

About.com Children With Special Needs

Worshipping With a Child With Special Needs

Surviving a service takes planning

By Terri Mauro

Making it through a worship service with a child with special needs can be a true test of faith. Between keeping your child under control and warding off the evil eye of fellow pew-sitters, you may feel that no one in your family is getting anything out of the service. If you have your heart set on some kind of Ideal Worship Experience, wherein your neatly dressed children sit quietly for every minute of the service, you're probably out of luck. But that doesn't mean your family should give up and stay home. Try these tips for getting more than a headache out of worship time.



Photo by Terri Mauro

It's not all or nothing.

You don't have to make it all the way through a service for it to be a positive experience. Sometimes planning for success involves knowing when to leave. If you have noticed your child can be good for the first 15 minutes and then loses it, leave after 15 minutes and make a big deal about how great that was; set 20 minutes as the next goal, not 60.

Give short-term rewards.

Big rewards with long time frames often backfire; if your child feels unable to comply after a short while, he or she may decide the reward is unattainable, and then have no incentive to behave at all. Offer your child very small reinforcements after very short intervals of successful behavior control -- maybe a sticker or a cracker or a chance to play with your keys every five minutes, perhaps a short walk every 15.

Don't offer incentives to be bad.

Be careful that what you're offering as an incentive actually encourages good behavior. For example, threatening to leave if behavior does not improve may backfire if leaving that house of worship is exactly what the child wants to do. Make sure the alternative to sitting through the service is even less pleasing -- sitting in the car saying prayers, not playing, until other family members are done worshipping may be one unattractive alternative, and has the added benefit of providing a spiritual experience either way.

Bring reinforcements.

If drawing or writing or crackers or small playthings or fidget toys or a stuffed animal or a chewy tube or a weighted vest or anything else helps your child control impulses and stay calm in other settings, bring it along to your worship service. You may see a few raised eyebrows, but not so many as you will if your child loses his or her cool during worship.

Keep your expectations realistic.

If your child is unable to sit still and be quiet and behave appropriately in any other place, don't expect a place of worship to have some sort of magical transforming effect on him or her. Prayer can work miracles, but probably not in the short term of turning your jumpy, twitchy, noisy, impulsive, compulsive, uninhibited little devil into a perfect angel for an hour a week. Don't set your child up for failure by setting goals he or she is unable to achieve.

Pray.

Praying for your child to be quiet *right now* may be ineffective, but praying for your own spiritual peace with your child's special needs, and for guidance in finding a way to help him or her find faith and comfort in God's house, is always worthwhile. Don't neglect your own needs in the rush of keeping your child quiet and contained. Put less emphasis on having the Ideal Worship Experience, and more on experiencing worship.

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