

Building Faith

A Ministry of Virginia Theological Seminary

buildfaith.org Printed on October 20, 2020

More than Just a Busy Bag: Helping Toddlers & Preschoolers Worship

October 12, 2020

Categories: Baptism & Eucharist, Children & Family, Worship & Liturgy

Tags: bulletin stickers, busy bag, engagement, preschoolers, toddlers, worship, worship bag



Participation in worship is a key marker for lifelong faith development, so how do we do this well for our littlest ones?

There are countless ways to nurture the faith of our youngest disciples and their families in worship:

- by creating hospitable physical space,
- by forming liturgy that includes all ages,
- and by instilling a culture that recognizes without children present, we cannot fully be the body of Christ.

One simple way to foster worship participation is to reshape or enhance the “worship bag” that many congregations offer for children.

Busy Bag vs. Worship Bag

Sometimes worship bags are utilized as busy bags – something to keep children occupied so that their parents can worship more fully. Other times they are viewed as a mini Sunday School packet to educate children on the tenets of faith. While these are fair and laudable goals, perhaps the most useful approach is to consider how these bags can do the very thing their name suggests – **help children worship.**

Can 0-4 year olds really participate in worship?

Yes! We know that the first three years of life are often heralded as among the most crucial periods of development in our entire lives. In fact, [research shows](#) that a child’s vocabulary at age 3 is based upon the quality and quantity of words spoken to them over the first three years of life. Young children learn so much from their surrounding environments and often pick up on far more than we’ll ever know.

I’ll never forget the moment my 14 month old LOUDLY said “Amen” with the congregation at the end of the Lord’s Prayer in worship. Most of the congregation chuckled at her response, many probably thinking that she didn’t fully understand what she was saying or doing. Yet my Christian Educator’s and Mama’s heart knew – she was being deeply shaped by our worship to the point of being able to respond.

Young children are capable of learning the rhythms of worship, of becoming familiar with the language of liturgy, and even more, of experiencing the presence of God through worship. These are all great gifts! But as many Christian Educators and parents know firsthand, this doesn’t always happen magically or automatically.

We have wiggles and attention spans and developmental needs to consider in order to create space for beautiful things to happen. And so, with intentionality, worship bags can become a tool in a family’s faith formation toolbox – just one small way to further facilitate worship participation.

Before You Select Items, Questions to Consider

- Does this item point to God or deepen understanding about the Christian faith?
- Does it allow children to “overhear” the Gospel as they utilize it? (i.e. requires a concentration level that enhances listening rather than blocking out what is happening around them)
- Is it age-appropriate so that children can work (mostly) independently with minimal prompts from adults?
- Is it cost-effective?
- Could it enhance faith development at home?
- Could it be disinfected and reused effectively?

Moving Beyond Coloring Sheets, Crayons, & Pipe Cleaners

There are so many possibilities for items that might foster meaningful worship! Consider what might work best for your context and community.

Paper copy of worship bulletin WITH corresponding image stickers

Ideas: Using printable labels, create stickers using clipart of music notes, people singing, prayer hands, an offering plate, a lectern, or Bible. Children may place the matching sticker on the bulletin as the component happens in the worship service. Download an editable template [here](#).

Tip: Even if the congregation does not utilize paper bulletins, you can easily create a simplified bulletin to include in the bags.

Small printed Bible story books

Ideas: Individual pages of reproducible Bible coloring books can often be combined into small booklets or look online for pre-made printable booklets. [Illustrated Ministry](#) curriculum can also be an excellent starting point for this.

Tip: There is power to seeing the broader story over just a single image that captures part of the story. Be especially mindful of the images/retellings you choose – implicit theological learning matters (e.g. consider how gender, race, etc. are portrayed).

Religious-oriented laminated play dough mats and small containers of play dough

Ideas: Free printable options can be found at [Flame Creative Children's Ministry](#).

Tip: This works best for outdoor or informal environments.

