

A Holy Presentation



Guidelines for
Participating in the
Divine Services with
Children and Young People

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This booklet is about two of the most precious blessings that the Most Holy Trinity has given to our community—the Divine Services and our children. It consists of guidelines for the participation of children--and young people--in the services. We hope that it will prove to be helpful to all parents, grandparents, and godparents—and to each and every member of our community. After all, the services belong to each and every one of us, and we are all responsible for the care and nurture of the children who attend our services.

Guideline #1:
We are all in this together.

If we want the children and young people in our community to behave appropriately during the services, then we have to model that behavior for them. That means arriving on time, silencing all of our electronic devices, being attentive, standing as much as we are able, and staying in the nave until the service is actually over. We adults often think that the rules don't apply to us, but, if we want our children and young people to be reverent, then we must show them what that looks like on a weekly basis.

Guideline #2:
We want our children in the services.

In many modern American Christian communities, it is possible to drop your children off with a staff person or a volunteer when you arrive on Sunday morning, and not pick them up again until you're ready to leave. Increasingly, in American congregations, children and adults rarely participate in the same services or events. However, that

has never been the way things work in the Church. In Holy Orthodoxy, families worship together; we do not segregate ourselves according to age or developmental needs. We do recognize that it is sometimes difficult for young children to remain in the nave for an entire service, and we do understand that parents often need a break--but our goal is to have our children in the services as often as possible.

Guideline #3:

When young children are in the services, they need constant, hands-on supervision.

It is never acceptable to simply turn children loose in the nave. When this happens, they can quickly begin to distract others from the service. Parents and grandparents need to be involved and interacting with their children at all times during the services. It is not enough to simply be “keeping an eye on them”; parents and grandparents must stay in close physical proximity to the child so that they can help the child stay focused on the service. This requires fore-thought and preparation: for instance, what activities can the child be engaged in during the services (lighting candles, reverencing the icons, following along in a child’s service book)? This also requires common sense: for example, one adult cannot successfully monitor the behavior of more than one or two children.

Guideline #4:

When infants—or their parents—need a break, then the cry room is an important option.

The cry room is only for parents and/or grandparents who are caring for infants. It is to be used when a child needs to be calmed or nursed, but it is not a play room. When children that are old enough to walk need a break from the service, they should be taken outside or to the parish house.

Guideline #5:

When pre-school children—or their parents—need a break then going outside or going over to the parish house are important options.

When the weather is nice stepping outside for a few minutes can make a real difference in the ability of a pre-school child to make it through the service. A large chest of 'outside' toys is located on the porch of the parish house; children are welcome to use those toys and to use the playground equipment that is next to the parish house. When the weather is bad, or when a child needs to rest or change clothes, then the parents and/or grandparents will want to use the nursery. These facilities are inside the parish house. Our nursery is not staffed either by paid professionals or volunteers because it is our settled conviction that no one knows a child better than his or her parents or grandparents. If you are new to our community and are unfamiliar with where things are located in the parish house, just ask one of our ushers for help, and they will be glad to show you around. The sound system in the nave is connected to the parish house, so you will still be able to listen to the service while you are attending to your children. Nevertheless, we do want all our children in the services as much as possible, so while a two-year old might have to be taken outside or over to the nursery just before the homily, that child should be brought back into the liturgy during communion—and once this schedule is well established, the goal would be to gradually increase the time that the child is able to stay in the service.

Guideline #6:

There are certain kinds of behavior which simply aren't acceptable during the services.

