

Prayground: A Comprehensive Look and Resources

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Love of Children: Building Faithful Communities for the Future

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Introduction:

Prayground defined: A prayground is a designated area within a worship space where young children can engage in age-appropriate, worship-centered activities during the service. Equipped with materials such as children's Bibles, worship aids, and props for "playing church," a prayground invites children to participate through movement, play and tactile learning while remaining part of the gathered congregation

History: Praygrounds have gained a lot of popularity since the early 2000s, and specifically from 2016 on. It's possible that Andrea Roske-Metcalf coined the term, though the exact origin is unclear.¹

Best Practices for Praygrounds

The Key Question Praygrounds Should Answer: *How does the space encourage all who are present to participate in worship in a meaningful way that honors each person's unique abilities, gifts, and developmental stage?* Any congregation that pursues an honest answer to that key question will be well on its way to creating a holy and grounded space for all.

Additional best practices are as follows:

¹ See: <https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/minnesota-church-incorporates-littlest-visitors-pray-ground/story?id=39253999>

1. **The primary goal of a playground is to help everyone engage more fully in worship:** As some members of the worshipping community are drawn to the materials and worship aids in the playground, they are able to participate in a way that aligns with their developmental stage, sensory needs, and personal preferences. The playground offers a safe and welcoming environment *within* the larger worship space. It is not a space to entertain and separate some while others worship. Instead, it is a space that makes it possible for children and adults to experience the holy together, each in ways that are meaningful to them. In this setting, children are affirmed as full participants of the worshipping community, and they're free to connect with the symbols, rituals, stories, songs, and mysteries of faith.
2. **There is no one-size-fits-all model for playgrounds.** Every congregation has its own traditions, worship style, mix of ages, cultural backgrounds, personality, and abilities. For one church, a playground might be as simple as a rug and a basket of toys for worship, set apart somewhere in the worship space. For another congregation, the playground might be a semi-enclosed space complete with custom furniture design and a variety of different tools and materials. The exact format is not as important as the intention behind it: to create a space where children are welcomed as they are and aren't seen as a distraction to worship but a meaningful and integrated part of the community's life and witness. Congregations would do well to create a playground structure that works for *them* rather than copying someone else's.
3. **Gentle structure and consistent presence help playgrounds thrive.** Gentle structure and consistent presence are essential for helping playgrounds thrive as valued parts of the worship space. Structure refers to a set of simple rules or a covenant that outlines clear expectations for how the space is used. These guidelines lay out when the playground is open, what can be expected there, and how to care for the materials. These rules/covenant might be clearly posted within the playground, bulletin, and website so all are aware of them. The covenant might be co-created by children and adults alike and updated as needed. This gentle and clear structure ensures the space remains welcoming and free while also supporting the flow of worship. Consistent presence, provided by the same caring adults or older youth on a regular basis help model and reinforce expectations for the space. Together, clear expectations and dependable presence communicate that the playground is an intentional, integral part of the congregation's life together in worship.
4. **Playgrounds work best when they reflect the rhythms of worship.** Since the primary goal of the playground is to help all engage more deeply in the worship of the community, materials can be selected and rotated to align with what is happening during the worship service itself. Musical instruments and ribbons can be made available for use during songs and play communion elements for use during communion. Books or toys related to the scripture reading and message can be rotated in when relevant to the day's message or liturgical theme. Wooden advent candles and soft nativity scenes might appear for the season of Advent, for example. During Lent, perhaps the musical instruments and ribbons are removed as a reminder of the more somber nature of the season. By mirroring the flow and focus of the service, the playground is more than a space for quiet play, it's a place where children are actively drawn into the praise, prayer, and learning of the larger community. This integration reinforces the message that all ages belong in worship and have a role in its unfolding.

