

Worship and Sunday School: Which model is best for your congregation?

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There are many ways to combine worship and Christian education for your congregation. Which is best for you? Read the descriptions of the six models, add other advantages and disadvantages, then use the suggested process found at the end of the models.

Model A: All-age worship follows or precedes an age-graded Sunday school

Advantages

- Links can be made between worship and learning
- Children and teachers experience full acts of worship and un-rushed education time
- Teachers and children share in community and sacraments
- Faith sharing is intergenerational
- Encourages adult Christian education

Disadvantages

- Parents may be resistant, expecting that children will not want to attend church and Sunday school over an extended morning
- Need a large facility to accommodate adults and children in age-graded learning
- Parents may "drop off" their children for Sunday school only

Model B: Sunday school and worship meet at the same time; children leave worship after 10 or 15 minutes OR go to their class as worship starts and enter worship during the final 15 minutes

Advantages

- Gives children a "taste" of worship
- The worship, as structured, may not be welcoming of children, so adults may prefer child-oriented worship in a class setting
- The whole family arrives and leaves within a short period (usually an hour); ideal for busy families
- Some parents need peace, quiet and nurture for themselves

Disadvantages

- Children rarely see the full scope of worship and may miss out on basic Christian teaching—creeds, the Lord's Prayer, hymns¹
- Children and teachers are excluded from most worship
- Children see worship and Sunday school as unrelated and separate

Model C: Worship with educational activities available for children in the sanctuary

Advantages

- Unites generations while taking seriously the age-level needs of children
- Allows for creativity and spontaneity
- Teachers/supervisors can help children and still feel part of worship
- Unites worship and learning
- Worship and education can be done in an hour
- Excellent for a small congregation or one with few children

Disadvantages

- In order not to disrupt worshippers, all children's activities would need to be quiet, so children may miss out on activities like drama, liturgical dance, using CDs and cassettes
- It is likely that teachers would provide only two kinds of activities—for readers, and non-readers—so children may miss age-level learning opportunities
- Some adults may find the movement and/or noise of the children distracting
- The space and furnishings may not be suitable

¹ In our congregation, we sing choruses at the beginning of the service and hymns in the middle and end. Because the children leave for Sunday school after 15 minutes of worship, we realized that our children were never singing hymns. We changed that!

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Model D: Intergenerational Sunday school, followed by intergenerational worship

Advantages

- Parents/grandparents who are away from their children a great deal in the week can be together as a family for learning and worship
- Learning and worship can be closely linked; learners can "bring" something to the worship e.g. a prayer, a craft, an idea
- Great for small churches or churches with only a few children and youth
- Encourages positive interaction across ages

Disadvantages

- Because learning and worship must appeal to all, children may find activities too hard, adults may find them too unchallenging
- Most curriculum is not set up for this type of learning so there will need to be lots of adapting
- A longer time is needed—probably two hours

Model E: All ages gather to worship for 20 minutes; for 30 minutes everyone goes to an age-graded educational program with coffee and juice; all-ages gather to worship again for 20 minutes

Advantages

- Encourages adults to continue learning; provides children with lots of worship opportunity
- Allows people to bring learning, ideas, crafts into the second part of worship
- Lends itself well to 3-part Reformed worship pattern: *Gather, Hear the Story* (in this case, "hear" and "explore") and *Response*
- Provides for both all-ages activity and age-graded activity
- Worship is more multi-sensory since learners bring back contributions from learning time

Disadvantages

- Most curriculum is not set up for this type of learning so there will need to be lots of adapting
- This pattern is so unusual for Presbyterians that some may feel threatened

Model F: All-ages worship on Sunday; Christian education is done mid-week for children²

Advantages

- Allows teachers and children to worship on Sunday
- May fit well with other activity that is already happening e.g. children's choir practice

Disadvantages

- May seem like little or no link between education and worship³
- There are few opportunities to share educational experiences with other adults
- May be difficult to recruit leaders who are commuters or busy with work during week

² An example of this model is the LOGOS program which runs mid-week offering fellowship (a meal), education and worship. Most Presbyterian churches that use the LOGOS program also run an additional educational program on Sunday.

³The LOGOS program, however, builds in ways that children and youth can contribute to Sunday worship.

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Suggested Process for Deciding Which Model Works Best in Your Congregation

1. Invite to a meeting all stakeholders—teachers, children, youth, parents, session, education or Christian nurture committee, minister, interested adults.
2. Advertise the meeting as "Exploring Options for Sunday school and Worship," or "A New Look for Sunday morning." Offer food—dessert and coffee, mile-high strawberry pie or incredible edible Bible food. Food is always a drawing card.
3. Present all six models using chart paper or overhead transparencies. In order to make the process "fair," put one in each of 6 coloured file folders. Ask someone to select the model they would like to look at by choosing a colour.
4. When all six models have been described, try to choose three that would work best in your congregation. Write on chart paper, so all can see, why these three would work for your congregation.
5. If possible, by consensus, narrow the choice to two. Post the two choices at either end of the room. Ask people to move close to the one that they are favouring. There may be strong consensus that one model is the favourite. If not, agree to put the decision on the back burner for the time being, or until a mutually agreed upon time.
6. If one model is chosen, select a task group (it may be an existing or new committee) to begin the steps to implement the change: sustain hope, build awareness, weigh the price, do it, evaluate.

Implementing Change

- Sustain hope
- Build awareness
- Weigh the price
- Do it
- Evaluate