messages we convey to children and their families through our buildings, our people and our worship.

Church

What is church? What are we inviting children and families in to?

Church is the place where we gather together to seek God and to be known and loved by God. It isn't a building or a club but a community made up of people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities and ages who try to love and accept one another just as Jesus loves us.

As church, we journey with alongside each other with God as imperfect humans in need of God's grace. The quote attributed to St Augustine reminds us that:

'the Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints'.

The Church is also called the Body of Christ. We are God's family on earth. Families span the generations from youngest to oldest. When you gather round the table with your family for Christmas dinner, the older generation don't sit separately to the children to eat; you eat together. For the church to fully represent the Body of Christ and be God's family, every member of the family, from the youngest to oldest, should be represented and should be able participate in the life and worship of the community.

This is what church is meant to be.

|

family



Church

Is this what newcomers to church, particularly families and children, experience?

Sadly in some places, the buildings and culture of a congregation may unconsciously convey messages to families with small children that make them feel that they aren't welcome, they can't join in and they don't belong. For example, worship services are lead by adults for adults and there isn't anything for the children to participate in. Services can be quiet and reflective and children can be noisy and active; it seems like the two don't fit together. Church buildings can be historic and therefore not obviously child friendly spaces. Parents are anxious about bringing curious boisterous toddlers or fussy babies into church, worried about what others will think, particularly if there is no obvious toilet facilities or space for children to play.

God values children, God made them and loves them and wants them to be included in his church. We need to consider carefully the messages our church, our people and our building convey.

We need our churches to share the good news about Jesus and offer the hospitality of God to whoever comes across the threshold. When children and their families come into our church, I wonder if they receive these messages?

You are all **welcome** here.
You **belong** in this community.
You can **worship** God with us.



You are welcome

What do we need to be a welcoming church?

Welcome starts with intentional prayer and asking God - how can we be more welcoming? Our prayers are aided by empathy, by imagining ourselves as the stranger arriving on the threshold of a new place. As you think and pray about welcome in your church, it might help to ask yourself these questions:

Recall a time where you went somewhere new and you didn't know anyone.

Did some one welcome you? How did you feel?

What would have made this situation better for you?

Every person, no matter their age, social status, ethnicity or gender, crossing the threshold of the church should receive the hospitality of God. Some people have a gift of being welcoming and hospitable; they put people at ease and make them feel at home. Seek out members of your congregation who have this gift of hospitality and empower and encourage them to lead by example.

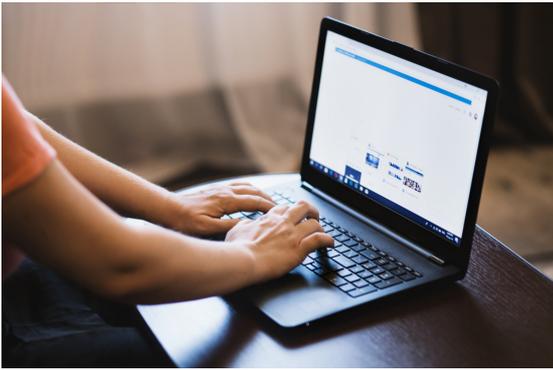
There are, though, a few important things to take into consideration when welcoming young families. Remember that for families parenting children aged 0-5 this can be a particularly challenging phase and that coming to church may not be the easiest thing to do on a Sunday morning. Families may arrive late because it is hard work to get everyone dressed and out of the house on time, especially at a weekend. Sometimes parents and carers are sleep deprived or have their nerves on edge after one too many toddler tantrums. The pressures of work and bills and not spending enough time with their children may be an issue they are wrestling with. There is a lot of guilt around parenting and caring for young children and they won't come back to church if they are made to feel unwelcome or judged about their children's behaviour and their parenting.

What families need when they come to church is to receive grace, compassion and understanding. They may live far away from family and might be looking for a community to support and encourage them in faith and parenting. In particular, new families to church need, for example those non-church goers who bring their children to be baptised, what Rachel Turner from Parenting for Faith calls, 'guides' not 'gatekeepers'. Church congregation members can be key in welcoming and guiding families into belonging to the congregation, sharing the good news about Jesus and learning how to worship Jesus together.



