

## Kids and Church



by **Brenda Weisel Comfort**

Anyone who has wrangled a screaming two-year old into church, then marched out 10 minutes later to threaten almost bodily harm knows that kids and church mix about as well as kids and family portraits—it seems like such a great idea, but the execution is a bear.

Sure, anyone can deal with a sleeping infant or an attentive ten year old, but dealing with most other ages presents parents with great amounts of frustration and not a whole lot of satisfaction until much, much later. What makes things extra difficult is that every other parishioner, who at one time or other has been in your shoes, has child-rearing amnesia. Dirty looks, shushing, and ill-timed advice are plentiful; understanding gestures, smiling, and offers of help? Not so much.

Here are some tips from a mom of six who has been in the bench trenches for 19 years and counting...

**1. Take them to church and take them frequently.** Although it seems counterintuitive, frequency of attendance is the best way to accustom your kids to life in the church. Lots of parents give up because it doesn't seem to be working (ie. the kid is noisy, the kid is obnoxious, the kids is "bored"), but in fact when you quit, the kid wins. The more you go to church, the easier it becomes to go to church.

**2. Go to bed early.** Treat Saturday night like a school night. You wouldn't let your child stay up late on a Wednesday, so why are letting him or her stay up late on a Saturday? Getting up early for church is more difficult when you and the kids are exhausted, so do yourself a favor and get everyone into pjs earlier.

**3. Go to Great Vespers (if it's available) and say evening prayers.** In the OCA, Great Vespers on Saturday evening is typical, while in other jurisdictions, Matins or Orthros is the norm. If any of these services are an option, and you are able, attempt to be there. Make sure to say evening prayers before the kids go to bed. If possible, add some Pre-Communion prayers at the end.

**4. Reduce your activity level the night before.** Around here, we try to not watch TV, cruise the web, or play video games on Saturday night (sometimes we fail—especially Mel and I). Doing this reduces the noise level in the house and helps us prepare our hearts for receiving Christ the next morning. Reading books, playing board games, and being together as a family can take precedence when screens aren't grabbing our attention.

**5. Dress up for church.** Wear your best clothes because you are going to God's house. You can wear your sweats, yoga pants, jeans, and t-shirts anytime, but there aren't many opportunities to dress up. Plus, your attire really does influence your attitude and your kids' attitudes. On another note, if I were more organized, the kids would lay out their clothes the night before, but I'm not that organized. I am just relieved that they are wearing clean clothes.

**6. Pray at home.** Since what we do at home is a reflection of what we do at church, it's important to [pray with your kids](#). This allows you to teach them how to make the sign of the cross and when to make the sign of the cross. It also allows you to teach them to stand with their feet facing the icons (or in church, the altar), to hold still, and to focus on the prayers that are being said. Of course, they will fidget and drive you crazy, right up until they go to college, but that's their job.

**7. Have realistic expectations.** You will spend a lot of time in the narthex or the nursery with your baby, and you will miss almost every Gospel reading because the toddler has to go potty. Sometimes you will have to give up and go home because everything falls apart and there's no redeeming the situation because vomit is involved. You will have to attend school events for your older kids when you would rather be in church. These things happen. Try to be realistic about what you can and can't do, then try not to complain.

**8. Leave the toy box and refrigerator at home.** Pretty early on, I realized that toys and food just cause trouble. For some reason, the least favorite toy always becomes the most important thing in the universe and must be wrenched from a sibling's hands once Liturgy starts. Eventually, we only brought a kids' prayer book and some Cheerios. For the longer services, I would bring a pencil and paper, but I

usually regretted it.

**9. Set an example.** Be on time. Read the Gospel the night before. Follow the pre-communion fasting guidelines (unless you are pregnant or it's medically necessary to break the fast). Don't get into an argument in the car on the way to church. Love each other and be kind.

**10. Help each other.** Don't expect your spouse to do all the kid duties in church. Help each other out by taking turns. Between the two of you, you might be present for one half of the church service! According to Mel, we spent the first 13 years of our Orthodox life in the narthex. He's probably right.

All these things may seem impossible, but I'm here to tell you that it pays off in the long run. Our job as Orthodox parents is to pass our faith and traditions on to our kids. When they leave your home it will be too late to teach them the importance of going to church, so don't give up! That fidgety toddler will one day grow up to be an adult, and will make her choice to be faithful, in large part because you made the choice for her when she was two.

**Source: What's Cooking**