

Teaching Young Children How To Worship

Laura K. Selenka

When I offer encouragement to parents who are attending church with young children, I share a little artistic interpretation that I indulged in myself when I was in their shoes. It is my belief that human nature is constant and predictable; it crosses generations. When Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me,” he completely understood what he was saying. Sure, the classic artwork depicts perfectly behaved youngsters gathered peacefully around our wonderful Jesus. But I know in my heart that somewhere in that crowd were siblings scuffling over who could sit closer. There was a boy who had found a stick and was pretending it was a galloping horse. Someone was crying. Someone needed to go potty.

Children are not, and have never been, perfect. Jesus did not limit his invitation to well-behaved,

clean, quiet children. Jesus, knowing the true nature of children, did direct adults to bring them into his presence. We parents have been commissioned to lead and teach even the youngest children how to be with Jesus, how to worship our loving God.

That commission flavors our own perspective on the worship service. Mindful parenting is hard work. But rather than trying to “get through the service,” we can look for ways to teach our children how to be a part of the worship service.

For insight into age-appropriate behavior as it relates to worshiping with toddlers and preschoolers, I’ve spoken with Cindi Holman, WELS National Coordinator for Early Childhood Ministries. Holman has a master’s degree in Early Childhood and 27 years of classroom experience. Just as important, she’s a mother and grandmother, who

has experienced many a worship service from the back row.

“My heart is with parents. It can be discouraging and exhausting,” Holman says about worshiping with young children. “Remember that you are training a young worshiper. You are privileged to teach; you are who God chose for this job.”

Although statistics on attention spans vary slightly, according to Holman, we can generally calculate that our young children can focus on one activity for 3 to 5 minutes per year of age. For example, a two-year-old probably can remain attentive to an activity for 6 to 10 minutes before likely wanting a change. “This doesn’t mean they can’t sit for an hour,” Holman explains. “A change could be as simple as moving from the pew to sitting on your lap.”

Knowing Holman’s calculation for attention spans may help when packing quiet activities and books for a service. Bring things that are novel, rather than the most-used favorites. Many churches

helpfully provide a children’s bulletin, crayons, or returnable activity bags. Often these bags contain coloring pages

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(Teaching Young Children How to Worship . . . cont.)

and items that subtly connect children to the service theme. “If your church doesn’t provide these items, maybe this is your calling; maybe you’re the one to start it,” Holman encourages. However, shifting your child’s focus can still be as simple as following the natural rhythm of the service. Encourage standing and sitting along with the congregation.

Familiarity is important to young children. Holman suggests arriving early to walk around and show them important parts of the worship facility. Visit the baptismal font and tell them what it was like to welcome them into God’s family. If your building is blessed with artwork or stained-glass windows, talk about the Bible stories that are represented. Preschoolers love to share their knowledge and often will only need prompting to retell Bible lessons they’ve learned. My church’s Moms’ Group once hosted a tour that included playing the organ! Holman suggests, in future services, if your little one needs help holding it together, you can redirect him or her with a soothing game of Can You Find the Statue of Jesus? or Do You See the Bible on the Altar?

Just as toddlers react to familiar nursery songs, they will react to our worship music when it becomes familiar to them. I used to sing parts of our liturgy to my babies at bedtime, along with more typical lullabies. Holman suggests asking your pastor ahead of time for hymn numbers and Bible readings. “A lot of pastors would be thrilled to give parents that in advance,” she explains. She encourages using that information in the days leading up to the service, building familiarity, so when the day

arrives, you can whisper, “You know this song—sing along!” or, “Listen to Pastor read the story about Jonah and the big fish!”

Holman says that home devotions and family prayers provide more opportunities to teach familiar routines. Try instructing, “We can talk to Jesus. This is how we sit and what we do with our hands.” It



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may also help to have a routine to prepare for the service. Let children help pack a special bag. Let them choose something special to wear. “These activities also highlight that church is a special place,” Holman explains. The more we bring church into our homes, the deeper children will connect with it. It is exciting for them to recognize an item at church that they also have at home, such as an Advent wreath.

