



Susan McNeil, Director of the Nazareth Project for Marriage and Family Formation, shares her input on the importance of welcoming families with young children to Sunday Mass. If we don't encourage parents to bring children to Mass when they are young, they are not likely to come when they are older. The future of our Church depends on encouraging families to worship with their children and on helping parents to make the Mass experience a rich and valued one. Without children, there is no Church in the future. Here are some suggestions for extending hospitality to families with children:

- Regularly invite young families to Mass.
- Train greeters, hospitality ministers and ushers to extend a warm welcome to families with children.
- Provide “busy bags” with religious coloring books and crayons, stories of our faith, faith-based toys. The Evangelization and the Sunday Mass team can recommend some excellent books and toys that can be included in such bags.
- Provide a “quieting space” for those families who need it, while encouraging them to be seated with the assembly when needed. Be sure that space is reserved for families with children.
- Offer Liturgy of the Word with Children during as many Masses as possible.
- Offer childcare during Mass for very young children.
- Reserve pews, or special seating, at the front and back of church for families with young children. Due to the normal chaos of getting one's family to Mass, families often come in at the last minute to find little space to sit together, or people who are unwilling to move.
- Provide space for breastfeeding mothers (not in a bathroom).
- Priests might address children and teens during homilies.
- Smile at parents, tell them and their children how glad you are that they are there, provide encouragement even when kids are less than well behaved. Parents of young children desperately need encouragement! Critical to our future, and to evangelization, is the warm, loving reception from fellow Catholics in the pew. [Recently, my family visited a parish, where we sat in the back. My 6-year-old's behavior was less than perfect, and at one point he gave us some grief during Mass. After Mass, the couple behind us stayed for a minute, and I cringed internally, waiting for criticism. Instead, this older couple leaned over to tell my son what a good boy he was, what a beautiful drawing he made during the homily, and how glad they were that he came. It meant the world to us. Even someone who works for the Church needs encouragement!]
- Talk with your congregation regularly, reinforcing that small children are welcome at Mass, even though it causes a little extra noise.
- Have age-appropriate expectations.

- Some parishes place cards in the pews that not only welcome families and gently model behavior for parents, but catechize parishioners. Here are some examples of messages used:

To our parish families with young children:

We welcome you to the celebration of the Mass, where we receive Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The word Eucharist means “thanksgiving” and as you celebrate with us and your children, we thank you for your presence here among us.

Children are especially close to the heart of Jesus so don’t feel you have to stifle those wiggles and giggles in God’s house!

Children learn liturgical behavior by copying you, so quietly explain the parts of the Mass, sing the songs, and participate as best you can. Please use the card “The Meaning of the Mass” in the pew to help you.

If you need to leave Mass to calm your child, please feel free to do so but please come back.

Remember, the way that we welcome children in church directly affects their faith, what they think about the Mass, and by extension, Christ. Let them know that they are at home in this sacred gathering.

To the members of our parish:

A smile and a word of encouragement are a joy to parents with small, active children. Let them know that they are welcome here.

On the front of this card is a simple prayer for the family. You can pray it here after Holy Communion or take this card with you to pray with your family at home.

To the parents of young children, might we suggest...

Relax! God put the wiggle in children; don’t feel you have to suppress it in God’s house. All are welcome!

Sit toward the front where it is easier for your little ones to see and hear what’s going on at the altar. They tire of seeing the backs of other’s heads.

Quietly explain the parts of the Mass and actions of the priest, altar servers, choir etc.

Sing the hymns, pray and voice the responses. Children learn liturgical behavior by copying you. If you have to leave Mass with your child, feel free to do so, but please come back. As Jesus said “Let the children come to me.”

Remember that the way we welcome children in church directly affects the way they respond to the church, to God, and to one another. Let them know that they are at home in this house of worship.

Please let your child use the reverse side of this card to draw and doodle.

To other members of our parish...

The presence of children is a gift to the church and they are a reminder that our parish is growing.

Please welcome our children and give a smile of encouragement to their parents.

If you see a parent struggling, please offer to help them!

Blogger, Simcha Fisher, writes “Some kid noise at Mass is unavoidable, and should be welcome in any parish that wishes to survive. Many parents are trying harder than it appears to outsiders. Many kids have invisible disabilities, and many parents have invisible crosses. God is not honored by an hour-long litany of mental kvetching every week. The Church is not a museum, a silent retreat, or an old folks’ home. But it’s also not a playground, and all parents are responsible for helping their kids learn to behave as well as they can. [It’s our job to help them learn.] The Mass is not private time. It’s time to worship God with other people....The best advice I can give parents is: be patient, be patient, be patient. Behaving at Mass is a whole-family effort, and it takes a long time to get to where you want to be, with everyone cooperating as much as they are able. It’s taken us a full 18 years to get the point where, even if one or more kids does every rotten thing in the book, we can stay calm and confident and just deal with it, without strangling anyone or dying of embarrassment. The one thing you must never consider is giving up going to Mass! Even the worst experience is better than that.”