Here are some other ways in which your church can be more welcoming:

The Church Website



The church website is often the first impression newcomers have of the church and what it is like. The website is like the church's front door. Here is a great opportunity to communicate what sort of church this is, what services might look and feel and how the community works. An easy-to-navigate website with pictures of the building and worship services alongside service times and contact details helps people get a sense of whether this is a place they would be welcome or would like to visit. If families can watch livestreams of services, they will have a better idea of what to expect.

At the door

Have a welcome team stood at the entrance who can spot new families and help them feel at home. This is more than just saying hello and handing them a service book or notice sheet; get your team to ask them their names and find out a little bit about them. The welcome team can then explain what will happen, the format of the service, show them where to put their buggy and point out where the toilets or child friendly spaces are and show them the best places to sit where they will be most comfortable. This may require some team training.



Facilities

Facilities are important - do you have a space to park prams or buggies? Are the toilets accessible and do you have baby changing facilities that are warm and clean? Is there space in church for children who are restless to sit and play or for breastfeeding mothers to be comfortable? What can you change or improve to be more welcoming? If you are considering changes to be made to the building, do contact the DAC to check what faculties or permission you need.

Welcome cards

A welcome card (like the example on the next page) available in the pews/seats can be helpful for parents. In this welcome card, you can outline what is important - that everyone is welcome and you can give permission to families to feel at home, to move around appropriately if necessary and give them ideas about how to engage their children with what is happening in worship.

Welcome

We are delighted you and your family have joined us for worship today.

Please relax and feel at home in God's house.

Do sit close to the front so your children can see what is happening.

Please join in with the songs and prayers as you feel comfortable - your children learn from watching what you do and they will copy you.

Children are curious and want to understand; explain to your children what is happening in the service if you can.

If your children need to move around, that is ok! Please accompany them to keep them safe.

If your children make a noise, don't worry about it, it is good to hear children enjoying the worship.

If you need to leave or your children need to take a break, please step outside or use our side room to take a moment but do come back if you can!

If you do need any help or have any questions, do ask our welcome team or the clergy.



You belong

It has been said that people often belong to a church community before they believe in Jesus.

Belonging starts with invitation - come and be part of our church family! What are the ways in which your church might encourage children and their families to feel a sense of belonging?

Food and drink

A lovely way to start building relationships with families is to invite them to share food and drink together. Some churches serve breakfast before the service to help families feed their children before worship or coffee and cake afterwards. Perhaps you might start a Sunday Lunch gathering or a picnic after the service to invite newcomers to? These are wonderful opportunities to get to know people and make them feel part of the congregation.



Church Events

Once you have had a chance to get to know new families, think about what is going on in the life of church that you can invite them to? Do you have a weekly Toddler Group? How about Messy Church? Do you run mid week study or prayer groups? Or how about seasonal events like Easter and Christmas? Many churches run community events that are fantastic to invite families to.

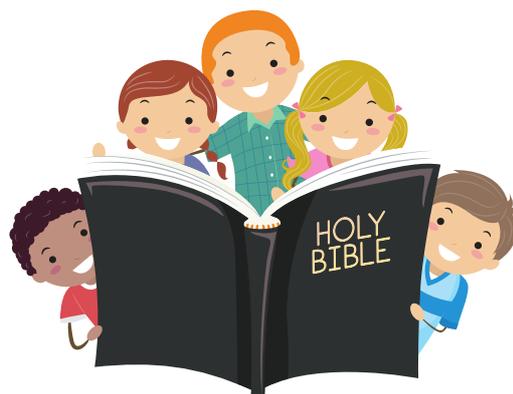


You belong

Belonging continues with participation - how can we help children and their families participate in worship services when they are ready to get involved?

- Speak to parents and ask them what they feel their child is able to do or what they would be happy to accompany their child doing.
- Welcoming congregation members, handing out books/leaflets and showing people to pews is a simple task but one that fosters a sense of belonging.
- If you have a church bell, another task children can do is ring the bell before worship begins - children may need help from their parent to do this safely but will enjoy making this joyful noise!
- Have parts of the service printed on cards and laminated such as the prayers, the bible reading, bringing up the elements for communion, taking the collection. Print the task on one side with a helpful illustration for non-readers and any text/liturgy on the other - such as the Bible reading. If asking children to read the Bible reading, use a child friendly Bible Translation such as ICB and if asking them to do prayers, write simple short prayers for them to read out. (This idea is from Rev Mary Hawes who runs a 9am 30 min all age Morning Worship service at her church with young families in mind that is followed by coffee and craft.)
- During the service, you could involve the children in telling the Bible story, re-enacting the story or making sound effects. You could provide art and craft materials and invite children to make art work to reflect the theme of the service that could be displayed for everyone to see in church.

