

10 ways to help your young children enjoy Mass

A few weeks ago I received an email from a mother of two.

“Do you have any tips for helping kids to like church?” she asked. “I just can’t tell if taking my son to church more frequently gets him more used to it, and therefore comfortable with the experience, or if it just gives him more reasons to hate it.”

I was intrigued by her question, especially because she wasn’t asking how to get her children to behave, but how to help them like going to Mass. And I realized I had very little to offer as an answer.

So I called Gina Magyar-Russell, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and assistant professor of pastoral counseling in the Loyola Clinical Centers.

Although she said she wouldn’t call herself an expert on the topic, she does take her three daughters—ages 2, 4, and 6—to Mass with her every Sunday. In fact, frequently she takes them without her husband, who is not Catholic.

I was immediately impressed. And I knew she would have plenty to offer. I hope you find her advice helpful, too:

1. Help your children to feel the Mass is for them. Walk them up to receive a blessing during Communion. Take your child to talk to the priest after Mass. Find ways for them to participate.



2. Find a parish where you feel comfortable parenting in a way that you can expose them to God and to your faith. If you don’t want to be in the cry room, and you don’t feel welcome to parent your child in the main church, it may be time to find another parish.

3. Look for programs within the parish that work for your child. “When the kids are about 4, it does help to have a children’s liturgy of the word, where the kids are having a kid version of the readings and drawing a picture,” says Magyar-Russell. “That’s a really good strategy for that age when they enjoy drawing and can understand the main messages.”

4. Choose a Mass time that works well for your child's schedule. You don't want your child to be hungry or tired during Mass.



5. Sing church music outside of Mass to make it familiar and fun. "We do a lot of singing the Alleluia and the Gloria in the car, not necessarily even on the way to church," she says. "My kids get a lot of joy out of participating and knowing the words."

6. Identify aspects of the Mass that interest your child and make the most of them during Mass. A child who is learning to read can make a game out of bookmarking the songs in the hymnal, or trying to follow along with the music on the page. Another child might love to watch the musicians, so you may want to choose a seat near the instruments.



7. Include your children in the conversation. That might mean talking about the stained glass or the statues or even the readings. "If you sit near me in church, you are being distracted," says Magyar-Russell. "Mass is not just for grownups, where they have to be quiet. They can be kids in that space."

8. If you bring books, let your children choose the books themselves before Mass. "There might be one or two in the pile that have a religious meaning," says Magyar-Russell. "I let them pick out books and put them in the bag before we go."



9. Try not to discipline your child during Mass. "I don't discipline that much unless it's really, really distracting," says Magyar-Russell. "My kids sit on the floor and take their shoes off and go through the hymnal like they're at the library. Where I draw the line is teaching that someone else is trying to hear or you're in someone else's way."

10. Try to see their behavior through Jesus' eyes. "If you can see it how Jesus might see it, I think he might see it as these are kids," she says. "I try not to let them have a negative experience with religion. You never want to say, 'God wouldn't like it if you did that.'"



What do you do to help your children enjoy going to Mass? Especially as Holy Week begins, I would love to hear your strategies, ideas, and experiences.

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