

Parent's perspective: The Collective Worship dilemma

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One parent speaks out about the damaging impact of excluding her young child from mandatory collective worship in school, and how withdrawal isn't really an option at all.

My four year old son has just started primary school. Starting school was a very exciting time for our family, we were looking forward to becoming part of the school community, so we were taken aback when we learned about the school's practices regarding collective worship, including daily recital of prayers.

The school, which is not a faith school, has not been explicit about its religious practices to parents. By chance, we spotted a prayer on the wall in reception, and were told by the school secretary (ahead of us accepting a place at the school) that such things like reciting prayers do not happen in this school. On another occasion a child giving us a tour pointed to a prayer on a birthday cake, which the children recite to celebrate birthdays. At the new parent induction, the Head did not discuss praying. There was a sheet buried in the school starter pack about collective worship, but it was not explicit about making children pray regularly during the school day.

Praying directly conflicts with our beliefs, and with our desire for our son to make up his own mind about the existence of gods when he is old enough to reflect on these questions for himself.

Concerned at our lack of choice in this matter, we had a meeting with the Head in which she explained that all children had to pray and sing songs worshipping god in order to meet the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) guidelines. She also said she does the minimum required to meet the guidance; as far as she reasonably can. I did some research and passed this on to her, including an offer from the National Secular Society to help the school reform their collective worship, with a view to being inclusive of people of no-faith (or of different religions).

This time the Head replied saying prayer and Christian worship in hymns was part of the ethos of the school. They made one concession; revising the wording of the daily prayer for our child's class in Year R to a reflective statement rather than a Christian prayer. The statement is inclusive and we are happy with it. She also made it clear that from next year this concession would be withdrawn.

We went to the board of governors and were turned down again. They said we had the right to exclude our child from collective worship; as though this was a reasonable choice. As a parent, this is not an easy route to take.

Last month the school had harvest festival; our son took food. We asked the school to not include the one song worshipping 'god, the father', but they wouldn't change their mind. So we decided to use the withdrawal they had offered us.

Our son was taken out of assembly and was left sobbing outside the school hall listening to the other children singing and begging to go back in. Two teachers were physically stopping him going

back. He is not a particularly confident or assertive child so he must have been really upset and confused by it all. Luckily my husband was at the assembly and was able to calm him down and let him go back in. That evening he quietly told me that he's had a "sad" day because he'd wanted to join in the singing.

How can this be offered as a reasonable solution for a 4 ½ year old child who doesn't understand what is going on? It is cruel; in his eyes he's being punished. He is the only child excluded. We can't, and won't, do that to him again. But as parents, where does this leave us? We don't want him to pray in school, which should be a place of education, not a place of worship. How can a child tell the difference between fact (science, maths) and matters of opinion (religion) when both are delivered by the teachers they look up to?

As for the birthday celebrations, linking birthdays with prayers to god (which only some families believe in) during 'birthday assemblies' is not at all fair in my eyes. Considering we found out about these prayers by accident, many parents must be unaware that this even happens... or perhaps they just choose not to think about it.

I understand some schools do have more inclusive forms of collective worship, and our local authority, Herts, states that collective worship should be relevant to both those of faith and no-faith, it also says children should not be made to recite prayers. However when we spoke to them they said prefacing the prayer with 'for those of you that wish to you can join in the prayer' makes it inclusive.

I have argued that bringing prayer and religious worship into school is neither good for the cohesion of the school nor embracing of the community. Considering this is a publicly funded community school, we are left with no alternatives for our son's education.

The Parent Governors Association recently issued a policy statement calling for an end to Collective Worship. The governors of our school say it is not binding and that the Head is within her rights to decide as she wishes.

I was brought up a Muslim but left the faith 15 years ago. This makes it even more challenging to turn a blind eye to the school enforcing religion onto my son.

Where should families like ours go for an education where we are respected and welcomed on an equal footing as people of faith?

A Parent

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