

Worshipping with 0-5s

ROOTS in partnership with the URC

Why bring very young children into worship?

Very early experiences are fundamental in all areas of human development. This is as much the case in faith development as in any other area of life. It is therefore important that the church makes good provision for babies and toddlers in the same way that it seeks to make provision for other members of the community. Infants and toddlers absorb the atmosphere of worship and the fellowship that accompanies it as they learn from other early experiences, being part of a family, visiting friends and so on. Although we, the adults who observe them, do not at this stage receive appreciable feedback on their learning from these experiences at this stage, it is happening nonetheless.



How do very young children learn?

Relationships are key

Tiny children are primarily experiential learners. Relationship is fundamental to this. The experience of being loved and secure is foundational to the development of faith. Obviously home and family are important here, but where tiny children are part of a worshipping community, such experiences must be part of the provision. A feeling of security, with freedom to explore and freedom from stress with people who will support them appropriately, is key to their development.

Play

Small children learn through play. We see this in the baby a few months old who experiments with touch and feel, who

responds to smiles and sounds. We see it in the toddler who develops an interest in particular things and sets out to reach them on wobbly legs, or sits and plays with them in distinctive patterns.

We see it in the mimicking of adult behaviour by the small child who solemnly collects a hymnbook and holds it upside down as they sing with everyone else; or the child who enters the pulpit and plays at speaking, holds the microphone to sing or kneels at the communion rail with hands outstretched.

Experience

For very small children experience is key. They absorb experiences as a sponge soaks up water, storing up their learning like treasure in a basket of infinite depth, to be brought out and sorted, revisited and evaluated over the coming years and for ever. Largely their learning is pre-conceptual: they know

about things; they respond with delight, intrigue, persistence, perhaps even fear. When they analyse, it is through trial and experimentation rather than verbal explanation and rational argument. If we offer them positive, warm, appropriate experiences of faith and faith community in their earliest years, we offer them a treasure for life, a deep well to be dipped into again and again, a foundation for a complex life of faith that will deepen and grow over a whole lifetime.

Physical skills vary

Children in these early years vary enormously in the development of physical skills: some children learn to walk at ten months, some may not walk until they are almost two. Some children can colour in a picture long before they start school, others find even holding a pencil difficult when they are five.

ROOTS resources for very young children

- Flexible resources for all-age worship, church crèche, and mixed-age children's groups
- Ready-made Bible-based toddler session every week

Find out more at www.rootsontheweb.com/toddlers

Developing a rationale for working with very young children

It is helpful to address some basic questions when working out how best we can support the spirituality of the youngest members of our church community.



Why?

- Work with very young children must give a positive benefit for the children rather than just keeping them out of the way of the adults, or trying to evangelise to their parents.

Where?

- Main church service/crèche (the latter must be more than 'sacred babysitting'!). Try to provide sightlines to what's going on at the front, so that children can become familiar with what happens there as well as in their area. But remember that parents need to feel comfortable; it could be half way up, perhaps to the side; save chairs/pews for parents near the area. Don't be sidelined at the back of the worship space.
- Toddler group/service in church or in a separate space.
- You might wish to use the suggestions in a children's group, either with its own designated workers, or alongside a more mixed age group where provision for the very youngest children has been problematical because many activities demand skills they have not yet developed.

NB ensure you follow your church's policy on health and safety and safeguarding and do a risk assessment of the space. If you're not sure what your local policies require, ask within your church elders or leadership, your Synod team, and see Good Practice 5 or the appropriate denominational policy.

When? How often? How long?

- Sunday morning during the service, or another time at the weekend or mid-week. Don't ever give the message that families aren't welcome in the service on Sunday morning.
- Weekly, fortnightly, monthly – what can your resources allow?
- How long? Aim for 30-45 minutes but it depends on your situation, e.g. whether everyone is together for certain parts of the service. If the very young children are together for the whole of the service, don't worry. You can just go round and round with the activities, and allow plenty of time for play. That's OK!

How?

