**12 REASONS TO WELCOME KIDS IN CHURCH + TIPS FOR ACTUALLY DOING IT**

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Sure, kids don’t belong *everywhere*.

They’re not a symphony orchestra’s target audience ([except when they are](https://www.nzso.co.nz/education/music-for-schools/school-concerts/)).

The tense whispers of snooker commentators suggest that toddlers wouldn’t be welcome at tournament finals.

But babies and children are legally entitled to be all sorts of places that aren’t always built with them in mind, including, say, courthouses (despite [the misguided judge who scolded a breastfeeding mother](http://sacraparental.com/2012/10/26/why-the-judge-was-wrong/) a while ago) and political rallies

**But what about kids in church services?**

It depends on the church, obviously, and they’re all different. Here’s one way of looking at it: how about we put logistics (space, demographics, time of day) and theology (how important to God do we believe communion is, or the sermon, or beautiful music, or Sunday School?) on two axes of a graph. There would be churches all over the page, and each combination would mean different ideas about where children should be during church services.

Some churches run age-targeted programmes for children, before, during or after the main service; some include kids in the whole thing Sunday service; some do neither. Almost all of them value children and want to do what’s best for them, but it can be hard to meet the needs of all the different kinds of  people in a church community, and not all churches send the message that children are valuable to God or churches.

One way of approaching things is becoming more common, but is still a bit scary for a lot of church leaders and other adults to contemplate: ‘**all-age’ or ‘intergenerational’ church services**.

Since my time as pastor of [West Baptist](http://www.westbaptist.org.nz/wp/?page_id=14) (2008-2011), I’ve become a huge fan of all-age church, where everyone is all in together, and people of all ages are warmly invited to engage in what’s going on. I’m not talking about a place where the kids are allowed to be in the room but expected to be quiet and do colouring-in. At West Baptist, there’s no separate Sunday School, and everyone of every age is actively included and considered in how things are done, on Sundays and beyond.

This system was already in place when I arrived. I was a bit sceptical at first, but now I reckon it’s fantastic – and truly possible for most communities.

**Here are twelve reasons churches everywhere should have a conversation about going all-age.**

As well as reasons to consider something that I appreciate would be a big culture change for many churches, I’m including **tips for runnings all-age services** (either occasionally, or every week), and ideas for how parents and carers can help their kids to switch on to the things in the service that are already kid-friendly.

I’m also including some **questions that decision-makers can ponder**, to evaluate how kid-friendly your church is right now, and what steps you might be able to take – big or small – to model the kind of welcome to children and their families that God provides for all of us.

If the ideas here appeal to you, or just get you thinking about other intergenerational things your church could do, please think about who you can pass this post onto – who makes the decisions in your church?

**Reason 1.  
KIDS ARE PEOPLE TOO: When we welcome kids in church, we acknowledge that they are important humans in the present, not just the future**

As a ten-year-old at West End Primary School, I sang along at group singing time to Whitney Houston’s ‘inspiring’ lyrics:

*I believe that children are the future  
Treat them well and let them lead the way  
Show them all the beauty they possess inside  
Give them a sense of pride  
To make it easier  
Let the children’s laughter  
Remind us how we used to be*

Hm. I wrote that out from memory, in order to smash it down, but actually, most of that *is* pretty inspiring – without the ironic quote marks. Children’s laughter is definitely a good reason to welcome them into all aspects of church life, for sure!

But back to my original, snarkier, point: children aren’t just the *future*, they’re the *present*. If church is a place for anyone, it’s got to be a place for children. How could anyone argue otherwise?

I read [a great piece by Rabbi Menachem Creditor](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-menachem-creditor/children-in-the-sanctuary_b_5283826.html) this week, who’d been receiving complaints about ‘disruptive’ kids in the sanctuary:

*My response to these wrong reactions to the presence of children within holy space is simple and core to who we are called to be as faith communities:****Our sanctuaries are not sanctuaries from children. They are sanctuaries for children.***

*…If you feel the urge to react to the sound a child makes in a sanctuary, please know that you are welcome to walk out until that feeling subsides. Children are cherished parts of our spiritual lives, not distractions from it.*

*[*[*Read more at The Huffington Post*](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-menachem-creditor/children-in-the-sanctuary_b_5283826.html)*.]*

Isn’t that brilliant? I think more often, we need to realise that the ‘problem with children’ is actually a problem with adults.

My next exhibit is: Jesus. Watch me bring out the big guns!

You probably remember the bit where Jesus tells his disciples not to keep children away from proceedings: ‘suffer the little children to come unto me’ [as the old King James Version has it](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2019&version=KJV).

I don’t know about you, but I had completely forgotten that kids had a significant part to play in one of the most dramatic parts of Jesus’ ministry.

Remember the bit where he bursts into the Temple, throws the furniture around, yells at the corrupt bankers, and shouts ‘My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves!’?

