

Children in Worship

Children bring a special energy to worship; and in meeting for worship they can learn how to be still and to recognize the presence of God in their hearts. They can; but not unless the adults, beginning with their parent(s), want them to be there and are willing to teach them, to raise them up as children of the meeting.

Most small children are not immediately comfortable in unprogrammed worship, and most parents do not look forward to bringing them. Asking active children to sit still for an extended period of time feels like torture to both the child and the primary parent (one parent in our meeting walked around the block with their preschooler before going in to meeting for worship) but children learn. And how are they going to learn if parents don't bring them and meetings don't take their needs and perspectives into consideration?

Preparation for worship is important for adults; it is even more important for children. When families take time for quiet reflection during the week—at mealtimes and when children are going to bed—children are prepared for the stillness of open worship. Talking about it on the way to and from meeting is also important in helping children learn how to use open worship. Meetings with some form of programming can include the concerns and perspectives of the children in the corporate preparation for silent worship. Meetings with separate First Day school programs for children can provide opportunities for children to talk about how they experience worship and to ask adults about their experiences. Meetings without programming for children can provide a space that is theirs, where they can move about quietly or cuddle with a caring adult.

The 6th Query begins, “Do our children receive the loving care of the meeting?” Well, do they? Are parents encouraged to bring their children to worship and reassured about what is acceptable behavior? Are there stuffed animals to hold? Stools to sit on when we are small and rest our feet upon when we are bigger? If there are benches, are children allowed to put their feet on cushions as they cuddle with a parent? Do they know that?

There are many ways meetings can say “Children are welcome”—even a rug with soft pillows, stuffed toys, and picture books (plus an adult willing to share the space) in the back corner of a small meetinghouse can be a special quiet place for children not ready to spend an hour sitting with adults.

Are children listened to? Do we ask them about what they experience in worship and advise them (if need be) on how to use the Stillness? Is “boredom” respected as something adults (including the speaker) experience, and reframed as part of a living faith in a Creator who is greater than we are and beyond our control? Are children reassured that this time of emptiness will not last forever and that the sweet presence will be felt?

Is First Day school the province of parents who “take their turn” or does the meeting make every effort to allow parents to stay in meeting for worship and for other adults to get to know the children? Are there provisions for infants and small children—and their parents—that those parents can appreciate and take comfort from?

When children are trying to be quiet, a certain amount of fidgeting and whispered questions to parents should be accepted. However, when their behavior makes it impossible for others to settle, the children need to be taken out of meeting for worship (hopefully somewhere else in the meetinghouse rather than going back home). When this happens both parent and child need to be reassured that they are welcome to return and try again. They also need to hear that this has happened to others—including eminent members of the meeting. Parents who are new to Quakerism need particular care and support as they struggle with their own doubts, questions, and uncertainty as well as those of their children.

It must also be acknowledged that not every meeting is a place for children. If you don't have the space or members who are committed to ministry with children then be truthful with yourselves and visitors. Pray (if led) that way will open and the day come when children can be a part of your meeting – if that is not the case now – and be faithful in the ministry you do have.

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