

Have small kids? 5 tips to helping you make it through Mass

Parents often feel self-conscious taking their small children to church. We worry that our little ones will disturb others or prevent us from “getting anything out of Mass.” While we do need to be sensitive to people around us and it can sometimes be hard to attend to what is going on when we are trying to manage a crying baby or squirming toddler, the truth is, our children are valuable members of the faith community. As baptized members of the Body of Christ, it is not only good that infants and toddlers come to Mass, they have a right to be there. As Pope Francis recently put it, “The cry of a baby is God’s voice: never drive them away from the Church!”

The religious brain

A parent who leaves a child at home “until they are old enough” is missing an important stage of the child’s religious education. Education begins unconsciously. Your baby or toddler needs to be given the opportunity to learn the rhythm, sights, sounds and smells of the Mass before he is conscious enough to understand the Mass. Spirituality begins as a sensory call from God that eventually leads to a transformative response. Depriving a child of this sensory education can make it that much harder to lead your children into a personal encounter with Christ that they can feel in their bones.

Do not disturb

Of course, there is a difference between a fussing baby and a screaming baby. As a matter of courtesy to the other worshippers, parents should remove a child who is being loud and cannot be consoled after about a minute or so. That noted,

everyone else around the family with a fussy child has an obligation to put on an understanding, sympathetic smile and trust the parent will handle it. As Jesus said to the apostles who were pushing the kids away from him, “get over your bad selves.”

Tips for success

Taking children to Church can, admittedly be a challenge. The following tips from can help make any churchgoing parent's life easier.

1. Sit in the front. Yes, it's counterintuitive, but kids behave better when they can see what's going on.

2. Don't start out in the cry room. Though well-intended, most cry rooms are like “Lord of the Flies” Sunday School. Go in only for as long as it takes to quiet your child. You and your child will get more out of the experience

3. Know when to hold 'em. If you have to remove your child from the sanctuary, hold him the entire time you are in the cry room or the back of the church. Letting your child play and run in the back of the church teaches him – through simple Pavlovian conditioning – that he *needs* to cry and fuss to earn play time. Let your child have a minimal amount of freedom of movement while he is in the pew, but none if he makes you leave the sanctuary. Is your child genuinely upset? Brain science shows that little ones need cuddles to help them calm down. If your little one makes you leave, by all means be loving, sympathetic, compassionate and affectionate, but do not put him down. When he's quiet, return to the pew.

4. Engage them. By all means, for children under 4 or so, bring some quiet, soft, preferably religiously-themed plushes, books, etc. Keep them in a special “going to Mass bag” that is reserved for church. That will keep these activities special. Regardless, try to put these things away before the consecration. At the elevation, point to the host and whisper

something like, “Look at the miracle! Look at Jesus. Say, ‘I love you Jesus!’”

5. Don’t do Mass in shifts. If you feel you aren’t “getting anything out of Mass” when you bring small children you are missing the point. What you get is the joy of passing your faith on to them. That’s what you signed up for when you became a Catholic parent. Yes, it can be tough, and yes, you may certainly do other things to get your spiritual needs met, but Sunday Mass is for your family. Go as a family.

Attending Mass as a family can be a challenge, but remember, God will abundantly bless those who bring his little ones to him. “For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these” (Mt 19:14).

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