Noisy behavior can be minimized by having advance conversations with little ones who typically respond well to being recruited as helpers. Holman suggests explaining that “we need to be quiet in church to make sure we help others hear about Jesus.” She recommends stating your expectations in the positive, rather than threatening what will happen if misbehavior occurs.

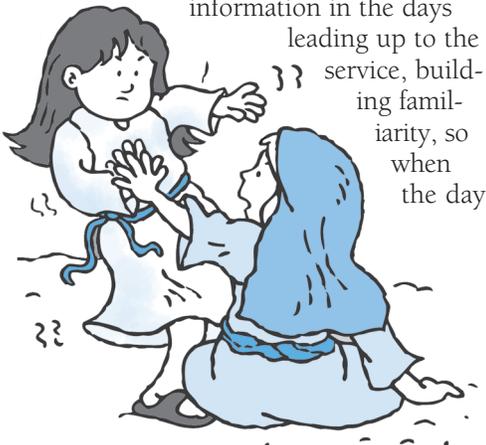
Sometimes we parents need to remember how sensitive and reactionary our little ones are to our emotions and stress. Holman suggests coming into worship prepared for naughtiness, having realistic expectations. Show up knowing that things may not go as planned, and be ready to calmly work through problems as they arise. Have a plan of action.

When children need to be taken out of a service to address a distraction they are causing, Holman suggests keeping it short. “Use the cry rooms or nurseries wisely,” she says. “Tell your child, ‘This is a place where we can find our calm and return.’” Remember that the younger children are, the more immediate your response should be to teach them that their behavior has been unacceptable. Holman strongly encourages positive reinforcement of good behavior, using a verbal thank you or praise. For example, “I saw that you worked so hard to stay quiet today! You were so helpful to other people who were learning about Jesus!”

Holman says it is important to “look for things to celebrate.” When little ones spontaneously respond to the minister, it is clear that they are listening even when we don’t think they are. Holman likens it to the way adults can multitask. As embarrassing as those moments can feel, Holman would assess, “A toddler singing means she’s connecting!”

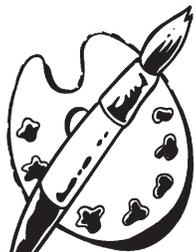
The more preschoolers and kindergarteners are able to read, the more they will be able to participate in a worship service. As children are gaining reading skills, that is a good time to wean them from the other activities. Holman concludes, “It won’t last forever; though in the midst, it feels eternal. Our goal as parents is to work ourselves out of a job.”

Laura Kiecker Selenka is a freelance writer in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where her family has graduated out of the “Back Pew Club” at Martin Luther but still delights in the joyful noise coming from behind.



Focus on Jesus!

Jesus is your best gift. He has earned your salvation! He is also the giver of all other gifts, talents, and abilities. Which of the gifts that are pictured interest you? What other things do you like to do? How can you use your gifts to serve Jesus and others in your church and in your community?



Help decorate the church nursery.

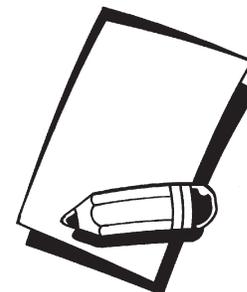


Play preservice music at church.

1	9	9	5	7	4	15	14
2	12	10	3	4	13	12	10
JESUS!							
14	3	13	17	3			
6	7	10	18	7	15	6	
		19	12	16	13		
15	1	9	3	11	15	14	



Teach soccer skills at VBS.



Write a prayer for the church newsletter.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
A	C	E	F	G	H	I	J	L	M	N	O	R	S	T	U	V	W	Y

Use the code to solve the mystery message!

Why *wouldn't* you consider MUSIC LESSONS for your child?

