

# Squirming and Noisy Children of the Promise

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One of the things you've probably noticed about worship at the Oceanside United Reformed Church is the presence of children - lots and lots of children. Little children. Squirming children. Children who make noises.

You may have sat next to, in front of, or behind a wiggly little body intermittently struggling to keep awake or quiet, a body simultaneously plagued by a tiny bladder and an appetite big enough to consume a whole package of crackers before the sermon starts. You have seen parents labor to keep their little ones from disrupting your worship, and feeling far more embarrassed by such small infractions than they should. At times these sounds annoy you. Occasionally you find them cute.

Welcome to life in a Reformed church! Theology, not convenience, informs our worship. One of the central tenets of our theology is the covenant of grace. If you have witnessed a baptism here, you have seen the parents and congregation ratify God's oath to be God to his people. Through the sign and seal of baptism, he assures us that we are his.

God makes his covenant not only with those adults who can make a credible profession of faith in Jesus as their only comfort in life and in death, but also with the

children of believers, who cannot yet make such a profession. This simply means that baptized children are members of this church and are, therefore, entitled to all the blessings of the covenant, every bit as much as their parents are.

The issue, then, isn't whether or not children should be in the worship service. The issue is the physical ability of children to remain in a service that runs longer than they are able to handle. But rather than encouraging parents to train their children to sit through worship - because even though it's hard, it's the right thing to do theologically - too many churches exclude children from the service altogether.

You've probably noticed that in many churches, particularly seeker-oriented ones, children are viewed as a hindrance to the mood of worship - especially if it's entertainment based. Young ones are warehoused in the nursery, then children's church, then youth services, until they're mature enough to appreciate the morning performance or catch the jokes in the sermon. The message coming through is, "Not only will we entertain you, we'll entertain your kids as well!"

Sure, there are times when sitting next to a noisy crumb-cruncher makes you want to send them and their parents to a sound-proof warehouse stuffed with the latest playground equipment and videos. But a covenant church cannot see children as a hindrance to our worship - even if they do make it tough to concentrate sometimes. The question isn't whether our children should join us in worship but how can we prepare them to join us? And it's up to the parents to prepare them.

As members of the covenant, children belong in our worship services, just as soon as they are physically able to make it through the morning. Children's church and other forms of diversion and entertainment are not options for us. The children belong in the

sanctuary, joining their tiny hearts and voices to those of their parents. The glorious covenantal promises which God makes to us, he makes to them as well.

A nursery exists only because not all infants and toddlers are ready to sit quietly through a service. It also exists because people who are new to the Reformed faith need some time and space to adjust to the Reformed way of doing things. A cry room exists for those times when feeding, disciplinary matters, and “ants in the pants” need to be addressed. Sure, we may need to remove our children from the service for a time, rather than allow them to disrupt the worship of others. But only for a time, and always with the goal of helping them become worshipers of the living God.

In a covenant community, the nursery and cry room are not ends in themselves - places where we dump our kids so we can get away from them for a few hours each week. These are places where our little ones go until they are ready to sit with us. But the noises they make, the squirming they do - these are covenant sights and sounds. Annoying? Sometimes. But at the same time, they remind us of God’s promise to be God to us for generations to come.

Baptism, we are told, distinguishes our children from the children of non-Christians. Baptism includes our children in the covenant, the visible expression of which is our worship. Our children need to be in worship to learn how to worship! They should never know a moment in their lives when they were not made to feel that church and the promises of Christ belong to them as much as to their parents. From the creed to the Lord’s prayer...to the confession of sin and the declaration of pardon...to the hymns and the readings - our children learn by hearing, seeing and doing. We catechize them and we teach them to worship. This is our duty as parents. This is our responsibility as a church.

Children may squirm and make noise. But they are children of the covenant. And all of God's promises apply to them, every bit as much as they do to us. Our children belong in worship...with us.