

About Deborah Hage:

Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.

The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.

To learn more about Deborah, her practice and her family, please visit deborahhage.com

The Non Spiritual Benefits of Attending Church

by Deborah Hage. MSW

While it is sometimes advantageous when parents believe in the tenets of a particular faith and desire to worship regularly in order to reinforce their belief system, faith is not necessary to benefit from sitting in a pew. Attending worship services, church, synagogue or mosque, is valuable even without "believing". Most worship incorporates numerous elements, which are very healthy for children and families. Getting a family up at the same time, eating together and out the door together once a week contributes to a sense of family. The ritualized action of going to the same place at the same time to do the same thing strengthens family identity, cohesiveness and unity of purpose. When the family then goes out for breakfast together afterwards there is an added bonus. One family has sweet rolls on Sunday after church, which are not offered any other day. This connects going to church with the pleasure centers of the brain.

Jim Mahoney, a therapist in Spokane Washington tells this story:

When he was a young therapist just starting out in practice he began work with a particularly difficult family. He saw the members separately and in small groups and then decided he needed to see them all together at the same time every week. They agreed to meet every Wednesday from 5 - 6 p.m. After their session it was too late to go home to fix dinner so they would eat out. The family dynamics began to dramatically improve. Jim went on vacation for two weeks and regretfully told the family he would have to miss the appointments. The family went to dinner anyway while he was gone and to everyone's surprise continued to make excellent progress. When Jim returned he discovered, much to his chagrin, it was the family going out to dinner together which was enabling their progress. Not just his work!

Attending worship together accomplishes much the same thing. Everyone in the family is organized around meeting a common goal, which helps the family work as a connected unit rather than separate parts.

Additional benefits of participating in the worship life of a community are the music and the positive message. Through the ages, people have been aware of how mood is affected by music.

Research done by Don Campbell, author of *The Mozart Effect*, clearly demonstrated that music by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven and Bach is therapeutic. Intellectually, listening to it can activate parts of the brain and help it become more organized and less chaotic. Research has shown that IQ can actually be raised by listening to classical music. Emotionally, various selections calm the over excited child or excite the depressed one. Singing is good for the entire family. It is hard to be angry and destructive while singing as it causes a pleasurable resonance in the brain, which counteracts and defeats negativity. Toning and chanting have a powerful healing effect on the brain. According to Daniel Amen, author of *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*, Ahhh evokes a relaxation response, Eeee aids concentration and releases pain and anger, and Ohhh and Ommm relaxes muscle tension. Listening to the various instruments play (piano, organ, flute, violin, etc.) exposes children to a wider variety of musical experiences than they would get from the radio or the type of bands they would typically listen to on CDs. It helps them gain an appreciation for fine music and counteract the negative tone and message of much of what they ordinarily listen to.

The messages tend to focus on the need for reciprocal, loving behaviors and meeting the human justice needs of the world. Forgiveness, and how it heals both the abused and the abuser, is also a theme which children who have been hurt by others need to hear. Another theme commonly found is one of overcoming adversity and becoming resilient to the darts and wounds of life. Listening to morally sound, positive, uplifting messages once a week is beneficial in and of itself. It teaches children there are standards of right and wrong, normalizes ethical behavior and counteracts the television culture's message, "If it feels good, do it."

Additionally, the very act of being in a worshipping community teaches the child organization and group participation skills essential to school. During worship the children learn to follow the lead of someone other than their parents. They learn to sit quietly when others sit, bow their heads when others bow their heads, kneel when others kneel and stand when others stand. They learn there are arenas in life where running, talking and noise making are not allowed. The educational advantage is that attendance can contribute to reading skills. During the hymns parents can place their finger on the line of the music so the child can follow along. The child learns how to read and memorize in a non-threatening environment in which there are no tests. Following the rhythm and word selection of the hymns teaches poetry construction.

As children get older and more responsible, many congregations find ways for children to participate in the worship. When children are small they can learn to usher, hand out bulletins, take the offering, greet worshippers, and perform other small duties while walking and standing next to their parents. As they get older, they can begin to do them on their own. This gives them the knowledge they can give back and contribute and are capable of doing something for others. Older children can read the lessons aloud to the entire congregation. If they have a musical skill they can also find a ready audience, which would enjoy hearing them, sing, play the piano or other instrument. Children become more self-assured as their participation is eagerly welcomed and their mistakes are overlooked. Of course, weekly choir practice is another opportunity for parents to get respite while their children are engaged in a positive, constructive activity.