Karen Hunter

The research is in. And it's compelling. Music lessons benefit children. And teens. And college students. And middle-aged folks. And senior citizens. Music making provides cognitive, physical, behavioral, emotional, and spiritual benefits. Are you considering music lessons for your child? Wrong question. Here's the real question: Why wouldn't you consider music lessons for your child?

The cognitive benefits of music education are well documented:

- Researchers have found that one-year-olds who participate in interactive music classes with their parents smile more, communicate better, and show earlier and more sophisticated brain responses to music.¹
- Young musicians show advanced brain development and improved memory over children who do not take music lessons.²
- Musical training (specifically, keyboard/piano) trumps computer instruction in strengthening

children's abstract reasoning skills—necessary for learning math and science.³

- Kindergartners who are given music instruction score significantly higher on spatial-temporal skills tests than those who do not receive music training.⁴
- First graders who received a daily dose of music instruction scored higher on creativity tests than a control group without music instruction.⁵
- Music education is a superior way to teach fractions.⁶
- Elementary school students who study music are better readers than their nonmusician counterparts.⁷
- Musical training helps under-achievers catch up in reading and surpass their nonmusician peers in math.⁸
- Secondary school students who report high levels of involvement in instrumental music over the middle and high school years show “significantly higher levels of math

proficiency by grade 12.” The data holds true regardless of students' socioeconomic status.⁹

There are physical advantages to being a musician too. Learning to play a musical instrument develops eye-hand coordination needed to learn handwriting.¹⁰ Senior citizens who took group keyboard lessons showed higher levels of human growth hormone (HGH) than a control group whose members did not make music.¹¹ The most recent research indicates that playing an instrument or singing actually changes the brain. The musician's brain is more capable than the nonmusician's brain of comprehending speech in a noisy environment. Children with learning disabilities, who often have a hard time focusing when there's a lot of background noise, may be especially helped by music lessons.¹²

Still not convinced? Consider the effects the study of music has on behavior:

- “Studying music encourages self-discipline and diligence, traits



that carry over into intellectual pursuits and lead to effective study and work habits.”¹³

- A 1999 Columbia University study found that students in the arts were more cooperative with teachers and peers, more self-confident, and better able to express their ideas. These benefits existed across socioeconomic levels.¹⁴
- College admissions officers admit that applicants who participate in music have an advantage. They claim that musicians are better at managing their time and are more creative and expressive than their nonmusician peers.¹⁵
- One study concluded that college student musicians are emotionally healthier than their nonmusician counterparts.¹⁶
- Besides reducing stress¹⁷ and job burnout, playing a musical instrument helps to curb loneliness and depression in older people.¹⁸

Musicians have an outlet for their emotions. Playing an instrument or singing can be especially valuable to those who find it difficult to express their thoughts and feelings. The adage “Music provides a window to the soul” is apt. The “tuned-in” listener knows precisely how the musician is feeling. Music unites too. My politically divided hometown lays its differences aside at Concerts on the Square. Amazingly, most music transcends the barriers of race, culture, society, education, and class.

There are spiritual benefits to both playing and hearing music too. When young David played his harp for Saul, “relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him” (1 Samuel 16:23). The psalmist David wrote, “My heart, O

PLAYING OR SINGING HYMNS THAT CONVEY THE TRUTHS OF GOD’S WORD BRINGS COMFORT, HOPE, AND HEALING TO THE SOUL.

God, is steadfast; I will sing and make music with all my soul” (Psalm 108:1). A sainted professor once told his class that he often played hymns on the piano when he felt Satan’s attacks.

Martin Luther said it too: “I have no pleasure in any man who despises music. It is no invention of ours: it is a gift of God. I place it next to theology. Satan hates music: he knows how it drives the evil spirit out of us.” Playing or singing hymns that convey the truths of God’s Word brings comfort, hope, and healing to the soul.

