

Children in Church

ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Teaneck, New Jersey



“And he took the children
in his arms, put his hands
on them and blessed them.”

Mark 10:16

Children bring much richness to the community gathered at worship. They bring new ways of seeing old familiar rituals, they often show an understanding of the wonder and mystery of the sacraments lost to many adults, and they take nothing for granted. Children also bring noise, awkward questions, loud toys, confusion, and sometimes even donuts. Yet **their presence is essential to the growth and vitality of the church.** Only in the church's welcome at its most sacred moments can children learn the truth of St. Paul's assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God. And only by worshiping together with its children can the community pass on its traditions for praising God through the sacraments, the music, hearing the Word, and the prayers.

✘ Often **children have profound religious and spiritual experiences** because they are not as “defended” intellectually as adults, who may block awareness of God's presence with thoughts. Children are frequently available to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Many adults have been surprised at what children absorb when it seems they are their own world, playing, drawing or coloring.

✘ St. Mark's **welcomes children at all services and programs.** For preschoolers, parents are asked to decide which is more appropriate: participation in the liturgy or the child care program. St. Mark's values the presence of all youngsters in church on Sunday mornings.

✘ How can parents, caregivers and other interested adults help our children come

to understand and participate in the Eucharist, our central worship service? What are our chances of sitting with our kids without hearing the word “boring” a dozen times on Sunday morning? Is it possible to increase attention with an acceptable din? **Some suggestions follow here.**

✘ **The sanctuary is a sacred place**, where your child is one of many people gathered to experience the presence of God among us, within community. Before or after service, talk to your child about how the sanctuary differs from other familiar places (like a playground, movie theater, or classroom).

✘ Come early to get a good seat, **preferably down front** where children can see the liturgical action. The new seating area and the front pews are particularly good for seeing. Even adults get fidgety when seated too far away or behind a lot of people blocking the view. It’s all right if little ones stand on the kneelers to get a good view.

✘ Before the service begins, once you have claimed a seat, you can quietly talk or walk a bit with your child, pointing out the scenes in the windows, special decorations or features of the sanctuary. **Look around together** – this is an interesting place, and most areas or furnishings have special names (font, lectern, nave, etc.).

✘ It helps everyone when you are clear about the behavior you expect once church begins. Consider developing a set of **“church manners”** for your family. During church, offer reminders in a positive way (“We all stand when we sing.” “This is the quiet time: you can talk after the next song.”) Resist the temptation to add “OK?” or “All right?” If your youngster replies “No!” you are stuck! After all, you aren’t asking for consent. You are simply letting your child know how you expect him/her to act in this special place. TIP: try speaking to your children in a whisper close to the ear – they may copy you by responding in the same quiet way.

✘ Set goals that are important and **reachable** for your family. If having quiet surroundings during the Great Thanksgiving is crucial for you, concentrate on helping your children recognize and observe that special time in the service.

✘ Be realistic about limits. Little ones cannot be expected to sit still all the time. However, children in primary/elementary grades are old enough to participate in the liturgy with your help. **The 9 am service has been designed to fit the attention spans of young children; typically 40 to 45 minutes.** This service also has a small amount of music. Take time at home to memorize some common prayers and responses to help these younger church members feel included and involved. (*“The Lord be with you.” “And also with you.”*) **The 11 am service also has “child-friendly” dimensions** including time for the children to move around by joining the Gospel procession in the center aisle and then having a **children’s sermon**.

✘ Follow the lessons, provided in the bulletin, as the lector reads them. Bible story books are in the pews, and good editions are available for home, so that favorite

scriptures can be reread later. Elementary classes study the best-loved stories in the Bible in Church School each week. The Bible story that will be studied in Church School is also the Bible story at the 9 am service. *The Sunday Paper*, available each week in two versions (young and younger) tells the Bible stories in pictures – be sure your child gets one or both versions (you may want to save it for coloring during the sermon or other quiet time).

*Child noise is a **normal** part of life at St. Mark's.*

Remember that your child may sound louder to you than to anyone else.

✘ We all know kids who are gifted noise-makers without a single thing in their hands. However, for those who do bring play things, help them choose **quiet, soft toys**. Too much noise, or too many little noises, can pose real barriers for our hearing-impaired parishioners.

✘ Food, except for nursing or bottles for infants, can present a real hazard for the parishioners who sit in the same pew at another time! A quick drink of water (plus a stop in the restroom) usually forestalls the need for snacks in church. The coffee **hour at 9:45** typically offers a mid-morning snack, which allows us all to concentrate more fully on the “holy meal” that we eat in church.

✘ Sometimes, despite our best efforts, children act up and seem to bother everyone around them. **Please don't feel embarrassed** if you need to take your child out of the service for a few moments – everybody has a bad day occasionally. You can listen to the service from the narthex or lobby, and return when your youngster seems calmer. A small amount of movement disturbs no one.

✘ **Child care in Carroll Hall** (Room 3) is an option for youngsters under 6. In the worst possible case and if nothing will do but to go home, know that the church will be here tomorrow, and next week, always ready to receive you and your children. You do not leave the worshipping community when you attend to your young child's needs.

✘ **Children belong in church.** They are part of this parish family, and we share responsibility for nurturing their spiritual needs. They will thrive with our loving acceptance of them as partners in the faith of Jesus Christ.

“Then Jesus took a child and had him stand in front of them. He put his arms around him and said to them: “Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me.” –Mark 9:36-37

With thanks to St. Columba's Church, Washington, DC for permission to use the basic outline and text of a similar brochure. Some changes and additions have been made by The Rev. Randall Day, St. Mark's Church, Teaneck, NJ. Thanks to Lynne Loomis-Price of St. Mark's for further additions and assistance in editing.