Kids were right in the middle of that action.

In [Matthew 21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+21), the story goes like this (I’ve added the bold):

*12-14Jesus went straight to the Temple and threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He quoted this text:*

*My house was designated a house of prayer;  
You have made it a hangout for thieves.*

*Now there was room for the blind and crippled to get in. They came to Jesus and he healed them.*

*15-16When the religious leaders saw the outrageous things he was doing, and****heard all the children running and shouting****through the Temple, “Hosanna to David’s Son!” they were up in arms and took him to task. “Do you hear what these children are saying?”*

*Jesus said, “Yes, I hear them. And haven’t you read in God’s Word, ‘From the mouths of children and babies I’ll furnish a place of praise’?”*

The children here were contributing something significant, making a real difference.

If they hadn’t been part of proceedings, who knows what else might have happened differently?

If they’d been separated out from the adults, like roast potatoes without gravy, something would have been seriously missing.

We exclude kids at our peril, because they have something to contribute – by their mere presence and existence as part of humanity.

Children are not just consumers of our services, and learners from our wisdom, they have a part to play, just like all adults in our church.

More about what that can look like in a bit.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What message are kids and adults at your church getting about how important children are to God?*

*Are there new things you could try to make sure everyone understands how important kids are?*

**Reason 2.  
When we welcome kids, we are making their carers feel welcome too**

This one is for C, a mum from our local primary school, who said to me on her first, brave visit, with tears in her eyes, ‘This is the first time I’ve been allowed to have my babies with me in church.’

Lots of kids and parents love having a special kids’ programme in the church hall while the sermon is being preached in the church sanctuary. But not everyone does. C wanted her family to be all together. That was *important* to her.

And here’s G’s feeling:

*I often feel like I have to go into the mothers’ room or leave the main church area when J is getting tired of sitting still. Being in the mothers’ room can be very lonely at times (or very busy depending on who is at church). It’s always dark to be respectful of breastfeeding (?) and I really dislike being in there. Wishing for a child’s play area (like Ponsonby Baptist) where I can sit on the floor and play, but still be an active part of a church family.*

If kids are explicitly welcomed and included in the main deal on Sundays, here are some adults you might find joining in more often:

* *parents and carers of children who, for whatever reason, like to stay with their adult and not be separated from them (for example: age or stage; anxiety; past or present trauma; particular health or other needs; or just because they prefer it)*
* *adults with babies and toddlers, who might otherwise feel they have to leave whenever their little one cries or needs a feed*
* *families who like to do things together, perhaps especially on the weekends*
* *people whose kids don’t enjoy the children’s programme, for whatever reason (maybe they don’t have friends there; maybe they don’t click with the teacher; maybe the environment isn’t a comfortable one for them, for any number of reasons; maybe they’re not engaged by the content)*
* *people from a cultural background where sending children out to another room is odd or unwelcome*
* *single parents or carers coming alone with children, who might feel self-conscious being left by themselves when the kids go to their programme.*

West Baptist has this on the front of the church newsletter that people are given at the door each Sunday:

*We especially love having kids involved in the whole service on Sundays, in all their wriggling, noisy glory, so please don’t worry if you or anyone with you makes a bit of a racket – we’re glad to have you with us!*

This – along with all the other ways children are explicitly welcomed – sets the tone and expectation. Children are welcome, and are welcome to behave like children. Adults don’t need to worry that anyone will glare at them if they peep.

I got lots of feedback over the years that this message really did penetrate people’s consciousness and make a difference to how welcome they felt bringing their kids, who may or may not resemble (quiet) angels on any given Sunday.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*Take a moment to put yourselves in the shoes of each of the people listed in the bullet points above. How would they feel at your services? Does your system, and the way you communicate, make those people feel welcome and part of things? How could you find out?*

*Could you consider having a play area in the church sanctuary so parents of small children can be present, while occupying their kids in the same room?*

*Could you make it clear to the congregation and visitors that*[*breastfeeding is welcome in the sanctuary*](http://sacraparental.com/2014/09/06/sacrament-breastfeeding-5-bible-blokes-cultural-capital/)*, so people don’t fear they have to leave to feed children?*

*Practicalities are also important. Is there room in your church for push-chairs? Do you have ramps or only stairs? Are there facilities for heating a bottle and a pleasant place to change nappies/diapers? Is there room for kids to sprawl a bit, or for a baby to lie on the floor while kids are with their families?*

**Reason 3.  
KIDS LEARN BY PARTICIPATING: When we welcome kids, we invite them to experience God in community with us**

When we attended a church last Easter Sunday that doesn’t allow non-members or children to receive communion, our four-year-old son cried. Passionately. He wanted the wine and the bread, he said. Why couldn’t he join in?

