

Adapting with autism

Sara and Jason Wodarczyk took their son, Nathaniel, to Mass when he was just a few days old – a practice that continued even after Nathaniel was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at age 2.

“We’ve taken him to church since he was a baby – even through the tantrums and meltdowns,” said Sara, who worships with her family at Our Lady, Queen of Peace, in Middle River. “We get the stares, the people who get up and walk away from us. ... I don’t pay any attention to it.”

Children are never going to learn anything if you don’t bring them to Mass, she said.

The family’s perseverance has proven effective, as Nathaniel, now 13, will be confirmed by Bishop Mark E. Brennan April 30, right on schedule with his peers – and in the same month dedicated to National Autism Awareness.

Life is all about going with the flow for the Wodarczyk family, which includes 6-year-old Nicholas and 4-year-old Mia.

“We’re super flexible,” Sara said. “What works today might not work tomorrow.”

Masses include many sensory stimulators that can be overwhelming for a child with autism. For Nathaniel, around the ages of 5 to 7, the sound of the organ caused him to cover his ears, but now he has mostly outgrown that reaction.

His mother said sometimes Nathaniel gets bored during Mass, so she follows along with her finger in the missal and songbook. They also use an adaptive Mass kit for children, which includes a picture missal depicting worshippers sitting, standing and kneeling during the different parts of the Mass.

Nathaniel attends a typical religious education class, sometimes using adaptive materials. Either Sara, herself a former catechist, or her husband stays with him. Sara and Jason work in tandem to meet the needs of their three children.

“We try whatever we can, whatever works for him,” said Sara, adding that she has grown in patience and understanding over the years.

It is important, Sara said, that Nathaniel – just like her other children – be part of the Catholic faith that means so much to her.

“You can still do what an average family does,” Sara said. “Your faith is always there.”

She hopes sharing her story will raise awareness, and encourage other parents facing challenges to still bring their children to Mass and include them in the faith.

“They can still do it,” Sara said. “We are super, super proud that (Nathaniel) has made it through and he will be confirmed in April.”

Life with a child who has special needs can be challenging. At one point, Sara said, it felt like they were taking Nathaniel to various therapies every other day. That plateaued as Nathaniel approached his teenage years.

“I promise there’s a light at the end of the tunnel,” Sara said. “You might not see it now, but it’s there.”

Sara described Nathaniel, a polite boy with prominent black-rimmed glasses and an endearing smile, as “an old soul.” His interests include 1980s television commercials, classic Disney films and old cars. A bowler in an adaptive league, Sara said he is carefree and easy going.

“There are days when I want to give up and throw in the towel,” Sara said, but added that the encouragement she has gotten from others, including that God only gives special kids to special people, is taken to heart. “He’s come a long way.”

The Wodarczyks are focused on preparing Nathaniel for high school. He was recently accepted into Middle River Middle School’s National Junior Honor Society and has an affinity for computers and technology.

He loves trains, and looks forward to the display put up every year by his pastor, Father Kevin A. Mueller, who said Nathaniel is just “part of the scene” at Our Lady, Queen of Peace.

“Everybody is welcome to be here – it doesn’t matter who you are,” Father Mueller

said. "It's what we're called to do. ... There's nobody we need to leave out."

Father Mueller said the relationship the Wodarczyks have with the parish is what you wish for every family.

"We're part of them; they're part of us," he said.