These include wandering around or running through the nave, sprawling on the floor, sitting on the floor to play with toys or draw pictures, visiting with others, talking in a loud voice. A child may want to move closer to the front of the nave to get a better view of the service, but an adult should always accompany the child. Occasionally, a child will want to bring a quiet toy with them to the services, and that is fine as long as it is something that they simply want to hold in their hands (for

example, a stuffed animal or a cloth book would be appropriate, but an electronic game or a battery powered action figure would not be appropriate). We want our children to be comfortable in the services, but we also want them to understand that worship is not the proper place for playing with toys. Sometimes, a child will need to sit down on the floor, but there is never a reason for a child to stretch out to their full length and roll around. When this happens, parents and grandparents can take advantage of the opportunity to teach the child how to sit on the floor with their legs crossed or to sit on one of the stools that are available in the nave. Also, parents and grandparents will often need to communicate with the child about many different things during the services, but this is an excellent opportunity to teach the child how to use their ‘inside voice.’

Guideline #7:

Parents of young children must make special preparations for the homily.

The homilies in our services are never very long—10 to 15 minutes at the most—but those few minutes are a critical time of teaching and exhortation. Consequently, parents should make every effort to ensure that their children do not cause distractions during the homily. For example, families should sit together: when a toddler decides to move from a parent on one side of the nave to a parent on the other side, then that toddler becomes the center of attention. If a child frequently gets loud and fidgety during the homily, then the parents should sit toward the back of the nave and close to the exit—otherwise, their efforts to calm the child become the center of attention. If a child slips away from the parents during the homily thinking that no one will pursue, the parents should simply get up and retrieve the child rather than allowing the child to become the center of attention. Going outside or to the parish house are important options for pre-school children during this portion of the service, but all parents and/or grandparents must be especially attentive to their children during the homily.

Guideline #8:

It is senseless to expect children to behave during the services if they never practice that behavior at home.

If we want our children to be reverent during the services, then we must also practice with them at home. This is when a family prayer time before the icons becomes essential. Each and every day, for just a few minutes, the child is able to practice the sort of behavior that is expected during the services. This reinforces what happens at church, and it gives the parents and/or grandparents many more opportunities for instruction and positive feedback.

Guideline #9:

Let's leave the chairs and benches for those who truly need them.

The seating in our nave is limited. We should be encouraging our children and young people to stand, but, if they do need to sit down--for instance, during the homily--then they should sit on the floor or on one of the stools that are designed for small children. The chairs and benches should be reserved for those who cannot sit on the floor: the elderly, parents or grandparents who are holding infants, and those with poor health or back problems. There is hardly ever a reason for a child or a young person to use a chair or one of the benches.

Guideline #10:

Children need to be supervised when they are using one of the stools.

There are a number of small stools in the nave that are specifically designed for young children. However, children need to be instructed on how to use these seats. Parents and/or grandparents should not allow children to stack the stools or push them around on the carpet or use them as a tumbling apparatus. If children find it difficult to sit quietly on the stools, then it is better for them to simply sit on the floor.

Guideline #11:

Let's all be on the look-out for opportunities to help.

If you see a single parent struggling with a couple of active pre-school children, step in and offer to lend a hand—don't wait for an invitation. Please do all you can to encourage those folks who are parents or grandparents of young children; tell them your stories; share with them what worked for you; offer to lend them any resources you might have. If you see a young person lounging on a bench during the service, tell that young person to get up; if some young people are visiting during the service, tell them to save the conversation for later (if you are uncomfortable telling young people to do these sorts of things, let the ushers know, and they will step in). The services belong to all of us, so we all need to be willing to help out. The children and the young people who attend the services are also our shared responsibility.

Guideline #12:

When we are reverent, we honor the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When we teach our children and young people not to be distracting during the services, we are teaching them something that goes way beyond good manners, because in Orthodox services, people are actually working. They are praying; they are interceding; they are listening for the Holy Spirit to speak in their hearts. Thus, a loud and rambunctious two year old could cause someone to miss a blessing or a call to service. A young person who sits on a bench could deprive someone of the physical comfort they need in order to pray for their family. A group of children playing on the floor after communion could prevent someone from receiving the guidance that they need for the up-coming week. In the services, we want everyone to have every opportunity to hear from the Most Holy Trinity; we want everyone to have a supportive environment in which to do their spiritual work. That is one of the reasons why we place so much emphasis on reverence.

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