



Five Tips for helping children participate in Mass

St. Anne is a family-friendly parish that welcomes parishioners of all ages. Our children are gifts from God and signs that our parish is growing! While little ones are often fidgety during Mass, as they grow they can learn about how to act and how to pray. Here are some suggestions on what adults can do to help younger parishioners participate in Mass as part of our community.

1 Teach children about the church.

Children should know that the church isn't just "God's house"—it's also their house, a place where they should feel comfortable, where they know that God is with them in a special way. It is where we gather as God's family. The more children know about the parts of the church, the more comfortable they will be in it. Take your children on a tour of the church. Point out the special parts of the church and explain their significance: the altar, the table that God's family gathers around; the tabernacle, where the Eucharist is kept and where Jesus is always present; the baptismal font; the crucifix; the reconciliation chapel; the stations of the cross. Help them begin to understand and appreciate what makes the church different from other buildings.

2 Explain why going to Mass is important.

It's never too early to bring children to Mass. Infants learn from what's going on around them. The prayers, the songs and the people at church can help to form a child's understanding of God and the Christian faith at a very early age—they need to be part of it! As children grow older (and sometimes resist the idea of going to Mass!) parents can help them understand why Mass is so important. It's one thing that Jesus asks us to do ("Do this in remembrance of me"). It's the way we give time to God, to thank him for everything God gives us throughout the rest of the week. And it's the way we strengthen ourselves, through listening to the Word of God and through Communion, to be the people God calls us to be.

3 Help them show "age-appropriate" reverence.

While we can't expect little ones to sit through Mass without wiggling, as they grow we can help them learn "age-appropriate" behavior in church. By age 4 or 5, most children can begin to understand that because the church is different from other places, we act differently. We don't run or speak in an "outside" voice. While the adults are praying, children can sit quietly with a book or puzzle. Meanwhile, most elementary-aged children can learn the responses to the prayers of the Mass. They can be expected to sit through Mass without taking several breaks to go to the restroom or get a drink of water. With the adults they can learn to stand, kneel, bow to the altar and genuflect at the tabernacle.

4 Teach children the parts of the Mass.

During Mass, parents can help their children learn what the parts of the liturgy are and explain what the priest and other ministers are doing. This enables them to understand and be more meaningfully engaged. It helps to sit in a place where children are able to see what is going on, but even if they can't you can still narrate for them. Explain that the Gloria is a prayer praising God. Encourage them to listen carefully to the passages from the Bible. Point out the bread and wine that are brought forth during the preparation of the altar, and later show them how Father offers those to God and how they are consecrated to be the Body and Blood of Christ. A children's Mass book or missal can help them follow along.

5 Model by your own participation.

This is something ALL adults can do, not just parents! Pray in a strong, clear voice. Sing the hymns. Listen attentively. By doing these things, we model for our younger parishioners how to actively participate in the Mass. Children—and many adults—learn more by seeing than by being told. Being part of a vibrant, worshipping community is a powerful experience for all of us.