

City Church Family Ministry Strategy Children in the service

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, children are present when God is worshipped and His Word is read. There is also present in church history for Bible teaching in age-appropriate groups. Guided by these two principles, the elders have decided the following for our context:

- Sunday morning services begin and end with everyone together: that is the nature of corporate worship. Children are intentionally present to hear the call to worship and benediction, read God's Word, sing, pray, and say creeds & confessions together.
- During the sermon only, younger children are taught the Bible in the children's Bible sessions.
- Older children, teenagers, and adults are taught the Bible in the sermon.

We wish to affirm parents' care and concern for their children's growth in grace. We praise God that the parents of City Church long for their children to persevere in knowing, loving and living for Christ throughout childhood and adulthood. We also appreciate parents' desire for their children to be surrounded by godly Christian friends, and we too grieve the lack of Christian influence across Ireland generally, particularly in children's schools and clubs.

At the same time, we hope to alleviate parents' fears by responding to a particularly modern, individualistic approach to Christian discipleship, which expects children to be solely and consistently disciplined in their peer groups throughout childhood and adolescence. Rather, Scripture, church history, and today's research would show that children are best disciplined in the context of the home and whole church, while age-appropriate groups (kid's clubs, youth groups, camps) only serve to complement family and corporate worship: this is God's good design for spiritual development.

I. Rationale for having all children in the service and older children in the sermon

1. Children's participation is Biblically-mandated

God in His Word expects children to be included when His people are gathered. In the Old Testament, when God's people assembled to remember His works and hear His Word, children were present (Exodus 12:24-27, Deut 31:9-13, Joshua 8:30-35, 2 Chron 20:13-18, Ezra 10:1, Psalm 78:1-8, Joel 2:12-16). Likewise, Jesus welcomed children and taught them (Mark 10:14, Matt 15:32-38). Paul assumes that children are present when the churches gathered to read his letters, addressing the children directly (Eph 6:1-2, Col 3:20).

2. Children's participation expresses a healthy ecclesiology ('doctrine of Church')

By his work Jesus reconciles people of all ethnicities, backgrounds, and ages to God and to each other in one family. Local churches are to be expressions of Christ's global, generation-spanning Church. We can express the unity Christ wrought by meeting together formally and informally. Since children can have faith and be part of God's redeemed people, they should be treated as such, rather than as unwelcome, less significant, or future parts of the body. Including children in the service and sermon is one of the ways we communicate that children belong in our church family. We also encourage parents to include children in our life as a church and surround them with older believers who care for them. This looks like attending whole-church gatherings (Christmas, Easter) and church weekends away, involving brothers and sisters in your home life and eating meals together, having your children witness (and later join) your Bible study/prayer groups. For older, more mature children, this might also look like attending community groups, prayer meetings, and praise nights with their parents.

3. Children's participation expresses our doctrine of Scripture

We believe the Bible is God's true Word about Himself and His salvation; it is perfect, authoritative, and understandable. Scripture alone is necessary and sufficient for knowing God's salvation and growing in Christlikeness. Therefore, we aim to minister to parents, young people, and children with God's Word. Of course, the Bible is taught in our children's sessions just as it is in the sermon, but there is particular value in having the entire church family sit under God's Word together - this is why all children are included for the majority of the service. Similarly, our high view of Scripture leads us to teach older children in the sermon. Quite simply, there is no reason why not. We believe it is the best place for them to be taught and trained by God's Word, under the ministry of the elders.

4. Children's participation helps them to grow in knowledge, trust, and awe

Not everything needs to be wholly comprehensible to benefit a child; we all grow into what we are taught. Indeed, we grow in our knowledge of God by being called to know more, just as muscles are strengthened by lifting heavier weights. Children learn algebra, chemical reactions, and foreign languages in school, so we have a high bar for what they can learn in church. It is good for both children and adults to be stretched and challenged under God's Word. This is not only to increase their 'head' knowledge of God and His Word, but their love for, trust in and awe at God, leading to humility. No one will ever 'arrive' at complete knowledge of our infinite God, so there is always more to learn!

5. Children's participation aims at holistic discipleship

What children primarily need is not simply moral training or entertaining programmes, but to know God increasingly in His Word, by His Spirit, which in turn changes their identity and whole lives. Likewise, what children need more than Christian peers (while an important blessing) is deep, intergenerational relationships within their church family, being encouraged towards Christ by older brothers and sisters. Including children in the service and sermon aims to see children increasingly formed by the gospel - with changed hearts, captive thoughts, and transformed actions- as Scripture is taught and applied, and as older believers model what it is to follow Christ. Including children in church services and church life more generally helps to shape their identity as part of a people belonging to God, as opposed to conceiving of themselves as consumers and the church as a service provider.¹ Knowing they belong to God and one another fuels Christian perseverance in a hostile world, far more than viewing themselves as self-owned and self-serving individuals.