We made it up to him by having communion at home (with, erm, broccoli juice, if you can imagine that), and he has now instigated communion at home more than once. In our family, communion is for people who love God and want to follow Jesus. If our son wants to sign up to that, he is welcome to participate.

(For more on the history of children participating in communion, you can read the [Wikipedia article here](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infant_communion).)

Kids copy what they see. My seventeen-month-old will go and kiss her hurt brother, because she’s seen me do so. My four-year-old denied a request I made by saying ‘tough luck, Mama!’ to me the other day, which gave me a pang of guilt at how I have been responding to some of his more unreasonable requests!

**Children learn by observing and copying. How can they learn to participate in the community of God *without actually doing so*?**

Just as we involve very small children in setting the table for dinner or tidying up the toys together, if we invite them to join in the group activities of a church community, they will gradually grow into them and increase in skill and interest.

Many churches invite children to [light the Advent candles](http://sacraparental.com/2014/10/26/advent-with-kids-76-ideas-for-getting-ready-for-advent/) in the lead-up to Christmas, and put on a Nativity play. What else can they participate in for the remainder of the year that will make them feel special and included?

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What parts of normal (adult) church life can children currently participate in at your church? What are they excluded from? What could you change so they get to do more?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*Whether your church services are currently intergenerational or not, there are plenty of things you can do in your family group to help kids participate.*

*Talk to your kids as the service runs, pointing things out to them that are familiar, asking questions, redirecting their attention.*

*Even in the ‘adult’ slots, there is often a visual aid or reference to something familiar that the kids can relate to. Be persistent in directing their attention to the front, or whatever activity the church is doing together.*

*Sermon topics, Bible texts and songs are almost certainly chosen well before Sunday morning. If they’re not already advertised in advance, ask the relevant leaders to let you know each week what’s coming up, and spend some time at home helping kids to get familiar with the songs, Bible readings and ideas coming up.*

*For kids in church who can’t read yet, learning the choruses of some of the popular songs your church sings will make them much more able to join in.*

**Reason 4.  
KIDS CAN HANDLE SERMONS: When we involve kids in church, we expose them to deep, important ideas**

This one is for R, the ten-year-old who asked me for a pastoral appointment (this is cool just by itself!). She’s been in an intergenerational church all her life, and listened to hundreds of sermons.

So we went and had a hot chocolate and some cake at a café after school. R wanted to talk about how to apply my sermon on conflict resolution in [Matthew 18](http://http/www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew%2018&version=MSG) to a tricky friendship she had at school. I had preached the sermon she was referring to *a full year earlier*.

**Kids can handle sermons.**

My usual approach to preparing all-age sermons at West, when I was the pastor there, was to think and write content for mature, adult Christians, but present it creatively in ways that invited younger humans and younger Christians to engage with big ideas. On a good day, this meant that both ends of the spectrum are reached by the sermon.

There’s a bigger section below on how preachers can serve an all-age congregation.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What are children in your church learning about God and themselves from their church experience, whatever it looks like?*

*How can you find out?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*Start a tradition of talking about the sermon and/or service at the next family meal.*

*Ask open questions, and brainstorm ideas for putting things into practice in the week ahead. Ask a church leader for help if you’re not sure how to get started on this – I bet they’ll be chuffed to be asked!*

*Check out*[*this collection of printable sheets*](https://nz.pinterest.com/youngfam700/kids-sermon-notes/)*for helping literate children to learn from sermons.*

*I also had good responses when I produced these Bingo sheets occasionally to help kids (and adults!) keep track of the service, and remember through the week what went on. Feel free to copy and adapt it:*

[*Tranfiguration Bingo*](http://sacraparental.com/2016/06/11/12-reasons-welcome-kids-church-tips-actually/tranfiguration-bingo/)*(click this link to download the Word document and make your own.)*

**Reason 5.  
IT’S GOOD FOR EVERYONE: When we include kids in church, we all get to practise being generous to each other**

One of the best things about West’s all-age church approach, for me as a pastor, was *what it did for the adults*.

The kaupapa preceded me, and was part of the DNA of the church community by the time I arrived. Everyone in the church had come on board from the beginning, after a long process of considering the idea. Thirteen years on, when I started, everyone in the church was actively committed to the idea that Sunday morning services weren’t just ‘for’ them; that there had to be some give and take, and making space for people ‘not like me.’

Everyone got to practise being generous to people with different tastes. Adults could put up with silly action songs. Kids could put up with boring talky bits. Classical music lovers could put up with drums. Extraverts could put up with silence – and maybe even enjoy it sometimes.

People recognised and could articulate that ‘someone else is really enjoying that bit’ – and don’t you think that this kind of unselfish attitude to our neighbour then becomes worship in itself?

