



# Worship in the **Early Years**

Worship can be a powerful and meaningful experience for young children, but it should be tailored to match the children's age and stage. This guide will look at the need of this age group and provide some ideas for organising worship for the early years.



## Developing faith in the early years

### The imaginative world of the 3- to 7-year-old

Have you ever stood with a young child who is fascinated by a spider spinning its web? From the earliest years, children have experiences of awe and wonder. It seems that all children are born with a sense of the incomprehensible, the holy – a sense of God.

Impressions of God are generally positive – a fun, playful God or a God that may take on a magical or superhero quality. Three- to seven-year-old children readily imagine unusual creatures like monsters and dragons, so thinking of God as a superhero is not unusual. Believing in miracles presents no problem to them.

One of the most important spiritual needs of young children is the freedom to create and find spiritual images of God, heaven, and death that express their feelings and understandings. They also need to create and participate in meaningful practices and rituals, like prayerful bedtime conversations and table prayers, that acknowledge that God is active in the ordinary events of life.

Pretend play gives children the chance to try out the roles and behaviours they see around them.

The three-year-old 'mothering' a doll and the five-year-old who sets up a school room and teaches his teddies and dolls are familiar examples. It is crucial that we give our children positive role models to copy.

Young children may have alternating feelings of being powerless and of being able to take on the world. This mirrors how they feel about their personal security and the trustworthiness of those on whom they depend.

Praying with our children and talking about the trustworthy, loving nature of God will help them feel secure.

Children love stories that clearly define good and evil, which is why Bible stories (and fairy tales) are so well loved. These stories help them recognise feelings and behaviours that threaten and bother them and help them to identify with the triumph of good over evil.

Music, art, stories, pretending, eating, wondering, praying – all are important in these early years. They help teach trust – of ourselves, other people, the world, and God.

# Worshipping in the Early Years

We know that in Early Childhood Services, children often do not attend full-time, and not all children will be present at the same times on the same days as each other. This can make scheduling worship challenging. Anyone working with young children appreciates that they often have short attention spans and need simple ideas presented clearly.

- Keep it very simple. It would be wise to make worship an extension of daily devotions, based on the same Bible story. It makes sense at this age and stage to incorporate the content from the Christian Studies Framework into your planning, as there is very limited time with children and it's probably better not to introduce too many new concepts at a time<sup>1</sup>.
- As your students are very young, it would be better to keep worship to 10 – 15 minutes maximum and include lots of interaction. Try to pick a regular day and time when most students are present.
- If you have consistent groups (eg the three-year-olds room), consider exploring the Bible story for the week in a few different ways in devotions/art time/story time/music time, and then having a slightly longer 'worship time' on the last day of the week that the group are present, which brings together the things they've explored that week.
- Consider blending worship and devotions into 'Jesus Time' each day, rather than having a separate worship time.

We have included a couple of simple patterns for you to follow at the end of this guide. You might also like to check out the ideas on the [Devotions in the Early Years](#), and the [Christian Studies Curriculum Framework](#) for your age group.



“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

MATTHEW 19:14



## Sacred spaces

Depending on your site, you may not have access to a dedicated worship space.

If you are not on a campus with a chapel area, you might like to create a sacred space to signal that this time is set apart for something special by setting up a small table with a cross, perhaps a special cloth, a Bible story book and perhaps a couple of battery-operated candles. Involve the children in decorating the space as much as you can.

IDEAS FOR SACRED SPACES



<sup>1</sup> **Worship, Devotions and the Christian Studies Curriculum Framework.** While the content of the CSCF may complement and inform worship and devotions, it is important for the spiritual well-being of staff and students that worship is the primary purpose of devotional time. Worship and devotions are stand-alone activities and should be timetabled separately from Christian Studies.





## Rituals and routine

Children respond well to clear and consistent routines, actions and patterns which signal that it is time to worship, time to pray, time to listen etc.

- You might like to ring a small bell or sound a chime as a sign that it's time to come to worship.
- You could play a familiar, quiet piece of music as children settle.
- Begin the worship by 'lighting' the (battery-operated) candles and then gathering everyone together in God's name (the invocation).
- When it is time to listen to the Bible story, consider having a short phrase or prayer which leads into the reading to signal to children that they are hearing from God. For example,

'Now we will hear from God.  
Let's listen carefully to the Bible story.'

'Let's pray before we hear the Bible story. Dear God,  
open our ears and our hearts to hear you today. Amen.'  
(You could include gestures to match the prayers).