6. Children's participation prepares them to persevere in church

Part of parenting is preparing a child to leave home. When a young adult moves out, they are more likely to faithfully gather with another church when services and sermons have become a familiar and cherished means of grace. Separating children from the church gathering into various programmes from 0-18 years communicates that children are unwelcome; by the time a young person graduates into the 'adult' service, they will be convinced it's not for them, or find it very difficult to engage.

7. Children's participation enables and equips parents for family discipleship

Since fathers and mothers are the most influential figures in a child's life, the impact of a family worshipping together cannot be underestimated. Having children in the service gives parents the opportunity to model to their children their love for and dependence on God and His Word. Piper argues: "You cannot calculate the cumulative effect of 650 worship services spent with Mom and Dad... We aim for children to catch the passion for worshipping God by watching Mom and Dad enjoy God week after

¹ Sharon Galgay Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church*, 2018.

week. If the children saw Dad praying, face in hands, before worship week after week for twelve years, how would it impact them? If they saw Mom and Dad beaming with joy as they sang God's praises, how would it impact them?"²

Having children hear the sermon also provides opportunities for discipleship at home and equips parents in these conversations; parents can talk to their children about what they've all learned together, explain difficult concepts, reinforce key truths, and help apply it to their children's hearts, minds and actions.

8. Children's participation is a tried and tested church practise

Children's participation in services and sermons is far from a novel experiment. Much of parenting is scary and unknown, and we recognise that in our context it might feel particularly difficult and lonely for children to sit in the sermon, when there aren't older families a few steps ahead in the journey. However, including children in services and sermons has been done before throughout church history, and it's still happening today across the world and Dublin. Our prayer is that as more children become teenagers at City, we'll see how everyone flourishes: it is good for young people to be in the sermon, and it is good for the whole church to have young people there.

9. Children's participation is supported by research

Alarmed that many high school graduates in the US fail to stick with their faith in college, the Fuller Youth Institute carried out a number of research projects to discover what helps students develop "sticky faith" that lasts into adulthood. Dr Powell and Dr Clark concluded:

- Parents are the most influential figures in their teenagers' lives. How parents share and live out their faith has a greater impact on their teenager's faith than anything else.
- Parents help build "sticky faith" by having meaningful conversations, talking about their own faith, welcoming doubts and questions, and not avoiding tricky topics with their children.
- Young people are more likely to have "sticky faith" if they were involved in all-church worship services and had significant, supportive relationships with adult believers.
- More than any program or event, adults showing an interest in teenagers was the number one way they felt welcomed and valued in the church.³

Further reading:

- <https://rootedministry.com/the-beauty-of-the-church-intergenerational-relationships-in-our-childrens-lives/>
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-are-your-kids-likely-to-lose-their-faith/>

² John Piper, 'Should children sit through big church?', 2016. <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/should-children-sit-through-big-church>

³ Dr Kara E Powell and Dr Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 2011

II. Helping children engage in the service and sermon

A. *Before the service*

- Read the passage together as a family before the service (e.g., on Saturday night / Sunday morning). The familiarity of it will help your child to engage and understand the sermon.
- Regularly express the necessity and goodness of gathering with our church family to worship God.
- Regularly explain each part of the service (call to worship, singing, reading, prayer, creed/confession, sermon, communion, benediction).
- Make clear that the service is equally for children and encourage them to participate in each aspect, i.e., to stand, sit, pray, sing, listen along with the congregation.
- Explain to your children what the sermon is- teaching from God's Word- and encourage them to listen. Tell them that it's okay if they don't understand everything- that's part of learning! Let your children know that they can quietly ask you questions, and that you can also talk about it afterwards.
- Arrive at church early enough for you and your children to say hello to people, helping them to feel part of things.

B. *During the service*

- Consider seating: sit near the front so that your child can see what's going on, instead of the backs of heads. Have your child sit beside you, rather than at the end of the row. Be close and warm towards your child.
- Help your children experience the drama of the entire service; it's harder for them to engage if their participation is interrupted by leaving the room or by distractions in the room (e.g., phone use, toilet break)
- Ensure that you and your child have Bibles. Help them to find the relevant passage, and to keep it open and look at it during the sermon.
- Bring a notebook and pen for your child to jot things down or use the sermon worksheets we provide.
- Model what it is to listen to and respond to God. Children's attitude to the Lord and His church is not only taught, but "caught".

C. *After the service*

- After the service, praise your child for how they engaged, and talk briefly about what was said.
- Later on Sunday, take time to share what you learned, what you were challenged by, where you were amazed by God. Ask them the same.
- Provide opportunities for your children to know their church family better: welcome them into your conversations, encourage them to talk to others, invite people over for lunch.