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*Does your church have members with a consumerist attitude to church, who only want services to suit them and meet their needs? Do some people complain that the music is too loud, too old-fashioned, too repetitive or not ‘theological’ enough? What could you do to address the attitude behind these arguments?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*Kindness and generosity go both ways. Just as we want adults to be friendly to our kids, and offer us sympathetic smiles and not frowny tuts when they are boisterous, it’s helpful to frame our requests to our kids as being about kindness: “Please remember towhisper your questions, because Sam and Lani are trying to hear from God right now, and we want to be kind to them.”*

*Be clear in your own mind why you are part of a church and why you include your children. Find a couple of phrases about this that you say regularly to reinforce your values and redirect grumbles, for example, “Yes, I know you don’t like this kind of music. Can you spot some of our friends who are enjoying it? Whenever this music is playing, we can show God that we want to follow Jesus by being happy that they are happy.*

**Reason 6.  
IT MAKES SERVICES BETTER: When we plan for kids to be involved, we plan better, richer services**

Of course, we aimed not to provoke too much ‘putting up with’, and everyone involved at West works hard to craft creative, interactive, multi-sensory, hour-long services that help everyone connect with God at some point, from the toddlers to the nonagenarians.

On a good day, it’s the best time you’ll have all week, full of stuff to make you laugh – and maybe cry – to help you think and fuel you for the week.

You simply can’t have a boring church service if you’ve got all the generations involved.

A typical one-hour service at West would include some of these things:

* Songs that kids can relate to, including action songs, as well as some aimed at adults (lyrics can be sent to families ahead of time if that helps them come along ready to sing).
* Musical instruments handed out during the singing, for kids to use (and yep, they are then collected up again before the talky bits!)
* A short interview with a different member of the congregation each week (including kids) to get to know each other better
* Plenty of visual stimulus for non-readers, on screen, and in displays that are relevant to the sermon series.
* At least one prayer or reading slot provided by a child. Beginning to do this is something of a rite of passage for the little ones. They often start by doing a one-sentence thanksgiving prayer at the microphone, held by a parent, and gradually are able to do Bible readings, and even lead entire services.
* An invitation for all children to collect the offering. Some people who donate regularly by automatic bank payment bring some change just to make this satisfying for the kids.
* A drama, skit or game that makes a point relevant to the service.
* A worship or prayer slot that is something interactive other than talking or singing.
* Song lyric slides usually include an image related to the sermon series.
* Often there is an interactive activity or game that relates to the sermon content.
* Often there is a time for responding to the sermon in a tangible way: writing or drawing something; collecting a symbol to take home; contributing to a group response (like the responses, in the picture below, to a sermon series on Jesus’ teaching on Kingdom of God)
* A benediction that is the same every week, so can be memorised and recognised by even quite young children. The whole congregation says it to one another.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*Is there something for everyone in your church services? What might you be able to change or add to help all the people present connect with God?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*What parts of the service are your kids most interested in right now? What parts might they be able to engage with if they were helped a bit?*

*Consider having your children sit with an adult and stay with that adult throughout the service. Children find it very hard to engage, even in kid-friendly church content, if they are sitting with their friends. If there are one or two key moments they can enjoy, they might miss them if they’re socialising.*

*Start a habit of talking to kids before and after the service about what went on. Take turns guessing in advance who will be doing the readings or handing out the newsletters. Pick a favourite part of the service to chat about at the next family meal.*

**Reason 7.  
KIDS HAVE LOTS TO OFFER: When you welcome kids, they are able to contribute their time and skills**

Everyone gets to contribute, not just consume. At West, every kid and teenager has a job on Sundays, something tangible to say ‘we need you here.’

When she was five, C told me that her favourite part of Sunday church was being on the Offering Team (our name for the perennially chaotic horde of pre-schoolers who took bags around the chairs to collect people’s donations).

J started curating (crafting and leading) Sunday morning services when he was twelve years old and carried on, as part of the regular roster, until he left home for university.

The average age of the technology team, running the sound desk and data projection, is pretty low, since it includes a bunch of teenagers and primary-school-aged kids. As soon as kids can play a bit on their instrument they are welcome to join the music team – even for one song each week while they keep learning.

Just as with adults, it’s also wonderful when we can respond to the personal skills and interests of children and create new jobs that match them with church needs. Little H was about seven when one of her grandmothers had a great idea. H was a faithful, regular pray-er at bedtime, and often wanted to pray for needs she’d heard about in church. An adult who was part of the ‘prayer chain’ compiled a weekly digest for her so that she could pray for age-appropriate needs among the community.