If you are livestreaming your services online and children are going to be involved in the service, do make sure you have written parental consent before the service begins.



You can Worship



What is worship? Why is worship important for children and their families?

Worship is learning to live our whole lives before God, honouring him and giving him our attention and respect. When we engage in worship in a church service, our hearts connect to God through the Holy Spirit and we are transformed to go out and live as Jesus' followers in the world, proclaiming the good news, old and young alike.

Children aged 0-5 can worship and in these early years, children grow and develop rapidly both physically, socially and emotionally. In the first couple of years most of children's communication is non-verbal and yet children understand and process far more than we realise. They primarily explore the world and do most of their learning through play. Children learn to worship and connect to God by seeing adults and older children worship and hearing from them about how being a friend of Jesus changes their lives for the better. They can also learn to worship by exploring faith for themselves through play too.



What opportunities can we create for 0-5's to worship and learn about God in church?

How about having a 'Pray-ground' area?

Flame Creative Kids blogger Rev Mina Munns describes creating an interactive area of at the front of church where children can engage with worship as a 'pray-ground'. Here is an opportunity to allow children to play and worship during the service. Children's corners in churches can sometimes be at the back, out of sight, cold or dark and full of everyone's broken leftover hand-me-down toys. The message that subconsciously sends to 0-5's and their families is that they are not important or of value.

If possible, set up a play corner in sight of the front of church and the altar so children can see what is going on during the service. Make the corner as comfortable and inviting as possible, with clean soft furnishings, play mats and rugs. You might want to put some inspiring art work on the walls or may be some Bible verse wall stickers?

Here are some ideas of toys for a pray-ground corner that can help children engage in worship:



Liturgical toys

Young children learn through role play like playing house or doctors. It can be the same in church. You could set up a mini altar with matching tablecloth to the colour of the season with a wooden cup, plate, cross and a bible. If you have seamstresses in the congregation, you might even be able to have a dress up box with child size robes and stoles?

Story bags/baskets

Story bags/baskets are filled with items that help children play through popular Bible stories such as Noah and the Ark or Jonah and the Whale or Jesus parables or even Psalms like Psalm 23. You could fill the basket with a beautiful picture book of the bible passage (there are many to choose from!), sturdy wooden toys or soft animals that refer to the theme of the story, fabrics and other items to create a small world scene.



Music

Many children love music and they learn about God by singing songs about him. Maybe during one of the hymns or songs you could bring out instruments such as egg shakers which are the perfect shape for little hands and are all the same so kids don't squabble over them. Alternatively you could try waving scarves - juggling silks that are washable or for older toddlers and preschool children, you could offer flags to wave.

Art and craft materials

How about having a supply of child friendly art and craft materials that are easy to access and a low table and chairs with a wipeable table cloth? Set out the materials to create an open ended invitation to children so they can respond creatively to what is happening in worship. It might be an idea to have some baby wipes and paper towels on hand to wipe down hands if a mess is made or clear up spillages. It may be also worth having a washable mat underneath the table to avoid damage to flooring.



Involving 0-5 year olds in prayer: Multi sensory prayers

Here are a few suggestions for multi sensory prayer activities you can do for confession or intercession with under 5's. These ideas involve being creative and using our hands so don't require spoken language which is particularly helpful for little ones who are still learning to talk. God knows them and their hearts and through these prayer ideas they can be talking to God and developing a relationship through prayer

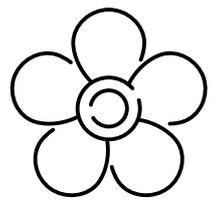


Bubbles

A good idea to use as a confession -ask children to imagine things they've done or said wrong floating up to God in the bubble and when they pop, that is God forgiving us - children love to jump up and burst the bubbles too.

Paper flowers

use squares or cut out simple paper flowers . Ask children to write or draw something they want to pray about, fold over the corners on the petals and place in a bowl of water - watch as the petals or corners unfurl and ask children to imagine their prayers rising to God.