5. **Inclusive language invites both visitors and regulars to feel at home.** Simple and inclusive language invites both visitors and regulars to feel at home by signaling that the playground space is available to all, regardless of age, background, ability, or familiarity with the congregation. Signage, bulletins and verbal invitations should use warm and non-technical language to explain the purpose of the space without assuming prior knowledge of what it is or who it's for. Language like "all are welcome to use the materials in the playground for interactive worship" or simply, "this space is for worshipful play" communicates both openness and a clear purpose.
6. **Clear expectations offer comfort, welcome, and a sense of routine.** Rather than an "anything goes" model of how to use the space, clear and posted guidelines allow all to feel secure about how the space is used. One expectation might be to return musical instruments and ribbon wavers to the basket after each song. Adults and youth who are guiding the space can gently redirect children who are playing with musical instruments during other parts of the service by helping them to return the instruments to their places when they're not being used. Clear expectations reinforce that the space isn't an afterthought, but an intentional part of worship life.
7. **Intergenerational worship means more than simply sharing space.** True intergenerational worship invites participation from all ages, fostering spiritual growth and connection among all. In this context, a playground is a bridge where children learn and experiment how to "do church" rather than a place to go while others worship. When they function at their best, they're a training ground, not a destination.
8. **Effective playgrounds are curated, simple, and intentional.** A well-functioning playground is thoughtfully equipped with materials that invite meaningful engagement without overwhelming the space. Fewer high-quality items that are chosen for their connection to worship and their ability to foster creativity are far more effective than an abundance of cheap and unrelated toys and fidgets. Curating the space in this way ensures it remains orderly and accessible as well as clearly aligned with the congregation's vision for worship.
9. **Playgrounds offer a meaningful shift from the status quo.** Playgrounds challenge assumptions that children must be still, quiet, or in a separate space in order to participate meaningfully in worship. Their presence is a visible reminder that intention and thought has been put into creating a space where the needs of young minds and hearts are considered and respected. This shift requires an openness to change and "a new way" and buy-in from the whole congregation should be considered when putting a playground space into practice.
10. **Thoughtful use of the playground invites reflection, iteration, and growth.** As the playground is used with the congregation, families, children, leadership, and other congregants will observe what works well and what needs improvement. When feedback and improvements are considered on a regular basis, the playground becomes more and more valuable as a space for growth, learning, and worship. A continual process of evaluation and modification affirms that the playground is a living space where experiments are welcome. If something doesn't go over well, it can be changed or eliminated. The covenant and rules can

change over time. Ultimately a playground may take a sabbath or even be closed when the space isn't serving the needs of the congregation.

Playing Church

Children learn best through play because it allows them to explore ideas, practice skills, and make meaning in ways that are natural, engaging, and developmentally appropriate. In churches, play can be an important form of *spiritual formation*, giving children opportunities to experience and embody the rhythm, symbols, and language of worship in hands-on ways. For this reason, children's playground spaces benefit from toys that invite them to "play church." Examples include: child sized pitchers and chalices and play bread for communion, child-sized stoles for role play, mini pulpits for worship leading and preaching and other worship themed toys. These materials not only spark imagination but also help children internalize the elements of worship, building familiarity and comfort with sacred practices. By offering tools for symbolic and dramatic play, we affirm that children's spiritual lives are shaped, not only by watching and listening, but also by active and joyful participation.

Sample Process for Starting a Playground

For congregations that are looking to start a playground in their context, here's a simple process that might be used. This process should be tailored and adapted to the unique needs and structure of the particular congregation. A five phase process is outlined here and this basic outline should be changed according to the polity and culture of the congregation.

Underlying Values for This Process:

- **Transparency** — The congregation should be well informed throughout and given opportunities to voice honest concerns and questions, in good faith. The process for decision making should be clear and communicated.
- **Respect for Dissent/Discomfort** — Change is hard and can take time, the biggest dissenters can become the strongest supporters sometimes. Listen carefully to their concerns
- **Integration Over Isolation** — Remember that the goal of the playground is not to create something different, but to allow for deeper integration within the worshipping community

Phase 1 : Listening and Discernment

Goal: To understand the congregation's current context, readiness, and needs

Tasks during the listening and discernment phase:

- Form a core team to engage in a significant study of playgrounds and their value. Include a team with a wide variety of perspectives, including a person or who may not be convinced of their value.
- Consider an in-depth study of children's spiritual development or intergenerational worship
- Visit neighboring congregations who have playgrounds to see them in practice.
- Develop a one-page vision for what a playground in your community might look like as well as how a small "test run" might work.