Similarly, Heather recalls:

*When I was a kid I loved the way I was included at church. There weren’t many kids, so everyone knew us. When I was about eight I got included in the music team playing my recorder. One of the young adults heard I was learning and marched me up to the lady in charge of the music and asked if I could join in.*

*As a 13-year-old I was asked to speak (briefly) to the church about my mission involvement because I had just been made a leader at a kids camp.*

*I like both those stories because they were about people finding out who I was and using those things to include me. There are plenty more, too – it was a great church to grow up in.*

Do you have a similar story? Please feel free to share it in a comment below.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What can an eager four-, eight- or twelve-year-old contribute in your church? What would they like to do? How can you help them learn to do it?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*Take a look through the church noticeboards or newsletters and think about all the jobs that adults do in your church. Do you know a child who might enjoy some of them? Helping with morning tea prep? Mowing the lawns? Setting out chairs or handing out newsletters? Baking for the staff at your local primary school? Helping deliver food parcels?*

*Think creatively about what your kids enjoy and how they could bring those skills to church life. Do you know a child who is into gardening or eco-friendly living? Could they bring their knowledge to church to green up the community? There really are no limits to what can be useful if someone is interested.*

*You might also like to read these*[*ideas for how kids can change the world*](http://sacraparental.com/2014/10/15/6-ways-kids-can-change-the-world-blog-action-day/)*.*

**Reason 8.  
IT MAKES US STRONGER: When we welcome kids in church, we strengthen relationships across generations**

Did you see [the Auckland family who advertised for grandparents](http://http/www.stuff.co.nz/national/6728039/Wanted-Grandparents-for-adoption) a while ago? I said at the time that maybe they should consider joining a church! The more time everyone spends together, worshipping, learning, chuckling, in the presence of the same Spirit, rather than split up in their own demographic corners, the stronger the relationships are across the generations.

I’ve seen plenty of kids gain extra grandparents – people who know when they have a piano exam or a birthday, and ask about the science fair or school camp when they see them on Sunday.

This can also be an important thing for [single adults](http://sacraparental.com/2013/01/12/single-4-auntie-and-uncle-update/), and people without children (although all people are different, of course). Regular, family-like contact with kids in a church setting can be an enriching thing for everyone.

These relationships also free parents of young children to be more involved in services, as Angela writes:

*What has made a difference for me to be able to do ministry within the church is our “village”. I have people in my church who are happy and willing to help out with my kids. This means hubby can do his job as the priest and I can worship lead, pray, and participate and know that my children are okay. My kids have some wonderful relationships with the people in our parish, surrogate grandparents, and there is always someone I can catch the eye of if I need them to do something like separate my 4 year old from his older brother or find the food in my purse. Both of us also minister with children attached to us but we have other people who help our children and it’s great.*

What do you think? How’s your village going?

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What opportunities are there in your church for kids and adults to develop stronger relationships? How could you encourage connections across generations?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*Invite someone without young children to adopt your family – a teenager, ‘grandparent’ figure or family friend – who can help you with keeping your kids engaged during services, and/or build relationships beyond Sundays. There may well be plenty of people who are keen to help, but they’ll usually wait for an invitation. If no one springs to mind, ask someone else in the church who is well connected for a recommendation and take the plunge.*

**Reason 9.  
IT CAN IMPROVE PREACHING: When we include children in church, our preachers are prompted to do a better job for *everyone***

There’s no doubt that I’m a better preacher and communicator for having had to preach in an all-age congregation. There’s nothing like explaining the incarnation and ascension of Jesus in a way that pre-schoolers can understand for making sure that all the adults get it too!

All-age preaching has been great for stretching my skills. It has made me a more thoughtful, creative preacher, because I can’t rely on purely oral sermons where the congregation works hard to keep pace. I do some of those – not every sermon has to be for every person, in this approach – but more often, I preach sermons that have the same*content* as one intended for an attentive adult audience, but with the imagery made manifest in a way that broadens the accessibility.

In giving children access to our preaching, we accidentally include a lot of adults who might struggle to engage with purely spoken sermons, or who don’t have years of churchgoing to help them navigate them.

All preachers use images, stories, and evocative language to illustrate the points we make. The trick to an all-age preaching lifestyle seems to be to make that imagery three-dimensional. Instead of just *telling* a story or *describing* an image, here are some things I’ve tried:

* Many times I have read a carefully picked, excellent **children’s picture book**, with the pictures scanned for the screen, and then later in the service, woven it into the sermon as the main illustration. The best children’s books are powerful for adults to hear, and I often got very warm feedback from adults on those Sundays.

* **Use the congregation as props or actors**: I’ve often invited a bunch of adults and kids to leave the pews and come to the front to be characters in a story I tell, or even parts of a diagram, acting it out impromptu, as I direct them.
* We often use a **demonstration with props** (think of the ‘[rocks in the jar](http://www.westbaptist.org.nz/wp/?p=567)’ demo you may have seen). Again, this is just a matter of doing something in real life that you might otherwise merely describe for an adult audience.
* Do a brief **craft activity** that brings it all together; perhaps everyone gets to blow up a balloon and write a key word on it to take home, or choose a picture to colour in, or add a post-it note to a board. For a sermon series with a theme of falling leaves, everyone got a different cut-out paper leaf each week to write on and add to a mobile.
* Split the sermon into two or three shorter blocks, spread throughout the service.
* Sometimes I have just used **one strong picture or prop** to make the theme or image of the sermon jump out: I once spent most of the sermon holding a fishing rod while talking about fishing, and I bet that stuck in some people’s minds for a while longer than if I’d just been telling them fishy stories with my hands empty.

