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## Mass without Tears

In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that one in 68 American 8-year-olds have been identified with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It is most likely that every parish has one or more families raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Although every child is unique, there are common difficulties with social interaction, communication, and patterns of behaviors among all children diagnosed with ASD. Families may not be attending Sunday Mass regularly because they fear their children's behavior is disruptive to others in the congregation. Maybe they have experienced disapproving looks from others, or worse, have been asked to leave Mass. A bulletin announcement such as the following may help educate and further understanding:

*You may notice families in our parish who are helping their children learn how to behave at church. Children with Autism or other disabilities that affect behavior especially need our encouragement and tolerance of what may appear to irreverent behavior. With our prayerful support they will soon recognize and respect sacred space and experience the presence of Christ among us.*

The following suggestions are for families who are nurturing the faith formation of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder:

- † Allow your child to become familiar with the empty church before attending Mass. With your pastor's permission, allow them to explore and touch things. It may take several visits before they feel comfortable in this sensory stimulating environment. Make a checklist with pictures of things to find in church: altar, crucifix, candles, holy water, statues, etc.
- † Transition to proper Mass behavior by reinforcing the difference between visiting an empty church and worshipping at Mass. *When we visit, we walk around; at Mass we sit in the pew.* Although you may instinctively choose to sit in the back or in the cry room, the front pew may be a better choice to hold your child's attention.
- † Practice Mass prayers and rituals at home. Teach through repetition the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. Use hand-over-hand practice for the Sign of the Cross and the "thumb crosses" before the Gospel.
- † Bring along quiet items for fidgety hands to hold: a rosary, interactive books, puzzles, etc.
- † If your child cannot sit quietly for the entire Mass, have them participate in the parish preschool program or Children's Liturgy of the Word, even if your child is older than the other kids. Over time, extend the duration of Mass participation.

*Resources:*

***Spiritually Able***, David and Mercedes Rizzo, Loyola Press, 2015, ***Autism and Your Church***, Barbara Newman, Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2006

*Thank you Catholic Diocese of Toledo, Ohio for sharing the original document with us*

