

Should I stay or should I go? Leading our Children in Worship in Church

The Question is:

Should I stay or should I go? Deciding when to stay in Church with our children or when to take them out can be a difficult question. Is my child too loud? When is loud *too loud*? They might be irritating me but maybe they should stay to get the benefit of the service. But maybe they are being a source of irritation to others, or they might be disturbing the clergy.

Some children “make noise” because they are actually singing in Church—making a *joyful noise* unto the Lord. Some make noise because they are playing with friends and totally oblivious to the Church service. Some parents are anxious over any noise; they are embarrassed and worry what others might think. Other parents do not realize how disruptive their children are, even though they are shouting or yelling during the Gospel reading, Sermon, or Anaphora and everyone is wondering—why aren’t the parents doing something?

Cell Groups of Conversation

A priest has a distinct perspective in the Divine Services—facing the altar standing before God and then turning toward the faithful. Any pastor can tell you that when he turns to give the blessing “Peace be unto all!” or some other blessing from the Lord, there might be four “cell groups of conversations” going on simultaneously: Some servants of the Church might be discussing a valid need; someone who just arrived might be greeting everyone around, someone else is chatting and smiling over some point. All could be for “good” reasons, but it still adds up to a lot of distracted people. It begs the question: how will the children learn to attend? What will they find in the Divine Services if the adults are bored or distracted? I rather hope that the noise of the children bounces off of the absolute attentiveness of the adults. This would be the best starting point for educating the youth.

Being oriented and showing the way

Time in Church shouldn’t be spent just managing behavior. It should be a journey of initiation into worship, and for parents that means spending the time and sacrificing so that our children will learn how to enter into worship. Parents come to Church to pray, but when you come with your

children you come to lead them to Christ and to teach them to pray. If we keep this in mind we won't readily fall into the problem of expecting quiet time and find we are busy taking care of our children.

There are certain special times in the Divine Services in which we should be especially attentive and prayerful. Some of those times are easy to recognize. Whenever the deacon or priest shouts, "**Let us attend**," we should attend, right? But there are other times we need to know about which also require our prayerfulness and attention. Our own education is a key.

If we say, in so many words, "Shut up!" or "Stop making so much noise!" then that is one approach. If we know the Divine Services and what the actions and events in the service mean, then our corrections to our children are a call to attend to the presence of God or the work of the people or clergy. It is different to say to our children (if they are old enough to understand), "John, Father Deacon is proclaiming the Gospel to the people. Did you hear: Let us attend! We should listen." Or: "Father is praying—the clergy and acolytes are praying for the Holy Spirit to come—let's pray too so we will be a part of this." Or: "Listen Katherine, Father is giving us the sermon. Let's listen so we can do what he suggests."

There are many good books that explain the Liturgy and Divine Services. Nikolai Gogol wrote a book called ***Meditations on the Divine Liturgy***. Also, in our bookstore is a wonderful book that expresses the mystery and piety towards the Divine Services called ***Experiences during the Divine Liturgy***, by Protopresbyter Stephanos K. Anagnostopoulos. There is also the book ***A Manual of Divine Services***, by Archpriest Sokoloff, that describes the various services and their details. Attendance and attention with study and prayer will open up vistas and worlds of beauty to us and to our children.

The building blocks of the Divine Services

Adults who participate in the services by chanting, serving in the altar or as sacristans have an easier time paying attention. How can we help the children be more engaged? Why not have them stand at the beginning of the Liturgy when the priest proclaims "**Blessed is the Kingdom**," during the Gospel reading, when the priest blesses, and when the Holy Gifts are brought out for communion? Have them say with you the *Our Father* and

the *Creed*. Find other building blocks that bring them into the service, and little by little they will know the service by heart.

I remember a moment when one of the priests forgot a prayer while in the altar and to our joy and surprise one of the acolytes reminded him. He had been listening after all!

Let us be prepared with something else to do

When we do have to leave the Church Nave, where can we go and what can we do? We should prepare ourselves and work together to build up a strategy for such occurrences. We have external speakers in a number of places around the building so you can still hear the services. There is a speaker in the narthex, the fellowship hall/main room, and the kitchen. So whichever place you land, there will be the possibility to still hear what is going on. The narthex allows you to also peak in. In warmer weather you can be in our modest outdoor playground or in the main room. One parent said that she has to make a re-entry plan so that once she leaves with her child she sets a time limit and way to return.

The nuclear family and the Church Family

The nuclear family should not be seen as an isolated unit in the Church. We are all part of the Church family and community. You can help! We should talk together and work together to care for the children of our Church. Most of all don't judge parents or children. Be assured that they feel it. Develop a relationship with the parents and with their permission with the children so that your help is based on a previously built relationship. What a relief to know that help is on the way.

Should I come and for how long

Determining which services to attend with the children and how long to stay is a spiritual matter better determined in consultation with your spiritual father and between husband and wife. You have to know your own children, develop spiritual strength and interest at home and Church and see what is possible. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos said that children have full noetic power and are able to discern the spiritual nature of worship. They are full members of the Church. But we shouldn't try them beyond their strength or bore them beyond their capacity. Let them taste, touch, enjoy the full laden feast and struggle a bit also. But don't ruin their experience by too many disappointments and admonitions.

Conclusion

There is a whole world that we don't see. It's happening in the back of the Church Nave but also in the narthex, downstairs, on the porch, in the playground or Church kitchen. It's a small world populated by mothers, fathers, children and sometimes an attentive god parent or friend. An important work is in process—raising the next generation of children for God. Discernment, patience, and struggle are at play. Let us pray for the heroes of God who are laying down their life, giving up their comfort, and sacrificing their time of quiet to participate in the art and finesse of initiating our youth into Church life. May these efforts be blessed and may all those who help through their participation and prayers be blessed!

Some rules for Children in the Church

- Children shouldn't run around or wander at will in Church. They can move, but their movements should be contained or worshipful. We can take them around to venerate the icons or light candles as we pray for friends and relatives, for the needs of others, or for the reposed.
- Children shouldn't be eating snacks in the Church nave. Bring them to the narthex or downstairs if they need to eat, both out of a sense of respect for those worshipping God and for the sake of not tempting other children who are fasting.
- The balcony is for the storage of Liturgical items—books, vestments, and supplies. The balcony is also dangerous for small children. Children do not need to be wandering upstairs or playing on the steps.
- It is fine for the children to go out for a while, but children should not be out unattended. The Church is holy but all the people who come and go aren't, and in this regard we should consider it a public place like an airport.
- Children under seven shouldn't be holding a lit candle unattended.

(Fr. Patrick Tishel)