The fellowship involved in the community is very helpful to parents who often have few places to turn for non-judgmental, unqualified, support and understanding. Pastoral care is free and is the opportunity to find someone who is adept at listening. Most spiritual leaders are not professional therapists, however, they are great listeners and empathetic supporters. Listening to people cry is one of the things they do best and most parents with troubled families need to do that more than occasionally! It is cleansing. It also saves friendships, as friends sometimes tire of continually hearing tales of woe from parents with difficult children.

Adolescents, particularly, need an adult, who is not their parent, to talk to and spend time with. Many worshipping communities provide such an adult as part of their youth ministry. Getting the troubled adolescents together with other teens under the supervision of a youth worker can be very beneficial in creating a support group for the teen. Many teens with behavior problems do not have access to positive relationships at school or in other arenas because their negative reputation has preceded them. Congregations routinely bring a wide spectrum of youth together and engage them in positive activities. Often the activity has to do with meeting a human justice need - serving soup at a soup kitchen, sorting clothes for the homeless, painting the home of an elderly member, etc. Doing something for others stretches the self-image of youth who do not often see themselves as capable of doing something positive which actually contributes to someone else's well being.

Younger children need the same thing. Often children who act out at school and at home do well for the short time they are in church. Their good behavior is reflected in the esteem which others, who do not know how they behave otherwise, give them. They get to practice being "good", cooperating and following group norms and seeing how it feels. Parents can see how well their child is capable of behaving and set realistic goals for them. While they know the child does not behave that way at home, they can see how well the child can act when he chooses to and make duplicating it at home a goal for the child. Sometimes parents lose heart because they don't believe there is any arena in which their child can behave or think their child is so hopelessly damaged he will never be able to behave in a socially acceptable way. Rather than looking with dismay at the child whose public persona is superior to his private one, they need to reframe the child's behavior and congratulate him that at least there are some places he finds cooperation to be useful. Express the hope that he will someday find cooperation useful at home. Don't punish him because he is "good" for someone else and not the parent. Praise him. The point is not to say, "Why can't you behave that well at home." Rather, the goal is to help the child see that when their behaviors meet standard expectations, they are happier, those around them are happier and their parents are happier. Parents can say, "I am so glad you save your acting out for at home. For we know and love you anyway. You certainly don't need the world to know how weird and lonely your actions are sometimes. Hopefully, someday you will feel so safe and loved you will be able to share with your family the little boy the rest of the world sees."

People to help with respite can also be frequently identified within the fellowship. Most religious communities have programs for children and youth which are extremely healthy for them to participate in. While the children are positively engaged, the parents can take advantage of the much-needed respite. Many youth groups travel together to perform, such as a traveling choir, to meet a human justice need, such as building a house on a reservation, or just for fun, such as a

ski or beach trip. The family gains in two ways - respite while the child is participating in group activities to earn the money to go and respite while the child is gone. Summer camps associated with faith communities tend to be less expensive to attend and often carpooling is provided to get the children to and from camp. When finances are an issue often other members of the community will donate what is needed.

Search Institute, an organization devoted to research regarding the state of America's youth, discovered that adolescents who participate in a worshipping community on a regular basis are more apt to lead healthy life styles and reject premarital sex, smoking and drugs. They are less apt to engage in delinquent behaviors and more apt to be successful in school. It is significant to note that after the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in the spring of 1999, the students flocked to the local churches, not the counseling staff set up and trained to provide crisis and grief services. Even those youth who did not consider themselves religious went to the churches alone and with their friends as they found such a high degree of comfort and support there. Parents can contribute to such feelings of comfort, support and resilience by regularly taking their children to church, synagogue or mosque.

Families, which are not accustomed to attending worship services, may encounter some resistance from their children who would rather sleep later or watch cartoons. Quiet persistence and consistency will generally win the day when it is tied to a reward, such as breakfast out or swimming later. Just because children do not initially want to participate does not mean it is not good for them. Parents who take their leadership role in the family seriously will find ensuring weekly participation just as rewarding, and just as demanding, as ensuring children attend school. The same incentives and consequences can be applied.

If parents find their souls are refreshed and renewed when they take advantage of opportunities to worship regularly, that is wonderful. However, just because they don't believe they have a soul, don't believe in life after death, don't believe there is a god out there to worship, or do believe that churches are full of hypocrites always asking for money, does not mean they need to deprive themselves or their children of all the rest of the wonderful, beneficial aspects of participating in a faith community. There is more to religious communities than promoting faith. A lot more.

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