- When it is time to pray, show children how to fold their hands and bow their heads.
- You might like to encourage the children and staff to bless each other at the end of the worship time. Use simple words, and include a simple gesture like making a cross on each other's forehead or arm.

'God bless you today [name]';  
'Jesus loves you, [name]. Have a great day!'

“Worship the  
Lord with joy;  
come before  
him with  
happy songs!”

PSALM 100:2 (GOOD NEWS)



IDEAS FOR RITUALS & ROUTINES



## Involving students in worship

Young children can be very busy and may not be able to sit still for very long. It's good to get them physically involved in worship and use their senses to spark their imaginations and help them stay engaged.

- Ask students to perform the small rituals to start the worship time, like 'lighting' the candle or putting fresh flowers on the altar. It's a good idea to practice this beforehand and have a roster so everyone gets a turn.



- If you have children who are confident in front of the group, you could ask them to give the instructions:

'Now it's time to pray. Please bow your heads and fold your hands.'

- Get them to help tell the story:
  - o Use their artwork to create a step by step illustrated version of the Bible story. It's exciting to see your painting on the big screen!
  - o Video them telling the story and play it during worship.
  - o Have the children dress up and act out the story while you narrate.
  - o Use a big book and ask prompting questions as you read the story together.
- Action songs or songs they can dance to are a great way to get the wiggles out and to help reinforce the message.
- Even young children can contribute to prayers. You can leave space for them to chime in with their own prayers or teach them some memory prayers like the Lord's Prayer or very simple opening or closing prayers.



## Resources for Early Years Worship

PRAYER RESOURCES



MUSIC RESOURCES



BIBLE STORY RESOURCES



EARLY YEARS WORSHIP EXAMPLES



CREATIVE WORSHIP RESOURCES





# Sample Worship Orders (Early Years)

You might like to use one of these orders to help you organise the worship and set up regular patterns for the children to follow.

## ORDER 1

### GATHERING

*As the children sit down, ask some students to come forward to 'light' the battery-operated candle and say:*

**'We light this candle to remind us that Jesus is the light of the world.'**

*Other children place the Bible story book on the altar and say:*

**'We put the Bible on the altar because it is the word of God.'**

Leader (L): Let's begin in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

**Children (C): Amen!**

L: God loves us so much. Let's say thank you to Him by singing [and dancing/doing the actions to] this song:

### SONG

*Choose a praise/thanksgiving song related to the story of the week or one that the children know well. Model the actions.*

### THE WORD

L: Today we are going to hear a story from the Bible. [introduce the story in 1–2 sentences].

*The Bible story could be from a Bible story book, children's Bible, a video clip or a creative retelling of the story.*

*After the story: ask a couple of simple questions to check for understanding. This will give you a chance to reinforce the point if the children have missed it.*

### PRAYER TIME

L: Now it's time to pray. When we pray, we are talking to God! He wants us to pray for each other, for people who need help and for ourselves.

Let's fold our hands and bow our heads.

*Start off the prayer, connecting back to the point of the Bible story if you can. If you have time, ask the children or other staff if there's anything they want to pray for.*

*OR say a simple prayer that the children can learn together such as The Lord's Prayer or:*

**Dear Jesus**

**Please show me how to spend this day  
Sharing your love in every way  
Help me to be kind to everyone  
To play and laugh and have lots of fun  
Shining your light and giving your grace  
Sharing your joy with a smile on my face!  
Amen.**

### SONG

*You could add in another song here if time permits. Choose a song which connects to the theme for today.*

### BLESSING

L: Let's finish our worship by blessing each other. Turn to the person next to you and make a cross on their hand [or head or arm] and say this:

**God bless you (say their name)!**  
**Have a great day.**  
[or another blessing]

## ORDER 2

### GATHERING

L: It's time to worship now! We are going to hear what God has to say, we are going to talk to him and we are going to thank him for all the great things he has done.

**C: We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

### OBJECT TALK

*Show an item to get children thinking or ask a simple question connected to the story for the day.*

*'Who knows what this is?'*

*'What do you do on your birthday?'*

### BIBLE TIME

L: That reminds me of our Bible story this week [name of story]. Let's hear the story again.

### MESSAGE

*Very simple 2–3 sentences explaining how this story shows us who God is/points us to Jesus.*

### SONG

*Action song related to the story or a praise and thanksgiving song.*

### PRAYER TIME

*Share a simple prayer connected to the Bible story or ask children to pray for their families, their friends and whatever is on their minds.*

### BLESSING

*Bless the children or ask them to bless each other.*