

# Toddlers and Preschoolers: Good Behavior During Mass

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**Introduction:** Unruly children are not generally a reason to excuse yourself from mass. If a child consistently has to be carried out of church week to week, just plan on it. Go to mass separately leaving the child at home; take the child out for a walk during the homily and then come back. Sit in the back for rapid exit when needed or, once the child reaches age 3 or thereabouts, try sitting in the front to see if he can become interested in the proceedings [aided by your preparation at home, see below]. Be ready to exit quickly, however; if you have to leave there is nothing to be ashamed of.

## Toddlers: (18 months to 2 ½ or 3 years)

Good behavior during mass actually begins at home. Too many parents give up because simply correcting the children *during* mass is so ineffective. Rather, **ahead of time**, tell the children what you hope they will do and not do during mass. Have them repeat it back to you. After a few weeks of repetition you can simply introduce the topic on the way to church by asking cheerfully: “What am I counting on you for during mass?” Introduce a “secret signal” to be used as a reminder during mass (3 taps on the shoulder) and *expect to use it with great frequency*. If the child responds quickly to the reminder, he is praised for his success on the way home with little or no comment on the less desirable actions. Reminders every Sunday morning on the way to church of what is expected will be needed.

Prepare your “Sunday Tote Bag”. Keep it packed and ready to grab as you head out the door. Contents vary with the child.

### Theory:

The contents of the bag are used only for mass and not at other times. This means that they do not lose their novelty as quickly and further, the child can recognize that Sunday mass time is set apart and not ordinary.

### Recommended:

- Religious children’s picture books;
- Religious coloring books and crayons
- Plastic rosary; religious statuettes
- Favorite doll, blanket, stuffed animal or other transition/comfort item are all OK as long as they are useful and not distracting to other children or adults (such as a giant fluorescent-purple talking “My Little Pony”)

### Not Recommended:

- Food. Children do not starve in an hour.
- Toy cars, trucks, robots, Transformers, dinosaurs etc.
- No digital toys; this will be a harder habit to break when the time comes

**Do not let your child play with your phone! EVER!**

Nevertheless it is not a “fail” if you have to walk out with your noisy or disruptive youngster. Only by trial and error do you know how long they will last.

## The Family Room

Remember your child may be distracting to the priest who is offering a Most Sacred Sacrifice to the Father and not everyone around you can tune out a noisy child as parents of young children learn to do. So use the Family Room if your child is likely to be noisy during mass. It does take more effort to focus from afar with the artificial sound and a video monitor and with other children and parents making noise. Do your best to worship well, and encourage the other parents to do so by making the responses and by not engaging in chit chat; keep the family room a prayer room, albeit a noisy one. You will not be there for more than a few months while you train up your kiddo.

## Preschoolers-Kindergarten:

Expectations change radically between the toddler years and Kindergarten at which time, with preparation and help, most children can sit through and participate at mass. Motorically hyperactive children will take longer to achieve these goals but do not give up; remember, if you can address their boredom by keeping them engaged, you have won half the battle. A behavior plan is sometimes useful for the child who struggles.

Preschoolers: 2-1/2 or 3 years to 5 years

Now your child's preparation for mass begins in earnest. Take home a missalette. Preschoolers can memorize prayers and love to join in. With your encouragement to do so, they will pay attention just listening for familiar phrases.

Over a period of weeks, teach him the following at home:

"Amen"... "Sign of the Cross"

"... And with your spirit" [and the cue: "The Lord be with you"]

The Our Father

"Peace be with you" ... Lamb of God... "Lord I am not worthy..."

You can challenge the child who is in Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> Grade and learning to read to memorize the *Gloria* and the *Credo* (*with your help*). Compete with your child. Be prepared to lose! If your child has mastered these prayers in English start him on the Latin\*. Compete some more. And be prepared to lose. Children are brilliant memorizers and can memorize well even what they do not yet understand. Those of us in health care know that the prayers memorized in childhood are sometimes the only memory left to the elderly with dementia in their last days and hours.

*\*The Latin prayers of the Church and the mass are readily available on the internet. Teaching your children Latin prayers helps build Catholic Identity and immunizes them from fear of Latin and feeling stupid around Latin and other languages. All of the ancient religions including Christianity have had a liturgical language, that is a language reserved for public worship, largely unchanged from earlier ages: Hebrew, Greek, Armenian, Latin, Arabic etc. For centuries, Protestants preserved the English or other tongue of the time of their founders. The*

*use of an **everyday modern idiom** for worship is an experiment begun in the 1960s, arguably a catastrophic failure.*

### **Preschool Catechism for Mass**

Whose house is this?

Answer: God's house.

Why are we quiet at Church?

Answer: People are talking in their hearts to God.

[Why are the adults talking?

Answer: They should know better.]

### **Teaching the REAL PRESENCE**

Surveys of Catholics indicate that a substantial proportion of Church-going Catholics do not have a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist and do not believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, in the tabernacle and on the altar. In the early years of your child's formation as a Catholic, we all communicate the Real Presence to the children even more by our actions than by "catechesis" (as important as specific explanations are). The way we dress, how we genuflect, how we save our conversations for the back of the church or the vestibule (the entry hall) all communicate our belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the building. Teach your child to genuflect slowly and reverently. Teach him why we genuflect on the right knee. Show him how to genuflect during Adoration.

Quiet reverence before the Presence of God should be palpable when a stranger (or your child) enters the church. Do your best to make it so with little talk and quiet voices before, during and after mass. We all owe this to God and to each other so that there is little doubt about what we, as Catholics, actually believe.