Key questions to discuss with the core team during the listening and discernment phase:

- How are children currently engaged in worship? What is working? Where might children be less engaged than they could be?
- What are our congregations current strengths concerning children in worship?
- How might our worship space lend itself to a playground?
- What budget constraints or opportunities do we have for forming a playground?

Phase 2: Building Support/Refining the Vision

Goal: To move from idea to ownership, even among those who aren't quite ready

Tasks during the building support and refining vision phase:

- Ask open-ended questions and listen carefully to responses
- Cast a positive vision by explaining what you've learned and thought about and *why* you believe a playground is a viable next step for the congregation
- Clarify misunderstandings or assumptions that the playground is a place for childcare or a free for all that will distract from worship
- Offer a one time low commitment pilot of one element that might be incorporated into the playground (such as instruments or soft books) so folks have an example of what it might be

Key questions to discuss with the congregation during the building support and refining vision phase

- What would you like to see addressed as we implement the playground?
- What concerns do you have?
- How might this playground help young people engage in worship more effectively?
- What questions remain about the playground?

Phase 3: Create the Covenant and Guidelines

Goal: Establish expectations that are clear, grace-filled, and accessible, and visible

Tasks during the covenant phase

- To write a covenant for the playground that takes into concern the culture and input of the conversation and includes all ages in the writing process.
- Keep the covenant simple — 3-5 guidelines are ideal for the covenant (Examples: We use quiet voices. We put materials away when we are not using them. We listen to each other.)
- Train volunteers/shepherds for the playground making sure that volunteers are aware of the vision behind it.

Phase Four: Launch and Integration

Goal: Ensure that the playground reflects the rhythms of worship and feels fully part of the congregation's life and witness.

Tasks during the launch phase:

- To curate the furniture and resources that will be used in the space remembering to focus on a few, high-quality items.
- Commission the space during the worship service with a special prayer or blessing
- Post signs in the space itself as well as regular announcements in the bulletin, newsletter, and website
- Design a process for feedback within the congregation

Phase Five: Reflection and Iteration

Goal: Adapt the playground to grow and change with the congregation's evolving needs

Tasks during the reflection and iteration phase:

- Capture data about how the space is being used (attendance, feedback, reception)
- Revisit the covenant/rules and procedures and tweak where necessary
- Celebrate success by sharing stories with the wider congregation in the newsletter, website and other areas.
- Curate materials by adding what seems to be missing and take away what isn't working

Sample Playground Covenant

The playground is a place for children to worship through play, creativity, and movement. To keep it safe, worshipful, and welcoming, we agree to:

1. **Use quiet voices** so everyone can hear and participate in worship.
2. **Share materials kindly** so all have a chance to use them.
3. **Care for the space** by treating items gently and returning them to their place before leaving.
4. **Respect worship** by using the space in ways that help us focus on God together
5. **Welcome everyone** who comes to the playground.

The playground is a part of our shared worship life. Thank you for helping it to be a space where all can draw closer to God!

Sample Guidelines for Leaders and Helpers in the Playground

Your Role: Create a safe, holy, and welcoming space where children can engage in worship through play and presence.

- Model Engagement in Worship
 - Greet children and families warmly
 - Demonstrate gentle, worship-connected use of materials. (Wave banners and play instruments during songs, light play candles when candles are lit, act out the sermon with manipulatives)

- Offer Gentle Guidance
 - If activities become disruptive, gently redirect “Let’s use our quiet voices, please!”
 - Praise positive engagement
- Keep the Space Safe and Orderly
 - Watch for hazards (small pieces, items folks could trip on)
 - Help children return materials to their locations before leaving.
- Be a warm and consistent presence
 - Build trust through regular interaction and learning names
 - Come back and host again!
- Support inclusion
 - Welcome visitors as well as regular attenders
 - Briefly explain the purpose of the space, if needed

Conclusion: A playground is more than a play space. It’s a tangible and visible expression of the church’s commitment to children as full participants in worship. By offering a safe and engaging space within the sanctuary, with clear expectations and norms, congregations affirm that children’s curiosity, energy, and presence are gifts to be celebrated, not distractions to be managed. With thoughtful care, careful curation, and consistent evaluations, playgrounds can become a blessing to the congregation and community, drawing all deeper into the worship of God.

