

How to deal with the wiggles:

Ways to keep your littlest Catholics engaged in Mass.

by: Amy Voorhees, Director of Liturgy and Music Ministry

St. Mary's has been blessed to have a wonderful children's ministry reaching our children during the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. We have also had the book box that has been placed at the back of the church for children to "borrow" a book during Mass. Unfortunately, Covid-19 has caused us to stop the children's ministry and temporarily shelve our books. With that in mind, we thought it might be a good opportunity to share some other ways to keep your wiggly little Catholics happy and engaged during Mass.

Please know that these are simply things that I have tried over the years. Not all of these will work for everyone, so feel free to take it or leave it, and try a few different things to see what fits for your family.

My first two children are only 13 months apart. That meant that at one time we were wrangling 2 boys age 1 and 2, and even harder, 2 and 3. As a young parent, who felt like I had no idea what I was doing, I turned to a couple of resources for parenting. One book that I have personally turned back to time and time again is Dr. Gregory and Lisa Popcak's book *Parenting with Grace*. This comprehensive book covers all the ages from toddler to teenager and specifically addresses taking little ones to Mass. One of my favorite suggestions is to have a "Going to Mass bag". This small backpack or bag is filled with religious type items, such as board books and soft (noiseless) books, a plastic nativity set or, even better, one made of felt, along with a couple plastic rosaries and some Catholic Saint cards. You can get creative with what you place in the bag, as long as it is of a religious nature and something on the quiet side (I steer away from crayons and paper because we all have seen how children love to write on anything other than paper once they have a crayon in their hand!). The most important thing about this bag is that it is ONLY allowed to be used at Mass. This means that every Mass is an opportunity to dig through the bag and the items inside never get old since they aren't played with on a regular basis. I left our bag in the trunk of the car so it was always available.

Attending Mass as a family is one of the most important things you can do for your children. To get the most out of Mass, both as a parent and a child, it means we need to put ourselves in a worship frame of mind. Getting to Mass at least 5 minutes early, showing your children how to genuflect before entering the pew ("say hello to Jesus!"), kneeling together in prayer, and praying with your child before Mass all can help to put your family in a "Mass state of mind". I have whispered in my kids ears before Mass showing them where the crucifix is, quietly pointing out the statues and stained-glass windows. As they get older, I ask them to tell me where the crucifix is. We've taken the time to pray together, parent and child, asking for their Guardian Angel to help them during Mass to listen and participate. This helps to set proper expectation for their behavior during Mass.

When our children reach about the age of 4 or 5, we work to get them to fully participate in all the postures of the church: kneeling, sitting and standing. When our littlest ones get a little on the "noisy" side, we will take them to the back of the church. Whenever we leave the pew and walk to the back of the church, we try to hold our children and not put them down. We have a beautiful "Pieta" statue at the back of our church. I have taken this opportunity to quietly point out to my wiggly little one this statue with a simple "Mother Mary, pray for us" statement. These are ways you can show your children the beauty of our church, while instilling a reverence for the sacred items we have all around us. After they have quieted down, return to your pew. Mass should be celebrated as a family, together.

Finally, imagine if you were the shortest person in a room full of giants? What if all you could see was the backside of everyone in front of you and you were in a place where you didn't understand what was going on and you were "forced" to try and be still and quiet? Well, for our littlest children, that's what Mass is like. They can't see the altar because they're too short and they don't understand what's happening at every moment because Mass is new to them. When you come in to the church, strategically plan where your family will sit. Work to sit toward the front of the church, on the inside aisle, so that your child has a semi clear view of the altar. I know it's tempting to sit in the back so you have a clear "escape route" when you need to leave the pew, but this just means there are more people blocking your child's view of the "action". When we are standing, hold them up so that they can see. When we are kneeling place them in front of you so that you can quietly whisper in their ear about what's happening on the altar. I take my cues from the "smells and bells" of our liturgy. If the bells are ringing, it's because something important is happening and I will point that out to my child. I'll have them look as Father raises the host and wine and remind them that the bread and wine are being transformed into the body and blood of Christ. These are ways you can stand as the first Catechist to your child.

I am blessed with a husband who is dedicated to making sure our children, from toddler to teenager, get the most benefit of the graces offered at Mass. Parenting is a team effort and he has taken a brunt of the "work" at Mass since I often have cantoring duties. I remember very clearly one day when one of my children brought me my 1 year old while I was singing for communion because they had all reached their limit- and I was happy to sing in her ear and take "my turn". Tag team when you need to. We work together to teach our children about the Mass and this means we take turns with squirming kiddoes who don't always have a volume control button (wouldn't that be amazing!).

Finally, a special note to those of us who are not wrestling at Mass with little ones: Mass is for everyone, young and old, and everyone deserves an opportunity to attend Mass and receive the graces that are given in that hour of worship. Many of us have been there, done that, and can understand the struggles of being a parent to a young child. The best thing we, as a community, can do for young families is to welcome them in the church. I can't tell you how many times a couple sitting in front of me has simply smiled and waved at my children to put us at ease. I can also tell you about the times when we felt completely unwelcomed by a dirty look or shake of the head (not at St. Mary's!) and how frustrating and humiliating it felt in that moment. I was once yelled at after Mass by a woman who told me that children do not belong in church. This is not showing the love of God to all we encounter. The best thing we can do for our parish, as a whole, is to welcome young families. They are the future of our parish.

We're all going to have good days and bad with our children, but thankfully it's just a phase. I promise they do get older, and they are able to sit more quietly for longer periods of time...eventually. And I'm not perfect in helping my children to be engaged in Mass, trust me. If you see me give the "church pinch" to one of my older kids, or get up with a frustrated look on my face with a noisy toddler...please don't judge too harshly. God has shown me that there's always room to learn more patience!

I hope that some of these ideas may appeal to you. Do you have any suggestions? Please reply to this email with your what has worked for your family and we may include them in a special Facebook post in the future!