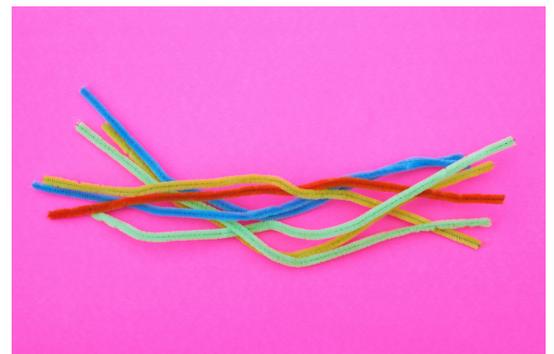


Playdough prayers

There are lots of different ways to pray using modelling clay like playdough or plasticine. You can use the playdough to make models of things you want to give thanks for or people you want God to help. You can knead the dough while you tell God about something difficult going on. Flame Creative Kids has designed lots of playdough mats that you can print and laminate to use in prayer.

Pipe cleaner prayers

Just as with the playdough, pipe cleaners are great for children to manipulate into shapes and use in prayer. You can shape the pipe cleaners into something you want to give thanks for, you can tangle the pipe cleaners up to talk about when we have got things wrong and we ask God to forgive us and untangle us. We can wrap the pipe cleaners around our wrists to remember wherever we go, God is with us and we can tell him all about how we feel.



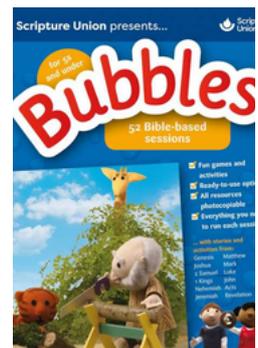
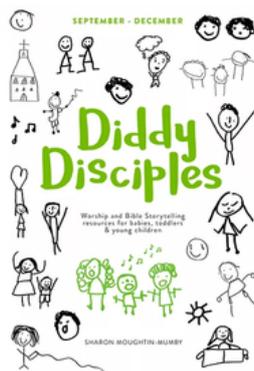
Starting a creche for Sunday Services

If your church has the space and the numbers of families attending grows, you might want to consider starting a creche or Sunday morning group for 0-5's.

It is important that creche is not just sending the children out of church because they are noisy and disruptive. There is no point having a room of toys and there being no spiritual input - the families may just have well stayed in the comfort of their own home. Instead this is an opportunity to perhaps have a bible story, a sensory activity, some songs and some prayers, not only for the children but the adults too. There may also be time for a snack and a chance for parents/carers to chat with one another and start new friendships.



There are plenty of resources available to help you plan and deliver a short creche session:



The creche space:

Environment is really important. Make sure your creche space is warm, comfy, clean and inviting. If possible, you might consider putting inspiring artwork or photos on the walls, having cosy soft furnishings for babies and toddlers to sit on. If you are providing toys, make sure they are safe, clean and in working order.



A Final prayer

Dear Jesus,

When parents brought their children to be blessed by you, you opened your arms wide and welcomed them, declaring how valuable children are to you and how your kingdom belongs to them.

By your Holy Spirit, enable us to do the same; to welcome, nurture and support children and their families. May our actions and our words share your grace and love, may we journey together and be a church family that worships and learns about you so we might serve your kingdom coming into the world.

Amen.

Helpful Resources & Further Reading

Further reading and highly recommended books:

- 'Beyond the Children's Corner - creating a culture of welcome for all ages' by Margaret Pritchard Houston
- 'Babies and Toddlers - Nurturing your child's spiritual life' by Rachel Turner, Parenting for Faith

Online resources:

<https://www.parentingforfaith.brf.org.uk/babies-and-toddlers/> - includes links to bite size videos exploring nurturing babies and toddlers spiritual lives and advice for baptism families.

<https://kitchentable.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Ages-and-Stages-all-ages.pdf> - a helpful document for parents wanting to nurture the faith development of their children at different ages, particularly 0-1 year olds, 1-3 years olds and 3-5 years olds.

Creative prayer, worship and creche ideas:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://lettheirlightshine.com/>
- <https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/support-for-you/faith-in-the-family/support-for-churches/playtime/playtime-resources/>
- <https://www.diddydisciples.org/>
- <https://www.biblebuds.co.uk/>
- <https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/resources>
- https://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/367949/Gods_Big_Story.aspx
- <https://godventure.co.uk/>
- <https://www.mustard-seeds.net/material>
- <https://www.salvationist.org.uk/resources/community-engagement/jump-in>