Playground Resources

Curated by Traci Smith www.tracismith.com

Playing Church

- [Wooden Mass Playset²](#)
- [Plush Nativity Set](#)
- [We go to Church playset.](#)
- [Play Stole](#)
- [Felt Bread](#)
- [Melamine Pitcher](#)
- [Child-sized podium](#)
- [Wooden Advent Candle Set](#)
- [Miniature Pews](#)
- [Church Miniatures](#)

Understanding the Message

- [Jesus and Bible Character Peg Dolls](#)
- [Easter Creche Peg Dolls](#)
- [Wooden Resurrection Scene](#)
- [Nativity Finger Puppet Set](#)
- [Where is Jesus Quiet Book](#)

² You’ll notice that Shining Light Dolls (and some of the other resources) are from the Roman Catholic tradition. The Roman Catholic church is *excellent* at providing tools and resources for children to “play church” — most of the toys are easily transferable to a Protestant context, although some might not be relevant. Note links to bread to substitute for the traditionally Roman Catholic “hosts” for example.

- [My Felt Quiet Book](#)
- [The Miracles of Jesus Quiet Book Pattern](#)³
- [Names of Jesus Wooden Puzzle](#)
- [Jesus and the 12 Disciples Finger Puppets](#)
- [Jesus and the 12 Disciples Magnetic Play Scene](#)

Worship Aids

- [Rainbow Ribbon Rings](#)
- [Wrist Ribbons](#)
- [Nino Rythmn Instruments](#)
- [Montessori Instruments](#)
- [Growing in God's Love Bible](#)
- [NRSV Children's Bible](#)
- [The Peace Table Children's Bible](#)

Seating/ Furniture

- [Lalo Baby Seats](#)
- [Child Seats](#)
- [Rocking Chair](#)
- [A place for everyone rug](#)
- [Play top connective storage](#)
- <https://www.lakeshorelearning.com/products/infants-toddlers/furniture/first-steps-curved-storage-center-with-acrylic-back/p/AA895/>

For Accommodating Different Needs

- [Wobble Cushion](#)
- [Small Weighted Lap Pad](#)
- [Hugs Blanket](#)
- [Playable Art Balls \(fidget\)](#)

Other

- [A place for everyone rug](#)
- [Custom Furniture Design](#),

Notably absent from my recommended list: Perhaps as important as the things listed above is the fact that some things are absent. Note that I do not recommend:

- Coloring Sheets and crayons/markers — These are very often used but are, in my experience, used a simple way to busy children in “something else” without drawing them into the worship of the community. My recommendation is to use them during a specific and contained moment within the service, if at all.
- Play Doh/Slime — End up being messy and sometimes eaten!
- Loud Toys — This is discussed in detail in the full report

³ Quiet books come out of the Church of Latter Day Saints tradition, where services are long, and children are expected to be quiet. Congregations should vet the theology of the books to make sure they align with their own theological traditions.

- Toys that have nothing to do with worship — The playground should be fundamentally different from a play space
- Traditional Picture Books — Traditional picture books are a wonderful way to teach faith and spiritual concepts, but the playground isn't the right setting for them, in my opinion.

Recommendations for Further Study:

For congregations that wish to do a deeper dive or book study in preparation for creating a playground space, I recommend:

[Intergenerate](#) — Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry — this book is an excellent primer on the importance of ingenerational ministry, and what it means

[A Gospel for All Ages](#) — A book with a specific focus on preaching for all ages
Church Together — forthcoming by Traci Smith and Dave Csinos