

The Child with Autism in Church

Here are some suggestions to help children with autism, their parents, and other members of the congregation make attendance at Divine Liturgy a time of joy and mutual acceptance.

For the Congregation:

The priest can speak to parishioners about the blessing of having a child with autism in their midst during worship. He can suggest the following:

- Watch for the child's moments of joy and reverence. These children are unaffected by social insecurities, or by consciousness of the fact that others are watching. Their joy in God's creation is unhampered by social convention.
- Understand that the child may express spiritual joy by shrieking.
- Be patient as the child learns, over time, how to be part of the church group. It is difficult for a child on the autism spectrum to find his or her role in the many groups that we all must learn to navigate in life, including the church group.
- Don't feel that a child with autism is "special" and thus need not learn the expectations of the group. Those working with or encountering children with autism should rather help them learn to fulfill their roles in the group, with modifications when necessary.

For the Child:

Every person, but especially the child with autism, must learn what teachers call "attending behaviors" before he or she can learn anything else. These behaviors include looking at people, listening to them, and eventually taking in what is happening at the moment and participating in an appropriate manner. At the Divine Liturgy, this means first attending to the service, and then to God Himself.

Here are some suggestions for helping a child with autism (let's say it's a boy) learn to "attend" in church. They should all be done in cooperation with the parish priest:

- Let the child visit the church during a non-service time, and explore all the nooks and crannies that are so fascinating, getting it out of his system before coming to a service.
- Designate a place in church only for the child, and teach him about his special place, also at a non-service time. The place might be marked with a pillow, a poly spot (a 6-inch rubber circle used to mark a spot on the floor, often in gym classes), or colored tape.
- Tell the boy what he CAN do rather than what he can't: When I go to church I can sing quietly with the choir, I can sit or stand quietly, I can pray quietly, I can watch the priest and other servers, I can notice when the curtain or doors open and close, etc.

- If going to church is treated as the highlight of the week it will be much easier to teach appropriate behavior. Set specific expectations, and if the boy is not meeting these he cannot be in church, and must come out. He is ready to reenter when he displays the expected behaviors. These expectations can be set forth in a *social story* or *power card*.

Here is an example of a social story, which can be gone over several times at home before the child attends church:

My name is Joe. I am a member of _____ Church. I like going to church. In church I can venerate icons. I can light a candle. I can sit in my special spot and read my Liturgy/prayer book. In church it is important to keep a quiet voice. This helps me and the people around me to pray. When I make loud noises in church it makes it hard for other people to hear the priest and the choir. It makes it hard for me to hear the priest and the choir. It is important to keep my hands to myself. Keeping my hands to myself keeps me and other people in the church safe. This makes the people around me happy. If I need a break I can go outside with an adult and come back inside when I am ready to keep a quiet voice and keep my hands to myself.

A power card (usually a notecard) has a picture of a superhero or other figure that appeals to the child, such as Batman. It can be kept in the child's or parent's pocket, for quick and easy reference. The words on the card might read:

- *Batman likes church.*
- *Batman can sing, sit in his special place, read his prayer book and pray quietly in church.*
- *Batman keeps a quiet voice and his hands to himself in church.*
- *When Batman needs a break he can ask for one and go outside with an adult.*
- *When the break is over Batman comes back into church.*

Other suggestions:

- The boy might work for special privileges by acting appropriately in church. Telling him before the service that he is working (by keeping a quiet voice and quiet hands) to get to pass or hold a basket (with adult help) might motivate him to act as part of the group.
- If staying for the whole service is too much—which might be the reason a child gets aggressive in church—the parents could create break cards, and teach the child how to use these before going to church. In church, the child can hand a card calmly to a parent when he needs to take a break. At first there might be 4 or 5 break cards, used with a timer so that the breaks are 3 or 4 minutes long. If behaviors improve, the number of cards and length of breaks can gradually be reduced.
- A picture schedule might give the child a sense of how long the service is, and allows the parents to build in breaks. They could make two columns on laminated paper, one titled

“Liturgy” and the other titled “Finished.” On the “Liturgy” side they would attach, with removable tape, sequential pictures of events in the Liturgy, such as the curtain or doors opening at the beginning, the deacon or priest doing a litany, the Little Entrance, Epistle, Gospel etc. As each part ends, the child can move the picture to the “Finished” side. The parents can insert breaks, perhaps during a little litany or a longer hymn. Breaks can be reduced in number as the child gets more able to manage staying in church.

- Parents can ask their child’s teacher to tell them about methods used in school to help the child be successful during circle time and other activities that require skills similar to those needed in church.
- Parents can decrease the need to use their voices in church by creating cards to give the child visible rather than verbal cues. On 3x5 cards, have pictures of a child sitting quietly, standing, with hands in lap and with fingers over lips. These can be put on a ring and used as needed for cues.
- A helpful book called *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* by Karen Dunn Buron suggests using finger cues to create a “voice volume scale.” One finger (or a card with the number 1 on it) means no talking, two fingers or a card with a 2 means whispering. The scale goes up to 5, a voice volume to be used only for emergencies.
- Some children have sensory needs that need to be addressed if they are to be successful in church. Parents could ask the child’s occupational therapist for suggestions. For some children, the deep pressure input provided by a pressure vest, joint compressions or strong squeezes up and down the legs and arms will be helpful. Weighted vests may also be of use in calming a child’s body during a service. Earphones can help the child deal with any overwhelming auditory input such as loud or high-pitched singing.
- For more serious and persistent behaviors, parents might use “differential reinforcement” (DRI) of an incompatible behavior. For example, a child making verbal outbursts can be reinforced, probably with a favorite food such as half a skittle or a piece of goldfish cracker, for every 30 seconds he goes without such an outburst. (A vibrating timer, called a MotivAider, can be used.) If he makes a verbal outburst he does not receive the reinforcer at the end of 30 seconds and the timer begins again. When he is consistently successful for 30 seconds, the time can be increased to a minute, 2 minutes, etc. This could be practiced in church at a non-service time, and it would be good if possible to work up to 30 minutes before the child goes to a service.

The child with autism can be a joyful worshipper in a parish that will make the effort to be welcoming and nurturing.

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