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Tips for a kid-friendly parish

Heidi Schlumpf | Nov. 24, 2010

Ellie Bains, 3, stands in line during Communion at Holy Rosary Church in New Holstein, Wis., Sept. 19. (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)

My daughter is squirming in my arms, as I unsuccessfully try to bribe her into behaving with Goldfish crackers. For a 20-month-old, she can fling them a pretty good distance. Meanwhile, my 3-year-old son has taken off, and I?m afraid he?s headed for the tempting plate of Communion bread waiting for the offertory procession.

Then I hear him: ?Mama, I have to go poopie!?

Oh, no. With my husband at work, I?m solo with the kids in the back of church. So I hand my daughter off to another parent, sprint down the aisle to find my son and get him to the ?potty? before he has an accident. When I return, it becomes obvious my daughter did not appreciate my leaving her with a stranger. I hope Father didn?t work too hard on his homily, since few people near my screaming child could hear it.

Like many parents of young children, I often wonder if it?s worth it to drag them or myself to Mass. Not only am I not praying peacefully, but our rather ?spirited? children (pun not intended) are preventing others from doing so, too.

Should my husband and I take turns going to Mass alone? Find a parish with a soundproof, escape-proof cry room? Learn to accept that peaceful prayer is not part of the spiritual life of parents with two toddlers?

Or could parishes be more kid- and family-friendly? I asked some experts: about a dozen Catholic moms and dads. They had some advice for parishes and parents alike.

Family-friendliness starts at the top. The pastor and other church staff set the tone for the parish in everything from religious education programs to baptismal prep requirements. Are they welcoming of families and flexible enough to accommodate families? diversity?

At Mass, the person in the pulpit is key, says Mike Latona, a father of three and staff writer for the Catholic Courier, the newspaper of the Rochester, N.Y., diocese. ?If the pastor, deacon or presider positively acknowledges the kids in the congregation, and gently implores everyone to do the same, they will follow that

lead,? he says. ?I?ve definitely seen the positive ripple effect in parishes where this happens, and a lack of youth participation where it doesn?t.?

Get them involved. We don?t bring kids to Mass just to save a few bucks on babysitters. Children learn from watching their parents participate, and at appropriate ages are ready to join the congregation in saying prayers, singing, kneeling, etc. Even toddlers can benefit from explanations about what?s going on ?up there.? Sometimes the more ?smells and bells,? the better. Sit in the front pew, so they can see.

The most important thing to teach children is to be respectful, says Sue Stanton, a grandmother and author of Child?s Guide to the Mass (Paulist). ?If you teach them to respect people and property, even the property of the church, your parish should tolerate the rest,? she says. ?As they age, children will see they have a role to play, be it in the choir, as a gift bearer, or sitting and praying quietly.?

Bring it down to their level. A separate Children?s Liturgy of the Word, in which grade-school-aged kids leave from before the first reading until the offertory procession for their own explanation of the readings, can be a godsend for parents and children. ?It helps my husband and me stay focused on the Mass, not on the kids,? says Carrie Swearingen, a mother of two and marketing consultant in Evanston, Ill. The children, meanwhile, get an introduction to religious education.

The scheduling of religious education classes is another challenge. School nights are crammed with sports practices, music lessons and homework, while weekends are busy at parishes. If religious ed follows Mass on Sundays, parishes could help create a morning that nurtures the whole family, says Swearingen. She suggests trying to get the nearby gym, YMCA or restaurant to offer a special deal for parishioners, so parents can work out or have some coffee and conversation for an hour without the kids.

To cry room or not to cry room. Forget women?s ordination, priestly celibacy or stem-cell research. The most contentious debate in Catholicism is about whether parishes should provide -- and parents should use -- cry rooms.

Some say ?kids will be kids,? and parishioners should tolerate their noisiness, Cheerio-munching and inappropriate discussions of bodily parts at the moment of consecration. A few even find it spiritually uplifting and see the face of God in the peanut-butter-smeared cheeks of a child.

But, understandably, some Massgoers come to church for a more meditative experience and find it hard to tune out the squawks of a newborn or the changing of a stinky diaper. That?s what cry rooms are for, they argue.

Others retort that liturgy is not about private prayer; it?s a community celebration. Yet when a child needs a little extra attention away from the community celebration, not all parishes offer cry rooms, leaving parents to escape to the vestibule, where they may not be able to hear what they?re missing. Other parents say chaotic cry rooms with lousy speaker systems are enough to make them shed a tear or two, so instead take refuge in choir lofts, which were designed to carry and amplify sound, after all.

Which leads me to my own advice to parishes. One size does not fit all, so try to offer a number of options for families: cry rooms and a welcoming attitude toward little people in the pews; a baptism class on a Wednesday night and the alternative of meeting individually with the priest; Children?s Liturgy of the Word and a bookshelf of religious board books for those who don?t make that exodus.

Ask parents what they need. A priest who has never had to park a stroller wouldn?t realize that a designated space in the back of church would really help out. Or that locked bathrooms that require a key from the usher won?t work for a recently potty trained 3-year-old.

And to parishioners who think that glaring at a struggling parent is what Jesus would do, how about offering to hold a child or showing them the statues while Mommy talks to someone after Mass or saying, ?Thank you for bringing your kids to church? (all of which have happened to me, by the way).

Whatever you do, please don?t judge. Parents feel guilty enough already for not attaining Holy Family-level perfection.

Finally, pray for us. We need all the help we can get.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

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