- **Human resources** – Who? What time can they give? It can work with one really dedicated person, but they need a back up. How about starting with a pair of people supporting each other? They can operate on their own if necessary. It's very important not to let the children down. If you meet out of church service time you'll need more: someone to be on the door to greet, someone to set up the craft, etc. Continuity is vital; avoid the children seeing different faces each week if at all possible.
- **Space** – What's available and suitable? Think of ease of access for buggies, space for moving around.
- **Kit** – see *What you will need* on page 4. Keep toys relevant. If people are throwing out toys, ask for play figures, relevant animals and items for Bible stories, and building blocks in good condition. Cardboard tubes, nice chocolate boxes to make special containers, or shoe boxes covered with wrapping paper, are all useful.
- **Budget** – Will the church fund it all, or can you ask families to contribute? For a midweek or weekend afternoon group you could charge, e.g. £2 per family. It helps to pay for craft materials and can make parents feel it's more professional. If asking families for money is not appropriate, you could consider asking the community to sponsor items or do some fundraising. Ideally, set up a budget for a year. Get it on the church's annual budget, then it's lodged in people's minds as an ongoing expense (like flowers, music, etc.). Reckon on £1 per week per child. Presenting it this way offers further opportunities for sponsorship.

Safeguarding

It is vital that you follow the child protection policies and procedures of your own church and denomination. Clearly this is for everyone's safety and security. Ensure someone takes responsibility for this so that it can be managed efficiently and thoroughly.

Children's spirituality

Spirituality is fundamental to human flourishing, and it is a foundation of faith. Rebecca Nye, among others, has researched and written about children's spirituality. She identifies six fundamentals for spiritual development that can be remembered by using the word SPIRIT as an acronym. Here are six pointers that reflect the ideas in her work as they might relate particularly to very young children:

Space Worship spaces are 'God is here' places – a space set aside devoted to the opportunity to experience God. Small children are able to experience this atmosphere.

Process Prayer and worship are spiritual processes, not an end in themselves. Valuing process means valuing the present moment, learning to be fully present, with the opportunity to experience God's presence alongside others.

Imagination The development of the imagination supports spiritual development and a fundamental capacity for prayer and the reading of Scripture.

Relationship Relationship with God is at the heart of our faith and children will develop an appreciation of this through the relationships they develop with people of faith.

Intimacy 'Spirituality is about a sense of "coming closer": our capacity for coming close to God will be supported through experiences of real attention and value shown to young children by those around them.

Trust We learn to trust by experiencing the trustworthiness of others.



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Nurturing spirituality

Gerard Hughes, in his book, *God in all things*, suggests a definition of spirituality expressed as 'signs of holiness'. Very young children fulfil all of them.

- A sense of awe and wonder
- A sense of mystery
- A sense of seeking
- A desire to connect with 'another world'
- The capacity to give and receive human love
- A sense of laughter and joy
- An awareness of what is both good and evil (engaging with difficult issues such as death, freedom, aloneness, suffering, right and wrong)

How can we create an environment in which these signs of holiness can flourish?

Building an inclusive community

How do very young children fit into the bigger picture of the church as a whole? We need to convey that they are not just a nuisance, but are fellow pilgrims and at risk of being alienated. If children are shut out, not welcomed, separated off, then we might seek to teach them but we won't nurture them. Remember the saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' It is the task of the whole church community to nurture the children.

Here are some practical suggestions for bringing the church community with you in embracing and responding to the needs of their youngest members:

- Get the minister/vicar on side; keep an ongoing conversation open with him/her. Provide stories of children's experiences, e.g. at Spiritual Child Network, www.spiritualchild.co.uk. Suggest he/she preaches about very young children or invite a guest speaker/preacher.
- Get parents on side.
- Share the story *Peter and Penny go swimming* (you can find it easily via an internet search), which perfectly illustrates the risks of excluding young children from participating fully in church.
- Be prepared for it to take a long time, but keep going.
- Make a log of when you notice what the children are doing. It will build up evidence that children don't need 'input' or 'teaching' to be able to express themselves through play materials, actions, etc.
- Invite the church community to share what they have learned from the very youngest members of the church to show that they are a positive benefit to the rest of the church.

What if people complain?

