

Mass with kids: 25+ strategies for a better experience

This article is adapted from *77 Ways to Pray with your Kids*.

The Eucharistic liturgy (the Mass) is the height of Christian prayer, and so essential to Christian life that the Church requires all the faithful to attend Mass every Sunday, as well as on holy days of obligation.

But many families find Mass challenging for one reason or another: disruptive children, resistant teenagers, apathy, or boredom. Below, you'll find some ideas for dealing with those challenges and making the most of your time at Mass.

General suggestions

► **Educate your kids about the Eucharistic liturgy.** Mass is an amazing experience: God speaks to us, we are transported to Calvary, we are physically and spiritually united with Christ, we are transformed and sent out on mission. Christ is at the heart of the Eucharistic celebration; the Baltimore Catechism summarizes this truth nicely: "The Holy Eucharist is a sacrament and a sacrifice. In the Holy Eucharist, under the appearances of bread and wine, the Lord Christ is contained, offered, and received." But it's difficult to appreciate what you don't understand. Fortunately, there is a wide variety of age-appropriate resources available to educate your kids about the significance of the Mass. Check out the "Learn more" links below.

► **Read and discuss the Scripture readings in advance.** With older children and teens (or just with your spouse), read and reflect on the Scripture readings in advance (the day before Mass, for instance). Note that, except during special

liturgical feasts and seasons, the readings from the Old Testament and the Gospel will share a common theme; you can begin your reflection by looking for what that theme is. You can also ask family members to comment on the readings: What was interesting? Surprising? Challenging? Enrich your understanding of the readings by using a missal with a commentary, by looking at the notes in your Bible, or finding a commentary online.

► **Make a point to offer thanks.** The word *Eucharist* comes from Greek words that refer to giving thanks. That's what the first Christians, drawing on their Jewish heritage, would have done at mealtimes. They would offer prayers of blessing and thanksgiving not only for the food they were about to eat, but for all of God's work of creation, redemption, and sanctification (see Catechism #1328). You can bring out this dimension of the Mass by asking your kids to name what they are thankful for on the way to church. Or have them write down what they are thankful for on slips of paper and place them in the collection basket during the offering of the gifts.

► **Do a liturgical scavenger hunt.** Ask your kids to pay attention to certain elements of the Mass: the color of the vestments, the name of the books the Scripture readings are taken from, the order of the procession, the option used for the penitential rite, etc.

► **Walk to Mass.** If you don't live close enough to walk, park a few blocks away and walk anyway. The transition may help older kids to get in the right mood—and younger kids might burn some energy.

► **Unpack the Mass.** After Mass is over, talk about what you just experienced. If you didn't discuss the Scriptures in advance, discuss them on the way home, along with elements of the liturgy that seemed striking.

► **Have family prayer time at home.** If you have a regular (even

daily) family prayer time, your kids will slowly learn how to pray, and to appreciate the deeper beauty and meaning of the Scriptures. This daily practice will help them participate more fully in the Mass.

Younger Children

► **Sit up front.** Sit as close to the front as possible, where children have the opportunity to observe the action of the Mass. Besides being more interesting than the view of someone else's back, having the opportunity to see what is going on week after week introduces children to the rhythm of the liturgy. However, if you are mortally embarrassed by the behavior of your children, sitting in the back of the church is better than not attending Mass at all.

► **Explain what is going on.** Before Mass, point out different features of the church—statues, stained glass windows, decorations, the tabernacle—and explain what they are about. During Mass, quietly point out key moments: “Now we’re going to hear God speak to us.” “We’re kneeling because Jesus is here in a special way.” Alternatively, redirect a disruptive child by asking her to (quietly) describe what she sees happening.

► **Invite participation.** Children ages three and up can be invited to sing along with the basic responses, such as the Alleluia and Great Amen. Encourage them to genuflect towards the tabernacle as you enter and leave the church, and to kneel and stand appropriately during Mass.

► **Give them something appropriate to look at.** Give young children a religious picture book or a collection of holy cards, or a favorite stuffed animal. (The animal can be encouraged to participate in Mass, too.) Some people give children [religious coloring books](#), although if you go this route, bring just a few crayons ... ideally, the type with square edges, because they will get dropped. The [Illuminated](#)

[Rosary books](#) contain lots of religious art for younger kids to look at, too.

► **Consequences.** Promise a small reward for children who meet certain minimum standards of behavior (for example, not having to be removed). This method will only be effective if you are willing to follow through, however, so don't offer something you are unwilling to deny later, if necessary.

► **Introduce your child to the priest, lectors, musicians, and servers.** If your parish sponsors a social hour after Mass, be sure your children get to know the priest and liturgical ministers. Recognizing these people as they celebrate the Mass will increase their engagement.

► **Play Mass at home.** Prepare children to participate in the Mass by encouraging them to play Mass at home. You can purchase a play Mass kit from a Catholic store, or use materials around the house.

► **Don't be afraid to use the nursery or cry room.** If your parish offers child care or a cry room, take advantage of it, if it will help you participate in the Mass. Starting when she is around age three or four, try to keep your child in Mass so that she can begin learning how to participate.

► **Should disruptive kids stay or go?** Judging whether to remove a disruptive child is a balancing act. On the one hand, both you and your child are entitled to participate in the Mass, by virtue of your baptism. On the other hand, so are other people! So the question often becomes: Is my child preventing other people from participating in the liturgy? The culture of the parish often determines where that line is drawn. If you are unsure, ask the pastor or a member of the parish.

► **Pray for help, and don't expect perfection.** Hundreds of generations of moms and dads have experienced the same challenges as you; most of them are probably saints now, so you may as well ask them to pray for the strength and patience

you need to get through Mass with small children. Remember, too, that the very work of lovingly managing children at Mass is a sort of prayer in itself.

