

## [Worship Etiquette](#)

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Posted by **Carolyn C. Brown**, Wednesday, August 23, 2013



I am surprised at how many of my posts about all sorts of worship issues lead to spirited conversations in the comments about behavior. What is and is not acceptable behavior for a child in the sanctuary seems to be a never ending “hot button.” So, I thought I’d take a stab at addressing it directly. Since this is a first attempt I look forward to hearing people add to, refute and otherwise weigh in on the following.

*When God’s people gather for worship* we include a wide variety of individuals who share a basic and deep need to be there. We all need to feel loved and wanted and accepted as one of God’s children. We need to hear God’s Word proclaimed and to pray and sing with others. But, we also have some very different needs.

Most children need to be a little noisier and wiggly than most adults.

The deaf 80 year old needs enough quiet to be able to hear at least a little of what is said.

The harried middle adults are seeking peace and calm and quiet.

The teenagers... well, the list goes on....

***The general rule of worship etiquette is that I can do whatever I want during worship until what I do keeps another person from being able to worship.*** Its corollary is that we each must recognize and accept the needs of other worshipers. If we whisper loudly, they can't hear. If we don't stay in our seat, they can't pay attention to the preacher. If we frown at them and their children, they do not feel like God's loved children who are welcome in the sanctuary. Parents can't expect all the adults in the room to give up their need to worship to accommodate a disruptive child. Non-parent adults can't expect children to not be children in the sanctuary. It takes all of us working together to make worship worshipful for all of us.

***Within this general rule, there are specifics*** that will vary from congregation to congregation but include the following (in no particular order).

The ***sound of crayons, markers or pencils on paper*** is acceptable. It does not drown out the voices of the worship leaders.

***The sound of rattling toys***, electronic games, or smart phone activities is not.

Those sharper sounds are harder to hear around or through.



***Quiet whispering*** is needed between parents and children, but not between children and their friends. And all whispering should be about worship.

***Kicking the pew in front of you*** definitely disturbs the worship of the people sitting in that pew. One way to help younger children avoid this is to take their shoes off, especially if those shoes have hard soles. This also makes their movements in the pew quieter for those around them and less bruising for their parents.

Pacing in the back with a child who needs the movement to stay relaxed is often essential. (Some congregations provide rocking chairs and stuffed animals in a children's corner for just this purpose.) Children going on ***frequent unscheduled, unescorted walks*** around the front of the sanctuary is not because it distracts everyone in the room.

***There will be brief child noises of all sorts.*** But brief is the key word. When a child's noise last longer than a minute or two, it is time to leave for the sake of worshipers around you AND to return when the child is ready and able to be quieter again.

***Worship etiquette will vary from congregation to congregation.*** In smaller churches with few children, expectations may be a little looser. In larger congregations with hundreds of worshipers including many children, a little more quiet and less movement is needed. But in all congregations the basic goal is to make worship possible for ALL of us with our many different needs.

***The key to good worship etiquette is not knowing the rules, but paying attention to people around you*** and learning how to participate more and more fully in worship. So, worshipers of all ages can learn to

Smile at their worship neighbors and call them by name when possible

Sign the friendship pad to celebrate the fact that you are here

Pass the peace to neighbors

Pass the offering plates

Know what to do during baptisms and communion

Finally, you know you've got it about right when an eight year old who has been chewing the gum given to her just before the sermon turns to her mother and whispers, "may I blow a bubble?" and her mother whispers

back without rolling her eyes or frowning, “no, not in church, dear.” I smiled when it happened in the pew in front of me this morning and have smiled about it repeatedly all afternoon.