Felt or laminated figures/props for retelling Bible stories

Ideas: [Young Children and Worship](#) by Sonja Stewart & Jerome Berryman is a great resource for printing Bible story figures/props on cardstock or to be laminated. Felt style with a simple flannel board can work well. Wooden peg people painted simply such as [this](#) or wooden Godly Play style figures are also great options.

Tip: Utilize the talents of your congregation members in creating the figures/props. If possible, connect the materials you choose with the scripture reading from the worship service.

Picture or board books

Ideas: Some of my favorites include [God's Dream](#) by Desmond Tutu (boardbook version is great for little hands!), [At Your Baptism](#) by Carrie Steenwyk, and [Psalms for Young Children](#) by Marie-Helene Delval. While books can be an expensive item, they can have a far and lasting impact.

Tip: Some publishers will discount when buying in bulk or consider buying used. If disinfecting/reusing regularly, board books may be the best choice.

Wikki sticks or pipe cleaners paired WITH religious symbols/words to outline or recreate

Ideas: Symbols might include a cross, manger, dove, flame, palm branch, heart, bread, chalice, etc. Words might be simple names or descriptors for God such as Lord, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Love, Holy, Good or simple faith phrases such as "God is love," "God provides," "God loves us," "God is with us."

Tip: Print the symbols/words on cardstock or laminate. Be sure to size so that it works well with the wikki stick or pipe cleaner length.

Simple, religious laminated puzzles or popsicle stick puzzles

Ideas: Free printable Bible story puzzles can be found [here](#) and how to make popsicle stick puzzles can be found [here](#).

Tip: Use images from old Sunday School or Vacation Bible School curriculum to create puzzles. Jumbo popsicle sticks work best for littlest ones' dexterity.

Finger labyrinth

Ideas: These can be made of laminated paper, wood, [fabric](#), or even puff paint.

Tip: Encourage families to utilize these during congregational prayer time.

Blank card to decorate and send

Ideas: Cut white cardstock in half, then fold each piece in half to make a card. Greetings such as “God loves you” or “May God be with you” may be pre-printed on each card.

Tip: During announcements or prayer time, worship leaders may prompt children to create a card for a particular person – someone who is hurting, someone who is a friend, someone who is a helper, someone who is lonely, etc. Alternate option – have a drop-box for completed cards that ministry staff can send to folks in the congregation.

Felt or 3D items for Communion play or Baptism play

Ideas: For Communion, these items might include: pretend bread, plate, chalice, cross, battery-operated tea light, fabric underlay, “What is Communion?” talking points for parents. For Baptism, these items might include: pretend person figure, bowl, cross, battery-operated tea light, blue ribbons or fabric for water, felt underlay (3 circles to symbolize the Trinity), and “What is Baptism?” talking points for parents.

Tip: Be sure that items are child-friendly and resistant to breakage.

Lacing cards

Ideas: Purchase pre-made religious ones or cut shapes (cross, heart, etc.) out of foam sheets and hole punch around the outer edges.

Tip: Stiff string or laces are easier for small hands than yarn.

Support for Parents

Ideas: Talking points which adults can quietly whisper to their child throughout the service to encourage engagement. Carolyn Brown offers excellent starting points [here](#).

Tip: Keep these simple and minimal. List 3-4 talking points on a quarter or half sheet of paper. Words of encouragement can be helpful, too!

Considering Safety Protocols In An Age of COVID

For in-person/outdoor worship

To mitigate risk, it may be best to have single-use bags that can be taken home each week. Although this may be more expensive and not the best stewardship of creation, it may be the most faithful way to offer hospitality during a pandemic. It also is a way to build a family's library of religious play items at home, which is a gift! If this isn't a good fit for your families, choose items that can be easily disinfected or are machine washable each week.

For worshipping communities gathering online

Worship bags can be periodically delivered to families to encourage worship participation, as a simple way to offer pastoral care, and to provide tools to deepen faith development at home.