What is one of the best benefits (I arguably call it the highest good) of music lessons? Your child may have the opportunity/thrill/privilege of using that gift of music in public worship (whether in Sunday school, Lutheran elementary school, or church), to the praise and glory of the benevolent God who endowed your child with that talent. The next generation of church musicians is nurtured and encouraged by parents—like you—who see the Big Picture. They know we need skilled musicians, particularly organists and pianists, to lead us as we sing those “psalms, hymns and songs from the spirit” (Ephesians 5:19) until Jesus returns or calls us home.

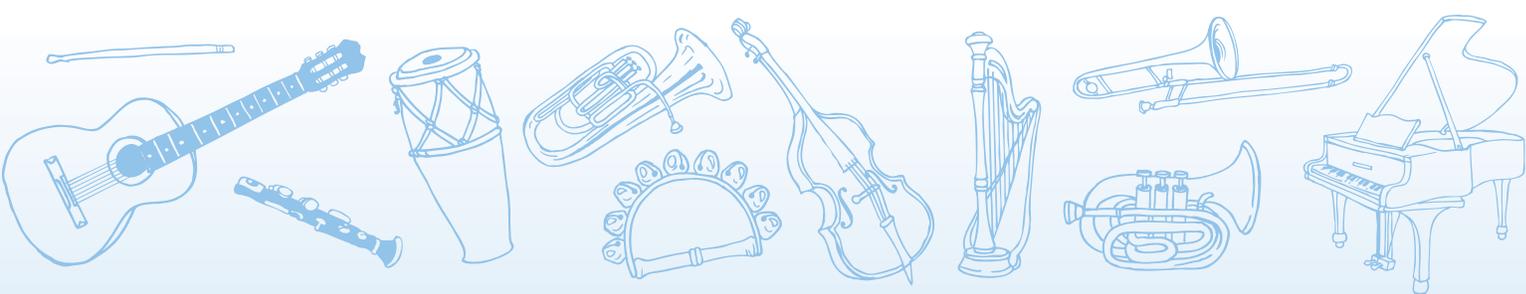
The bottom line is that 85 percent of Americans wish they could play a musical instrument. Don’t let your child become a part of this statistic! For all the right reasons, parents, encourage your child to take music lessons!

Karen Janke Hunter was blessed with parents who recognized the value of piano lessons long before the research was done. She and her husband, Pastor Randy Hunter, reside in Middleton, Wisconsin. God has blessed them with three children.

Notes

1. McMaster University, reported in *Developmental Science and Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 2012.
2. McMaster University, reported in *Brain*, 2006.
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4. F. H. Rauscher and M. A. Zupan, “Classroom keyboard instruction improves kindergarten children’s spatial-temporal performance: A field experience,” in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2000).
5. K. L. Wolff, “The Effects of General Music Education on the Academic Achievement, Perceptual-Motor Development, Creative Thinking, and School Attendance of First-Grade Children,” 1992.
6. *Neurological Research*, March 15, 1999.
7. Sheila Douglas and Peter Willatts, *Journal of Research in Reading*, 1994.
8. *Nature*, May 23, 1996.

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11. Dr. Frederick Tims, reported in *AMC Music News*, June 2, 1999.
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13. Michael E. DeBakey MD, leading heart surgeon, Baylor College of Medicine.
14. J. Burton, R. Horowitz, and H. Abeles, *Champions of Change, Arts Education Partnership*, 1999.
15. Carl Hartman, “Arts May Improve Students’ Grades,” *The Associated Press* (October 1999).
16. Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse Report, reported in *Houston Chronicle* (January 1998).
17. Dr. Barry Bittman, Loma Linda University School of Medicine and Applied Biosystems, as published in *Medical Science Monitor* (February 2005).
18. “Scientific Study Indicates That Making Music Makes the Elderly Healthier,” *American Music Conference*, 1998.



