

Quaker Toolbox

Thoughts on Children and the New Worship Group

In today's society, many parents are looking for a faith community primarily because they feel that their children should have some sort of religious education. Often these are adults who have drifted away from, or rebelled against, their own childhood church. They are looking for something different. Providing religious education for children may seem like a daunting challenge to the new worship group, but it may be a powerful way of reaching out to the community and drawing new people in.

Friends have always had a refreshingly radical outlook on the role of children in the church. Quakers in the seventeenth century were early opponents of the idea that children are born in sin. They held that children are spiritual beings by virtue of "the Light that enlightens everyone born into the world." • They valued each child's inborn capacity for knowing God, and sought to affirm and nurture that capacity, while not denying the all too human tendency to fall prey to temptation. Although children rarely felt led to speak in Quaker meetings for worship, their spoken ministry was received with respect, as it still is today. There are stories of how children held meeting on their own during the years of persecution in England, when all of their elders were in prison.

The Quaker notion that children should be listened to with respect, and nurtured as spiritual beings in their own right, will appeal to many modern day parents. Here are some ideas to help you think about how your group might minister to children and to families with children.

1. Traditionally, children attended Quaker meeting with their parents. The notion that children need some other activity during silent worship is a relatively recent one. New worship groups might consider simply reviving the old practice. Some children will thrive on being included in the meeting for worship. They will enjoy snuggling with a parent, or simply being free to think their own thoughts.
2. It may be helpful to provide some quiet play space in the meeting room, especially for young children. Some meetings have experimented with laying out a blanket in one corner, with a few books and soft toys for the toddlers. Some provide drawing paper and ask the older children to draw pictures of what they think about or what they hear in worship.
3. Have a supply of special meeting books children can choose to read quietly. One meeting offered old scrapbooks for a toddler to leaf through. Books that are only available at meeting will have more appeal than books brought from home.
4. Sometimes a child will sit more quietly on the lap of an adult who is not a parent, and parents may be very grateful for this kind of help. Not only does it free them to enter more deeply into worship, but also it expresses a community of concern in caring for their children.
5. If a child simply has to get out and move around, an adult other than the parents should step in. Offer a walk or simply a conversation. Suggest that the child find a special nature gift for

someone in the meeting or draw a special picture. Be prepared to listen. Children need adults to talk to who are not their parents, and a worship group is a wonderful place to nurture such friendships.

6. Accept the babbling or murmuring of children as part of the normal atmosphere of meeting for worship. In Quaker worship we are not trying to shut ourselves off in a private quiet place, but to encounter others in “that which is eternal.” • Loving the children, with all their irrepressibility, is only one more way of enriching meeting for worship.
7. Consider preceding worship with twenty minutes of family worship-sharing or sharing circles. Pose simple questions the children can relate to (“What do you think is beautiful?” • “What does it feel like to have a friend?” • “What does the word “peace’ mean to you?” • “Have you ever felt really close to God?” •) These will help both adults and children center down for worship, and get to know each other better.
8. Hold sleepovers for children in the meeting, including food, fun, and sharing circles. Plan hikes, picnics, and outings, allowing time for special outdoor worship and sharing.
9. If you do decide to offer classes for children, you can find wonderful religious education curricula and resources through Friends General Conference. Discern whether anyone in your group has a particular leading to nurture and teach the children.
10. If your group feels a special leading to work with children, consider advertising the availability of Quaker religious education in the community, as a way of drawing in new families. Be prepared to welcome the families that come.

Suggestions for further reading:

- Caldwell, Barbara and Reichardt, Dorothy. *Growing in the Light*. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1998.
- Hadley, Abby. *We’re Going to Meeting for Worship*. Quaker Press of FGC, 1996.
- Snyder, Mary. *Opening Doors to Quaker Religious Education*. Quaker Press of FGC, 1999.

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