



Engaging Young Children in Church, Part 1

When my husband and I first started having children, he and I were a part of the church choir. Up to a certain point, my first daughter was easily incorporated into lending my voice in the choir, but that changed when she became a mobile toddler. My husband continued to sing in the choir, and I sang from the congregation while caring for our busy girl. Soon we were on to seminary, where my husband served in the altar in various capacities, all the way up until he became a priest. During that time our family grew and I had *two* little ones to wrangle. And then our family grew again soon after our first parish assignment... I had three littles to wrangle and now my husband is *the priest!*

All that to say: my entire journey in worshipping with children has involved solo parenting during church services, so keep that in mind, as it will help you decide what parts of my experience intersect with yours. I've had the fortune to parent in a variety of church environments, and have noticed several things that parents need to pay attention to *about their particular church environment* in order to create a good plan for their kids.

Examine your environment & challenges

1. Church Architecture

This is *often* overlooked by those who seek to give advice to parents, but it can powerfully influence your method of approach. Look at how the church is laid out, physically. Are you in a traditional building with narthex, sanctuary, vestibules, and more? Or are you worshipping all together in one large space, or perhaps in a small multipurpose room? What is your building *made of*? Are you worshipping in a stone structure that echoes a lot, or are the walls laid with more sound-absorbing materials? Where is it easiest to see the altar? Are there pillars or chairs or pews in the way?

What part of the space does it look easiest to contain a small child? Are there any places where that open up and so encourage running? Do they have a "cry room" where you can listen to the services? When you exit the sanctuary, can you easily access a child-friendly place, or does it open up into a wide area where the children can bolt away? Are the floors carpeted, muffling a dropped toy or book, or is the floor made of a hard material where crashes will be heard easily?

It's important to note that I cannot address all possible circumstances here, but the principle is that the *physical makeup of your worship space* that will influence how you approach worshipping with your kids. Church architecture, as well as layout and materials are very difficult things to modify, so it's important to identify potential difficulties, and how they can create certain behavioral tendencies and habits.

2. Community Culture & Expectations

Some communities are very open with helping each other with their children in the services. Some communities have an expectation that children make very little noise, and parents may feel pressured to



stay in the cry room or nursery. While many may be enthusiastic about having kids present for the services, not every church congregation has communal knowledge of how to work *together* or assist parents with little children in church. Discuss with your spouse, friends, and fellow parishioners what barriers there might be in your own community's culture, and how you make room the needs of families, push towards an ideal, and still create an atmosphere of balance and peace in the community.

3. Know Your Own Children's Needs

Here's the cliché: every kid is different, and so you'll need a variety of tools and approaches to work with each one of them in the services. It's a difficult dance sometimes, because you have to throw your own mood, needs, and desires in there as well. The biggest tool I've found is this: love your child, no matter what. Bathe them in your prayers, even in the middle of a frustrating episode with them. Step backwards if you have to, and ask for other parents' advice with a certain trait or tendency. Get ideas from other parents on what worked with their kids at a certain phase. Take all suggestions as you would in a brainstorming session—consider everything as valid, and then put it to the test. If it works for your child, fabulous. If not, try something else. But consistency is key—once you set your expectations, don't waffle on them. Boundaries, reinforced with patience, help your child to know they are loved.

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Photo: <http://www.pravmir.ru/>

Prepare your family for liturgy

1. Practice at Home

Often before bedtime prayers begin, it's been a little wild in my house. My husband is away for evening services many nights, and so creating a prayerful environment in the tiny corner of a messy room with three energetic children sometimes feels like banging my head against a wall.

One small thing I do, though, is to get them standing in front of the icons and have them take in a few deep breaths, letting them out slowly. And then I pray our evening routine out loud *slowly*... more slowly than I



would on my own. These kids are learning the prayers with me, and as with practicing an instrument, it's better to learn to play the notes perfectly at a slow pace, because that's how you imprint the melody into your muscle memory. The same is true for prayer.

Practicing prayers and *how to approach prayer* will help children to take that with them to liturgy and make the connection.

2. Arrive Early to Begin in Peace

By arriving early, you allow yourself enough time to take a communal deep breath and get ready to dive in. Do the things you need to do: hang coats, take bathroom breaks, get that casserole into the church kitchen, light your candles, gather your service books. You don't show up late to *important* things, like doctor's appointments or the beginning of school. Arriving early signals to your children that *this time is important*. It also means that your unhurried mind will be ready to hear all the prayers and *fully* prepare your heart for the Eucharist.

But even if you're late, *don't get into a hurried rush*. In my mind, while being on time to the services is vastly important, it's *more* important to teach *how to approach worship* than how to be somewhere on time. Begin in peace.

3. Explain the Service as You Go

Children's service books help, but often the kids will want to jump right to the grown-up ones when they can.

One of the lovely things about church liturgy is that so much of the learning is implied in the structure of the service and the sequence of prayers. However, it takes a grown-up brain full of experience to see many of the patterns and to understand the reasons *why* things are done the way they're done (sometimes, even the adults don't even fully understand!). Pass your knowledge onto your children in whispers. Start very young. Even two or three-year-olds, who have only *begun* to ask why, can be given simple explanations. "We're standing up because Jesus is here," was one of the first things I said to explain the strange habit of popping up and down at seemingly random times during the church services. Keep it simple in the beginning, and then go deeper as they grow. You're their teacher. Kids are always thirsty for knowledge.

4. Talk About the Liturgy in Your Home

Don't let the services—or the sermon—be an "out of sight out of mind" phenomena. A good movie gets you talking about it on the way home with your friends, and the liturgy should follow the same pattern. See if you notice anything different about who was commemorated, something interesting about the Gospel reading, or if something in the sermon stuck out to you. Bring that up with your family and with your kids, perhaps on the car ride home or at dinner. Discuss it. Let people freely express their likes and dislikes, confusion and excitement. Explore and grow together in this way.

These are some very general principles to get you started. I've found that the specifics of what I do has changed quite a bit as my children grow and mature, but that these things have remained true throughout.



Good strength in your journey!