Illustrations: Shutterstock

The tension at the table was going to need a serrated knife to cut through it. Mom and Dad were tired after a long day. The kids were sniping at one another. And then a reach for the ketchup resulted in a glass of milk turning into a puddle on the bright red tablecloth. Eyes grew big and all heads turned toward Mom, when a sweet little voice piped up, quoting one of the family's favorite TV commercials: "You know what this room needs? A smile!" It was so unexpected that it caught everyone off guard and started a chain reaction of giggling that released the stress that was so palpable just moments before.

Does this scene seem familiar? Too often our family situations are full of stress, and it is hard to remember to bring a smile into the room, to laugh at a situation instead of launching into a tirade or, worse, crumbling into tears.

The Bible doesn't often refer to laughter, at least not in a positive light. More often laughter is a derisive response, as in God laughing at the wicked world powers that were rebelling against him or ancient Sarah laughing in disbelief when God promised her a child. The proverbial wife laughs—at fear: "She can laugh at the days to come" (Proverbs 31:25). When Jesus spoke of laughter, he spoke both in terms of a blessing—"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh"—and a warning: "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:21,25).

What can we take from such a serious biblical perspective on laughter? When there is tension in a family, when there is stress and sadness, we need to remember what causes such things. Sin is very present; our sinful

of Jerusalem on that blackest of Fridays. The only laughter would have been the maniacal glee of a mistaken Satan thinking he had just overcome the world's Savior. But his laughter was quickly quashed as the triumphant, risen Jesus trampled on his premature gloating and crushed his visions of victory.

Even beyond laughter, our victorious Savior gives us something less fleeting: true joy.

"May the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful" (Psalm 68:3).

Does this mean that we can't enjoy a good belly laugh, a great guffaw, or a howl of hilarity? Not at all. But it is important that we guide our children to learn what is and isn't appropriate to laugh about. We don't want to laugh unkindly at someone else's expense—for example, a person with a different appearance or a unique manner of doing things. And we certainly never want to laugh at those things that God takes very seriously, summarized succinctly in his Ten Commandments.

We do know a beautiful freedom because of Jesus' victory, allowing us to rejoice that we need not fear Satan and death because their sting has been removed. That sure knowledge cuts through the tensions of our lives, giving us room to smile, rejoice, and make glad noises of all types before the Lord: giggles, guffaws, chortles, chuckles, or even a song at the top of our voices!

Pamela Holz and her husband, Pastor Ken Holz, live in beautiful Clarksville, Tennessee.



IS LAUGHTER THE BEST MEDICINE?

Pamela Holz

natures are constantly fighting to take over and rule our hearts. The world would have us view our lives as a silly sitcom where children are disdainful toward the adults, who are dumb and self-absorbed. Satan desires us to simply laugh off sin, brushing it under the table.

While this paints a rather bleak picture in an article about laughter, it doesn't have to. What we need is a clearer perspective, remembering where we need to keep our focus. There was no joyful laughter on that hill outside

THE WORLD WOULD HAVE US VIEW OUR LIVES AS A SILLY SITCOM.

I Thanked God

Jennifer David-Sayles

Routines. We all have them. On a normal day, I wake up, have my cup of coffee, and read my Bible. I then go about my daily chores. However, I really wanted today to be different. Today I wanted to thank God . . . FOR EVERYTHING.

I began cleaning the entryway. For some reason, this is the catchall room for everything that comes through our door. It was at this time I thanked God that I had a home. I thanked him for the things others left behind that needed to be returned to their proper places because that meant my children and husband had been here. I thanked God for the mud that my children had dragged in because that meant my children had shoes on their feet.

Next was the living room. I folded up the blanket that my daughter had slept with the night before and thanked God that she was warm and that he was giving me the privilege of raising her. I grabbed my vacuum cleaner and unknotted the cord. I thanked God that I had carpet to vacuum; so when the girls had friends over, they could sit comfortably and watch the latest movie on television. I thanked God for the television. But I did ask him to make the programming a little more family friendly.