This is not the dreaded [slavery to trendy YouTube clips or dependence on technology](http://kiwimadepreaching.com/2011/06/geoff-new-the-rising-cost-of-electricity/#comment-677) that conscientious preachers and congregations rightly worry about. It is simply making our existing conceptual imagery three-dimensional, so it’s more accessible to those with younger minds or non-auditory preferences.

The good news for clergy and preachers who are freaked out at the idea of having children listen to their sermons every week is that they have probably done all of these kinds of things at some point when preaching to adults. It’s not[rocket science](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGCMtk695Cg). It’s just a matter of being a bit more methodical and deliberate in how you flesh out your normal preaching.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*How often do you have an ‘all-age’ sermon and/or service? Could you experiment with doing your first one? Or try for four times a year? Or monthly? How would that look? Who might feel that this was a sacrifice, and how could you address their concerns? Do you have people available who could experiment with all-age preaching and give it a shot? What training or support could you find for them?*

*And do check out the resources at the end of the post.*

**Reason 10.  
ADULTS DON’T MISS OUT: When kids are part of the church service, adults don’t have to miss out to lead or attend kids’ programmes**

It can be quite a sacrifice for regular Sunday School teachers to miss out on all the stuff aimed at adults.

But if a church combines the generations, then it doesn’t need to set aside a bunch of people to lead kids’ programmes, and these people don’t need to miss out on the main service.

It’s not just the teachers, of course: if the church service isn’t welcoming to young children, their parents and carers spend a lot of the service quieting them in a foyer, feeding them in a side room or accompanying them to a children’s programme. Parents of young children often miss out on church services for years. Actually, **parents of young children often stop going to church altogether**.

In small churches, it can be a large proportion of regular adult attenders who leave the room when the kids do.

There’s a lot of work involved in running a good kids’ programme. What if your church could free up all those people?

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What does it cost to run your children’s programme now, in terms of volunteer and staff time and other resources?*

*What might your church be able to achieve if those resources were freed up?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*Consider making an appointment with a key leader in your church to discuss your experience of church as a carer of small children. Make a list of ideas that might improve things for carers and take it along.*

**Reason 11.  
When we include people from very young, they don’t have a jolting transition in adolescence**

When you’re all in together, there’s no big, wide door out of the church at age 12, 14, or whenever the kids’ programmes run out and young people are expected to (but often don’t) join the adult congregation.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What is the current trend in church attendance for young people in your congregation? Do some kids start opting out of coming along when the children’s programme is too young for them? How can you help young people transition into adult services? Or how can you involve all generations in the same services so there is no need for transition?*

***Tips for parents and carers:***

*If your children are currently attending a kids’ programme at church, have you considered how they will one day make the transition to adult church?*

*Give it some thought and see what questions it prompts for you and your kids.*

**Reason 12.  
When we welcome kids in church, we demonstrate how welcome *everyone*is**

The all-age approach communicates a special kind of welcome. Again, the church newsletter/welcome sheet at West says:

*We especially love having kids involved in the whole service on Sundays, in all their wriggling, noisy glory, so please don’t worry if you or anyone with you makes a bit of a racket – we’re glad to have you with us!*

When parents know that kids are meant to be there, that church is a kid-space as well as an adult-space, everyone relaxes a bit.

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What kind of people feel most welcome at your church? Are there any changes you could make that would expand that group, so that more kinds of people would feel at home? How can you find out?*

**‘BUT WHAT ABOUT…?’  
Common worries about all-age worship, and some responses**

**‘But what about mature Christians who need to be fed and extended by serious sermons?’**

Mature Christians have probably heard the Christmas story 60 or 600 times before, but we still retell it every December.

The preaching that happens on a Sunday is not usually supposed to be about adding to the store of knowledge, but about encouraging and equipping the whole community to be and build the kingdom of God. Some of that will be about ‘teaching’ but often it is more like ‘reminding’.

Mature Christians have many opportunities to learn more and be challenged more. Sunday worship simply doesn’t need to be – and can’t be – the only time available for teaching high-level material suitable for adults.

When thinking about the needs of senior Christians, church leaders can:

* recommend and lend books
* run study groups
* share web links to interesting material
* encourage wise and knowledgeable members to become teachers and leaders themselves.