Some people find very young children difficult and their presence intrusive and these people are equally as deserving of respect as the children are. Listen to what they have to say and try to work out a mutually acceptable way forward. Do offer to explain why young children's presence and participation is fundamental to their faith development – the *Peter and Penny go swimming* story might help (see *Building an inclusive community* above). If there are ways to reorganise the use of space or equipment (e.g. ensure microphones are kept away from areas where young children gather so that people with hearing aids are not confused during a sermon by extraneous noise) then do consider this.

But young children should not be excluded from worship. This carries its own message and it has life-long implications. Banned babies are much less likely to grow into committed Christian adults. If we work hard to include them, however, young children will be less disruptive and will be perceived as less disruptive. People will be delighted to watch them striving to participate. If they have the opportunity to see what is provided to help young children take part, that it is intentional and serious, people may be more accepting of their presence.

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Resources and ideas

Practical tips when working with young children

- Take time to listen to them and don't rush them on to the next activity if they want to talk.
- Respond with comments which open up a conversation; commenting with preverbal children about what they're doing creates a verbal framework for them, e.g. 'I see you're making a boat, show me how it works.', rather than, 'What a lovely boat!' which closes down the conversation.
- Be aware of and respond to non-verbal communication.
- Slow yourself down to their speed and don't worry if you don't finish what you planned to do.
- Provide open-ended activities and let the children explore unguided.
- Develop a 'slowing down' process to move from noisy toys to a quieter activity – the children will recognise the change of rhythm.
- Allow them to lead activities and use play and creative materials in ways that you had not imagined.
- Be there to help and facilitate where necessary and give them space just to be.

What you will need

However you decide to use these materials, some basic equipment will be helpful and a person or a group of people will be needed to look after it and set up the space each week. Use good quality, clean items in good repair. Don't accept what should really be thrown away. Ask for a budget, or at least an initial injection of capital! Clear up the material each week and put it away so that it is kept clean and in good repair. You might ask for a small cupboard or use a large box with a lid.

A general kit list might include:

Scene-setting

- A carpet or blankets to sit on and some cushions to make a safe, comfortable space
- Artificial grass square
- Large plastic sheet or tarpaulin
- Long rolls of paper (lining paper, wallpaper)
- Selection of coloured fabrics
- Play parachute or large piece of material
- Selection of baskets, cardboard boxes and drawstring bags

Sensory play

- Large shallow tray and sieves, funnels, sponges, cups etc.
- Sand
- Shiny crafts items (shiny paper, sequins, shiny stickers, tinsel, eco-friendly glitter etc.)
- Balloons
- A bag or box that looks special (could easily be handmade) to use as a storybox, or to hide things in for a game
- Percussion instruments
- Child-safe mirrors
- Battery-operated tea lights and other light sources, including torches
- Ribbon, wool or string
- Play dough and tools (inc. shape cutters)
- Pots of bubbles

Fine motor skills

- Wooden building blocks
- Stacking cups
- Shape sorter
- Selection of puzzles – jigsaw, lift and reveal, interlocking toys

Gross motor skills

- A play tunnel
- Hula hoop
- Soft balls and/or bean bags

Small world play

- A model church
- A Noah's ark
- A nativity set
- Dolls' house
- Toy cars and car mat
- Train set
- Toy farm set and extra toy sheep of different shapes and sizes
- Toy boats, fish and nets
- Small world people (dolls house, Playmobil, Happyland etc.)

Creative play

- Play food, cups, plates, pans
- Plastic plant pots and toy gardening equipment
- Dolls and teddies
- Toy doctor's kit
- Dressing up items – particularly nativity costumes, crowns etc.
- Toy treasure, coins, jewels
- Hand and finger puppets

Nurture the youngest children with **ROOTS**

Specially-written material for every week of the year

Storytelling

A version of the story for very young children using a variety of storytelling techniques – actions, mime, repetition, symbolic objects or pictures, story bags, puppets – to engage different learning styles.

Opportunities for play

Music and movement

Creative response

Prayer activities



Find out more at www.rootsontheweb.com/toddlers

Building a whole church community

- Every week the ROOTS resources explore the same Bible reading, enabling everyone to worship and learn together – across all generations
- Reliable resources to enrich adult, all-age and family worship
- Brand new resources each week to inspire leaders and encourage faith at home



See a sample week at www.rootsontheweb.com/sample