

# Let the Little Children Come to ‘Big Church’



At-home worship during the pandemic showed us the significance of having families attend together.

Since last year, COVID-19 has asked all of us to adapt in myriad ways. As we begin to emerge from pandemic precautions, the pull to return to normalcy will be strong. Simultaneously, we will assess what we have learned: What practices do we want to maintain? For young Christian families, one pandemic practice in particular promises a huge discipleship yield.

Like other families, the Wilkins turned to jigsaw puzzles to fill our unexpected hours of togetherness. In March 2020, it wasn't just toilet paper that ran scarce. There was also a shortage of—of all things—1,000-piece puzzles. With puzzle-hoarding running rampant on Amazon, I finally committed to ordering one from a print-on-demand website. When it arrived, it was indeed a 1,000-piece puzzle... but each piece was about the size of a dime. You know what you need in lockdown? More ways to be short-tempered and frustrated.

That being said, one habit I hope our family will preserve post-pandemic is working on (normal-sized) puzzles together. With regard to the continuous puzzle that is discipling our children, COVID-19 delivered a full-sized, clear picture of a key way to do so, through the unexpected means of Sunday services streamed into our living rooms.

For many young families, the coronavirus lockdown was their first time to worship together consistently through all elements of “big church,” rather than follow a common pattern of kids attending children’s programming while adults attend the weekly gathering.

At my own church, as soon as we began streaming services, kids began

asking about baptism and the Lord’s Supper at unprecedented rates. Many had never seen them. In living rooms everywhere, children prayed communal prayers, listened to the Word proclaimed, heard testimonies, and joined their voices in song—with *their parents*.

Like my tiny jigsaw puzzle, these family worship gatherings were not without frustration. Children may have squirmed, consumed copious snacks, or run circles around the living room, but something priceless was happening: Families were living out the words of Psalm 34:3: “Glorify the Lord *with me*; let us exalt his name *together*.”

Observant parents who might have assumed “My child won’t really get anything out of the service” learned this was, in fact, profoundly not true. Because there is no replacement for children watching their parents model worship. Because children have a right to witness and learn from the ordinances of the church. Because children are not the church of tomorrow; they are the church of today.

I’m a big fan of children’s ministry. I think it’s invaluable. I’m paid by my church to think about it in good ways. But let me be clear: While children’s

church is a wonderful supplement to big church, it is a terrible substitute.

A child old enough for kindergarten can be welcomed into big church with a little loving guidance from a parent determined to disciple. If it is true that “more is caught than taught,” parents should value modeling worship for their children more than any lesson taught by a children’s church leader.

In one sense, COVID-19 invited the smaller members of the church of today to worship exactly where they belong: with the rest of the church. I seem to recall someone else doing a similar thing, to the confusion of his disciples.

On the other side of the pandemic, I hope never again to find the shelves bare of toilet paper. Or puzzles. Or Extra Toasty Cheez-Its, as long as we’re making a list. But I hope the puzzle pieces that fell into place around shared family worship will be saved and deepened. In returning to normal, I hope we won’t preserve a pre-COVID practice that perhaps wasn’t as great as it seemed.

I hope more families will bring school-aged kids to the gathering that is big church, in addition to sending them to the blessing that is children’s church. For families, the “with me” of worship matters. Let the little children come—even if they wiggle and whisper. They are the missing pieces that complete the picture of the church as God’s family. Let them be formed in the house of the Lord.

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TERRIBLE SUBSTITUTE.

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