And furthermore, in four years of preaching to all-age congregations every week, the feedback from mature adults in my church suggests that it is perfectly possible to stretch those people at the same time as reaching kids. Take up the challenge!

***Key question for church leaders:***

*What opportunities do you or can you offer to mature and knowledgeable people in your community to extend them, outside of the sermon?*

**‘But worship is supposed to be respectful and solemn’**

Hold on. Is it?

While preparing this post, I read a super-curmudgeonly article in an American denominational magazine, which I won’t link to, because it is so awful. But here’s a quote:

*It happened again last Sunday, as it has happened other Sundays. A young couple arrives – usually late – with an infant and toddler in tow. After making a commotion in the back of the church, taking off coats, extracting the toddler from his buggy, and assembling an array of child-care accessories, they walk to a seat in front of the church – almost as in solemn procession – during one of the readings, thereby becoming the center of attention. For the duration of the Mass, the baby fusses, and the older child, unattended, runs back and forth up and down the aisle.*

*On another occasion, a mother, by herself, takes her baby to Mass. For the entirety of the Mass – without a break – the baby cries and protests (as a tired or hungry or otherwise uncomfortable child will do). Those sitting near the two (including yours truly) cannot even hear what is going on at the front of the church. Any possibility of praying or hearing prayers evaporates. The mother tries to quiet the child, an attempt that completely fails. It gets so bad, the presiding priest looks with some concern over at the source of the noise as he comes down to receive the gifts.*

*In both these cases I ask myself: Why does one family have to hold an entire assembly hostage? What makes people so inconsiderate or starved for attention? Why can’t parents take more responsibility for their children? Why isn’t parish leadership doing something to provide alternatives for parents and children? It’s amazing how much attention – the wrong kind of attention – an agitated child, especially one who starts crawling around under the pews, can attract.*

This man needs to be reminded what it is to love one’s neighbour. I can almost hear Jesus’ response to this man, who sounds very like the Pharisee in his parable:

[*Luke 18:9-14*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+18:9-14&version=NIVUK)

*9To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”*

*13‘But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

*14‘I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’*

*[*[*Read more at Bible Gateway*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+18:9-14&version=NIVUK)*.]*

Beating your breast doesn’t happen in solemn silence. Sneering at your neighbour sure can.

It’s true that plenty of people are *used* to quiet, solemn worship, but I can’t recall any Biblical support for the idea that it is *necessary* to properly approaching God. [Miriam](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+15&version=NLT) and [David](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2%20Samuel%206&version=NLT) seem pretty loud and raucous. And if Jesus wanted solemnity, he would hardly have [welcomed children](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+19&version=NLT) at all.

Let me be clear: there is a difference between people being ‘disrespectful’ of God, or of a gathered community, and children being normal children.

**This concern for quiet and ‘respect’ is about preference and style, not about correct theology**. Changing their expectations is a compromise adults may well be being called to make for the sake of a more vibrant and inclusive community.

Just so we don’t let the sour taste stay in our mouths, here is a response to that same article, by a priest:

*This is a bit disheartening; and angering. I am a Catholic priest, and welcome children at Church. I found [this article] by doing a google search for how kids help bring parents to their Mass. Needless to say it won’t be used in any homily I write.*

*It reminds me of something Archbishop Flynn said to us. He got a letter from a person in the diocese who thanked him for coming but asked if he could say something to parents with unruly children, saying you don’t know what it’s like to try to hear at Mass with children. The Archbishop was livid at the man as he told his story. He said to our class that he wrote the man personally, and said he does – try offering Mass, preaching, etc., and how dare he say that to make parents unwelcome. Our archbishop emeritus also made it a point to thank parents for bringing children to Mass and called it joyful noise. It’s the only time I’ve seen the Archbishop emeritus genuinely angry.*

*Perhaps they are late because getting kids ready and in the car is a constant battle and very tough. Would you rather they just stayed at home? I challenge people that they are hypocrites if they stare and judge and make people feel unwelcome and then go up for Communion conveniently forgetting that whole part about loving one another and doing onto others as you would do onto me.*

*Thank God these parents are coming to Mass rather than staying at home, and thank God they are choosing life. Many parishes don’t have a crying room; sometimes those that do may not have a proper speaker system in it. I believe Jesus rebuked the apostles for trying to prevent the children from coming to Him.*

*If you can’t hear, move to another pew, sit closer to a speaker. Say a kind word to the parent who is losing sleep and working hard to raise a family and say “I’m thankful you are here, God bless you and your family.” Smile and don’t be a fake Christian. We can be very good at outward holiness while inside we can be so mean and judgmental. Let’s encourage families rather than making them feel unwanted and uncomfortable. A very disappointing article.*

Preach!