On to the kitchen. The MESSY kitchen. You see, I had made no-bake cookies the night before and had left the pan in the sink to soak. I thanked God for the ingredients I was able to use in those cookies, and then I sent

a little prayer that those ingredients not end up on my hips! I thanked him for the stove and the refrigerator and the cupboards full of food.

It was time to set the table for breakfast. I thanked God that we gathered

As you walk about today, thank God for all that you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch.

here as a family every morning and then again in the evening. I thanked him for the conversations that we all had at these times.

I then moved on to the bathroom. How I HATE to clean the bathroom. However, as I scrubbed the toilet bowl, I thanked God profusely for allowing me to have indoor plumbing so that

I didn't have to walk outside in the middle of the night! It made that chore A LOT easier! I thanked him for my being able to scrub a shower that my girls use way too much. I wound up all the cords to the hair dryers and to the curling irons and thanked God that my children love themselves enough to look presentable wherever they go. I grabbed the dirty clothes out of the hamper, collected the mounds of clothes on my children's floors, and placed everything in the laundry room. As I loaded my washer, I thanked God that I didn't have to go to a river, run sandy water through them, and then hang them from a tree. I thanked him for great smelling laundry soap and fabric softener that makes our clothes soft.

As I finished everything else, I thanked God for my four beautiful daughters, my amazing husband, my awesome son-in-law, and my two adorable—downright spoiled—grandsons. And then I thanked God for my church, extended family, friends, and everything else that makes my life complete. I have to say, by focusing on my blessings, the chores were a whole lot easier to complete.

As you walk about today, thank God for all that you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. It will give you a much brighter perspective on your life.

Jennifer David-Sayles, a freelance writer, resides in Gilford, MI, and is a member of St. Luke in Vassar.

PRAY FOR YOUR CHILD

Sometimes we think of prayer as a last resort when trouble comes and we have nowhere else to turn. Yes, it is important to call upon the Lord in prayer when we face days of trouble (Psalm 50:15). But prayer is a privilege we have at all times. Our children face challenges each day, and so do we as parents. Because we are children of God through Jesus, our prayer life can be a regular part of each day, whether we face troubles, anticipate challenges, or bask in the warmth of the sun. Here are some suggestions for improving your prayer life:

PRAY FREQUENTLY. Remain in close touch with your heavenly Father. He is willing to listen at any time, in any place, and in any situation.

PRAY IN YOUR OWN WORDS. Don't be concerned about your choice of words or grammar or format. God knows what you want to say even before you say it. He encourages and welcomes your conversations with him.

PRAY IN JESUS' NAME. Even if you don't express it in words, remember that Jesus' death on the cross brought you back into a wonderful new relationship with your heavenly Father. Without Jesus, your prayers will go unheard.

PRAY WITH A THANKFUL HEART. In spite of the circumstances, remember God's blessings. He is the giver of every good gift, including the gift of eternal life. Give glory to his name in your prayers and with your prayers.

PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE. We most often abuse prayer when we fail to trust that God will grant our requests in ways that are best for us, our children, and all believers.

PRAY TO YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER, who loves you and your children more deeply than you can imagine. Sometimes he may appear to be silent and not listening, but as our heavenly Father, he will give us what we need the most. In loss, tragedy, and pain, trust his care. He promises that the hairs of our heads are all numbered. Even when he seems not to listen, his power is operating in ways we may not understand.

PRAY FOR PATIENCE, wisdom, and strength to carry out the difficult task of parenting.

PRAY FOR THE COMFORT of forgiveness when you fail to be the parent you should be, and then find in that forgiveness the strength to do better.



"You can't wear your Halloween costume because there are no pirates in the Christmas pageant."

Parents Crosslink

Parents Crosslink is published by Northwestern Publishing House four times annually in partnership with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's Commissions on Discipleship and Lutheran Schools. All comments should be directed in writing to **Curt Jahn**, Editor, N16W23379 Stone Ridge Drive, Waukesha, WI 53188 or jahnc@nph.wels.net.

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Key for Focus on Jesus puzzle (p. 3)