Older Children

In addition to the ideas listed above, you can try the following ideas with children who have received their First Communion:

- ▶ **Give them a children's missal.** Once children can read, give them a children's missal to help them follow along and participate during the Mass. There are a number of children's Mass books, or you can purchase a subscription to *Magnifikid!*, a full-color subscription missal for children. Or for younger kids, the quiet activities and fun artwork in [OSV Kids](#) magazine will help keep them sitting quietly.
- ▶ **Give them a children's prayer book.** Children often have a hard time focusing on prayer after communion; help them out by providing them with a children's prayer book. (Check out [Sense of the Sacred: Illuminated Book of Catholic Prayers](#), or [Prayers for Our Catholic Family](#).)
- ▶ **Encourage children to serve in appropriate liturgical ministries.** If your children are old enough, encourage them to become altar servers, to participate in the children's choir, to bring the gifts forward, or to serve as an usher or hospitality minister (with you). Directly participating in these ministries will give them a different perspective on the Mass and a sense of ownership.
- ▶ **Bonus points for participation.** Offer some small reward for children who participate with appropriate posture, responses, singing, and so on.
- ▶ **Walk through the Mass.** Set aside some time to walk your children through a different part of the Mass each week. Have them act it out, then explain the meaning of that part of the

liturgy. Explore the symbolism of the actions and elements of the Mass: Why do we stand and kneel? Why does the priest break the Eucharistic host? (It reflects the sharing action of Jesus at the Last Supper and the breaking of his body on the cross.) Why are bread and wine used? (See Catechism #1333-1336.)

► **Check out Scriptural connections.** Nearly everything that the priest and the assembly say during the Mass is rooted in an ancient liturgical tradition. You can help your kids appreciate this long tradition by pointing out the many connections between the liturgy and the Scriptures. For example, the words, “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation,” spoken by the priest at the beginning of the Preparation of the Gifts, is an ancient Jewish prayer found in many biblical texts, including Luke 1:68 and Psalms 119:10; the Gloria (the sung acclamation that begins, “Glory to God in the highest . . .”) is rooted in Luke 2:14 and Revelation 4:11, among others; and the priest’s greeting (“The Lord be with you”) and the people’s response (“And with your Spirit”) comes from 2 Timothy 4:22. See Felix Just, SJ’s [“Biblical Texts Related to Catholic Liturgy”](#) for many more examples.

Teens

► **Introduce a more mature understanding of the Mass.** If the last time your teen learned about the Eucharist was while preparing for First Communion, it might be time for an update. Use a youth-friendly catechism or any of the many teen-friendly resources available online. [LifeTeen.com](#) offers excellent resources developed by teens and young adults. Alternatively, academically gifted teens may want to dig into Church documents about the liturgy, such as the [General Instruction of the Roman Missal](#).

► **Encourage service in appropriate liturgical ministries.** Besides serving in the liturgical ministries listed above, teens who have been confirmed may also be eligible to become lectors or extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist.

- ▶ **Provide a missal.** Offer your teen a missal to help him follow along during Mass.
- ▶ **Attend a teen-friendly parish.** While “parish shopping” isn’t ideal, if your child’s faith is at stake, it might make sense to seek out a parish with a good youth program and a more teen-friendly liturgy – although some teens might find that a more traditional “smells and bells” liturgy provides a better environment for encountering Christ.
- ▶ **Should teens be forced to go to Mass?** At the time of their marriage and at the baptism of their children, spouses promise to take responsibility for raising their children in the faith. Generally, this means insisting that children take part in the life of the Church. One way of thinking about this is as safeguarding your child’s spiritual welfare, much as you would safeguard his basic health and hygiene. However, resistance or rebelliousness around Mass attendance might signal other issues that need to be addressed (such as the parent-teen relationship or a need for deeper faith formation). Teens who insist that they no longer believe might be precluded from receiving the Eucharist on the grounds of being in a state of grave sin. If a teen is persistent in rejecting the faith, consideration also needs to be given to respect for his religious liberty (see [Code of Canon Law #748, §2](#)). Seek the advice of your pastor for help in sorting out these difficult issues.

Talking Points: Why Do We Go to Mass?

The celebration of the Eucharist is so essential to Christian life that the Church requires all the faithful to attend Mass every Sunday, as well as on holy days of obligation, and to receive the Eucharist at least during the fifty days of the Easter season.

If your younger children ask why they “have to” attend Mass, explain to them that Mass is where we go to see and hear

Jesus: "Jesus was born as a little baby because he wanted to be with us and share his love with us. After he went to be in heaven, he wanted to be even closer to us—all of us, all around the world—so he gave us some special ways of being close to him."

You can also adapt the answers below (which are more appropriate for older children and teens) to their level of understanding:

► **Because Jesus gave us himself in the Eucharist.** "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; . . . he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and . . . abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:51, 54, 56). God chose to meet us by taking on flesh in Jesus Christ, and he chooses to continue meeting us "in the flesh" through the Eucharist, which is his whole body and blood, soul and divinity (Catechism #1413). We also encounter the presence of Christ during Mass in his Word (the Scriptures), the priest (who acts in the person of Christ), and the assembly of the faithful (Catechism #1088).

► **The Eucharist is at the heart of the life of the Church.** Through the celebration of the Eucharist, Jesus' followers participate in the saving work of his life, death, and Resurrection (Catechism #1407, 1409), and prepare to continue that work in the world. The Eucharist also strengthens the unity of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ (Catechism #1416).

► **The Eucharistic celebration is a sharing in heaven.** When we go to Mass, we don't just anticipate heaven, we get to share in it (Catechism #1419).