***Key questions for church leaders:***

*What is the existing culture in your church community when it comes to church worship? What do people currently expect, in terms of style and the way things are usually done? Which of these are theologically important to your community and which could be changed to accommodate new groups of people?*

**‘HOW ON EARTH CAN WE DO THIS?’ Here are some resources to help!**

The first place to start might be to seek out a local practitioner of all-age church.

Do you have a denominational children’s ministry coach who can point you to good resources? Do you know someone nearby doing things differently?

If not, here are some places you can start:

**Further reading**

Every family at West Baptist is connected with a copy of [Robbie Castleman’s Parenting in the Pew](http://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/book.pl/code=3777). It’s a fun, easy read, full of great ideas and stories about how to include kids in church life.

**Resource Websites**

[Sticky Faith](http://stickyfaith.org/)

[Barnabas in Churches](http://www.barnabasinchurches.org.uk/all-age/)

[All Age Worship Resources](http://www.allageworshipresources.org/about-us/)

[Messy Church](http://www.messychurch.org.uk/)

[Calvin Institute of Christian Worship](http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/nine-tips-for-designing-intergenerational-worship/)

**Visitor hand-outs**

Here’s a PDF you can download of the visitor hand-out from West Baptist below:

[‘Being an All-age Church’ visitor hand-out](http://sacraparental.com/2016/06/11/12-reasons-welcome-kids-church-tips-actually/being-an-all-age-church-one-page/)

And here are a couple of PDF sources for a pew sheet that is used by lots of American churches (so many that I have no idea who the original source is):

Source 1: [Southwood Church, Nebraska](http://thefamilybox.org/wp-content/uploads/Southwood-Welcome-Pew-Cards.pdf)

Source 2: [Faith in our Families](https://faithinourfamilies.com/2014/07/02/for-parents-with-young-kids-at-mass/) (including more great resources in the comments)

The text of both is this:

***To the parents of our young children, may we suggest:***

*Relax! God put the wiggle in children; don’t feel you have to suppress it in God’s house. All are welcome!*

*Sit toward the front where it is easier for your little ones to see and hear what’s going on at the altar. They tire of seeing the backs of other’s heads.*

*Quietly explain the parts of the Mass and actions of the priest, altar servers, choir etc.*

*Sing the hymns, pray and voice the responses. Children learn liturgical behaviour by copying you.*

*If you have to leave Mass with your child, feel free to do so, but please come back. As Jesus said “Let the children come to me.”*

*Remember that the way we welcome children in church directly affects the way they respond to the church, to God, and to one another. Let them know that they are at home in this house of worship.*

*Please let your child use the reverse side of this card to draw and doodle.*

***To other members of our parish:***

*The presence of children is a gift to the church and they are a reminder that our parish is growing.*

*Please welcome our children and give a smile of encouragement to their parents.*

*If you see a parent struggling, please offer to help them!*

I loved being the pastor of an all-age congregation. And now that I’m on the other side of the pulpit, as a parent in the congregation, I have a new appreciation of this kind of church life.

I want my own children to be welcome wherever we connect with God and other people following Jesus, and I want that welcome to be obvious to all of us on Sunday. I don’t want to feel like I have to take someone out if she’s being a normal baby, and I don’t want to have to leave myself! I want my kids to grow up knowing that they’re part of a broad, deep, intergenerational community of people who love them and want them to know Jesus.

*After all, we are only older versions of the children we see. We cry. Why shouldn’t they?They play. Shouldn’t we as well? Those children will, one day, please God, take our places as leaders of faith communities. That is, they will be the next generation of faith leaders unless we inform them that their whole selves aren’t welcome in our sacred spaces.*

*Jewish tradition teaches us that the Gates of Heaven are only open because of the cries of children. How can our prayers be acceptable if we exclude our most pure sound?*

*And so, I close with the simplest way I can state this, and invite you to remind each other if the need arises: A sanctuary is not a sanctuary from children. It is a sanctuary we’ve built for our children, and their children after them.*

*[*[*Read more at The Huffington Post*](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-menachem-creditor/children-in-the-sanctuary_b_5283826.html)*.]*

Now, of course I know that there are lots of great ways of nurturing everyone in churches, and we don’t all have to do it the same way.  You might be part of a fabulous kids’ programme – great!  What do you think would be different if you were all in together?

**What are your experiences of kids-and-church? What do you appreciate most about the approaches you’ve seen in action? What do you want most for your kids?**

**And if anyone wants further info on how all-age church runs at West, feel free to leave a message below.**

***As always, you can connect with Sacraparental conversation in other places too. You can follow***[***the Facebook page***](https://www.facebook.com/sacraparental/)***, see what I’m squirrelling away on***[***Pinterest***](https://www.pinterest.com/sacraparental)***(mostly***[***raw cookie recipes***](https://www.pinterest.com/sacraparental/allergy-queen/)***right now), and exchange nerdy links and political rants on***[***Twitter***](https://twitter.com/sacraparental)***. Please say hi***