Make way for the children!

“Why do I have to go to Church? What do I get out of it?” I remember saying this phrase over and over during my preteen years. The response was always the same: “You are not there to get something, you are there to give something.” How do you explain the importance of participating in the liturgy to a preteen? How do children participate in a ritual that feels “so grown up”?

The richness of the liturgy is multilayered and complex. As the most central sacrament in the Catholic faith, the Eucharist and its theology permeates our understanding of who we are as a people, our relationship to our Savior and our relationship to each other and the world. However, its essential elements are very simple; all are welcome to share a simple meal at the table of the Lord. God provides all that we need. We can help children connect with the liturgy by focusing on these essential elements.

When my children were younger, it was helpful to get them involved in rituals at home, like family dinners. The more involved our children became in the planning, preparing, serving and cleaning up the more ownership they felt in our important family gatherings. I believe it promoted a sense of belonging and responsibility. Above all, they enjoyed it!

It was the same when it came to addressing their questions about attending Church. The more involved they became the more they participated and understood the elements of the Mass. This was surprisingly easy to do. When I became the director of faith formation at our Church, I worked with families to get involved in the liturgy together with their children.

Beginning as young as 5 years old, children can provide hospitality with their parents or another adult in welcoming people to church and handing out bulletins or worship aids.

Before volunteering, talk as a family about the importance of making people feel welcomed, just as Jesus did.

Around 7 years old, a child could join a parent or adult in passing the basket during the offertory. As they become more experienced they can provide the service on their own. Families can also volunteer to bring up the gifts during the offertory. Talk with your children about your value of supporting your Church community with your time, talent and treasure.

When your parish offers the opportunity, your child can assist at the altar as a server. This important ministry allows the child to become intimately involved in the movement of the liturgy. Help them recognize the witness of service they provide to the wider community.

As children become older most liturgical ministries become available to them. With proper training and preparation, older children can be a lector, proclaiming the readings at the liturgy. Children ages 13 and 14 may enjoy assisting the sacristan, who serves as a coordinator for the worship services and makes sure the service runs smoothly.

In my 20-plus years of working with children, I have never found a child who didn’t take these ministries very seriously. Children naturally understand the reverence required. Many of the children I had the pleasure of working with continued helping with different ministries as they became adults. Above all, they enjoyed it!