Best Practices for Creating Welcoming Children's Worship Spaces

"I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other." – John 13:34 CEB

Praygrounds, Pray & Play Spaces, Grace Spaces and Activity Centers

These designated worship-area activity spaces are intended to provide a welcoming environment for the children and their caregivers who join us for worship. The purpose is to engage and include children in worship, not to provide activities to keep them busy while the adults worship. The need to create these spaces goes beyond merely wanting to "attract" families to church. Not everyone can comfortably sit in pews for a whole host of reasons; providing a way to participate that also meets a member's needs creates greater belonging, affirming that everyone belongs in the Body of Christ. **Taking children out of the service to a separate space and out of sight is no longer considered best practice in terms of faith formation or safety, particularly if a family is new or visiting.**

These spaces speak to the radical hospitality we are called to when following Jesus, and also create opportunities for faith formation during an activity (worship) which many see as being "for the adults." Children are full members of our worshipping community, and they learn by observing and imitating. By creating comfortable, inclusive spaces beyond the traditional "pew" we are offering more members of the Body a rich formative experience.

Best Practices

♥ Visible - placed ideally at the front of the sanctuary, or in another location with clear sight lines to what is taking place during worship. The location immediately informs children and their caregivers about whether they are included and a part of worship or not. It also signals to anyone who enters the space "children are important and welcome here."

♥ Intentional - provide one or more tables, seating and activity options designed for those you hope will use the space (child-height tables for colouring, a padded mat for babies, a rocking chair for caregivers...). Choose quiet toys and use a rug or mat to dampen sounds.

♥ Flexible - create a space where those who use it can make their own according to their needs. Be receptive to feedback and ideas from users and adapt as needed.

♥ Intergenerational - cultivate connection by encouraging members of all ages to come to the space together. Young and old can read, colour or create together, fostering belonging by building relationships across generations. Consider having an adult "host" the space each week.

♥ Inclusive - expand your hospitality beyond children by learning about the diverse needs of your community and the ways you can design a comfortable and accessible space. Be flexible and welcoming when families arrive after the scheduled start time, recognizing that schedules can be complex.

♥ Communicate clearly - normalize both the use of the space and the gifts children bring (noise, emotions, creativity, play). Use visuals such as posters or art that affirm these gifts. Have a grand opening and a blessing as part of the service when you unveil the space. Address concerns with openness, reiterating the purpose of the space and how it connects to your community values.

Ideas to Inspire You

Choose engaging activities that complement what is happening in worship. Ever-green examples include: colouring, books, shakers or rhythm instruments, games, Lego, play-doh, origami, fidgets, crafts, puzzles, puppets. Other activities could follow the lectionary or liturgical seasons, such as a nativity set, wooden Advent candles, sandbox or felt board with biblical figures, pretend Communion cup and bread/plate, Easter/Pentecost streamers, Creation Time sensory bins... let your imagination (or your Pinterest board) go wild! Remember that less is more - too many choices can feel overwhelming, and keeping some ideas for later gives you options to rotate in throughout the year.

Have an activity bulletin to follow along with, sometimes called colouring or children's bulletins. These help early and pre-readers engage with the service. Lectionary-based bulletins are available to order from groups like Illustrated Ministry. Consider posting a visual order of service (the "social story of church") on a poster with symbols for each part of the service if it follows a similar pattern each week.

Choose comfortable seating: recliners, bean bags, cushions, stools, benches.

Keep the space clutter-free and spacious. This will help with accessibility for kids who crawl as well as those who use wheelchairs, walkers, strollers, canes, and crutches.

Learn about neurodiversity and cognitive disabilities and explore ways you can support the needs of your community. This could include quiet fidgets for busy minds and bodies, soft blankets for those needing a warm hug, or headphones for those who find the sound too loud.

Decorate with visuals that reflect your community's identity and cultures. Find or create images or artwork to animate the stories you tell in worship that reflect the diverse experiences of members and the world we live in. If you have children or youth attending midweek groups, consider including their art or photos in the main worship centre so that they are visually included as part of the church family.

Share other opportunities for families to connect with you. Post information about events, programs, and key church contacts in the space. You could include take-home flyers or postcards with links to resources for families (like BibleWoolies.ca), United Church summer camps in your region, and events at neighbouring communities of faith.

Important Considerations

Consider the safety of curious children by removing or securing cords, using electrical plug covers, and anchoring shelving or furniture that could tip. Store cleaning supplies out of toddler reach. Do a safety check regularly and ensure that there are no broken pieces, small things that could be swallowed, or anything that could cause harm.

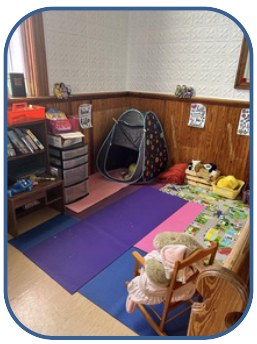
Don't forget about the mess! Kids are messy, and that is okay. Keep cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer stored safely nearby for easy use. This tells caregivers and children you anticipate that messes will happen and they are no big deal. Make sure the space is regularly cleaned and cared for as part of your hospitality to families.

Elsewhere in the church building consider additional ways to extend hospitality to children and their families. Make sure bathrooms are clearly marked. Place a change table in a gender-neutral bathroom or the nursery and include a stash of diapers and wipes for emergencies. Place a stool by the sink and a potty seat in the bathrooms. Keep a highchair or booster seat in the area where congregational meals are hosted. Keep cleaning products, chemicals and tools locked away safely.

Next Steps

Thank you for taking this time to prayerfully consider how your Community of Faith might make your space welcoming and safe for young people. For more support in beginning, strengthening, or growing your ministry with children, youth and young adults, please reach out to your regional staff responsible for Faith Formation, Youth and Young Adult Ministries, or First Third Ministry.

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many.
- 1 Corinthians 12:12 CEB

Helpful Links

Praygrounds: Best Practices and a Report by Traci Smith
Jesus, Glue & Glitter
Flame: Creative Children's Ministry
Illustrated Ministry