

Children Need to Be Welcomed

The parish needs to help its youngest parishioners feel as though they belong. Signs of welcome are readily apparent. When I was a young mother with four preschool children, for example, I could tell the moment we entered any home how welcome we were. I merely had to watch our hostess. It had nothing to do with what she said or did, it was all in the way she looked at the children. They knew it, too.

Parishes are the same way. Children can tell how welcome they are just by the way people look at them or don't look at them. The easiest way to evangelize children is by surrounding them with smiling, affirming faces in the classroom, the parish hall and church vestibule. On occasion, parishioners and staff members may need to be encouraged to attend to the parish children, acknowledging their presence in positive ways and expressing how important they are to the whole parish family.

Public rituals. Many parishes ritually “enroll” youngsters who are preparing to receive a first sacrament. In addition other rituals can also be planned for youngsters, celebrating the beginning and end of the school year with a special blessing ceremony, or recognizing birthdays at the end of Sunday liturgy. Rituals can be short and simple as long as they recognize young people and help them feel a special part of the community.

Liturgy of the Word. Many parishes regularly tailor the Sunday liturgy to children through a children's Liturgy of the Word, giving them an opportunity to understand and reflect on Scripture as it pertains to them and their peers. Leaders must ensure that such time with children remains “liturgy” as distinct from lesson-time or arts and crafts. Most such word liturgies are held in a room or building separate from the main assembly at Mass. When the youngsters join the larger community to hear the proclamation of the Gospel, the parish could, at least on occasion, publicly recognize them.

Some homilists also make it a point two or three times each year to preach to the children rather than the adults. One priest

I know of does both. Once a month, he calls the parish children up front and speaks to them for a few minutes before addressing the adults. It only seems fair, after all, since most of the time we ask children to listen to adult sermons. Some adults have said the most effective homilies they ever heard were those intended for children.

Comfortable space. On entering some homes, a parent knows instantly to advise the children, “Stay close and don’t touch anything, we won’t be staying here long.” Some parishes, unfortunately, send out the same message, “Don’t touch.”

All children must be taught to respect property and possessions. They must also learn where in the parish plant they can run, jump and crawl without hurting themselves or anything else. Ideally there should be some space designed with children specifically in mind. Common areas in the parish ought to be designed to accommodate youngsters as well as adults. Our churches and their surrounding areas would then feel less like showcases than homes. Parish children need to be seen and heard.

Have Fun and Be Realistic

No one expects Little Leaguers to throw an eighty-mile-an-hour fastball, or fourth graders to master algebra—such abilities develop gradually. So it is with a child’s religious development. The best teachers can do is to help each child experience God and learn about God (the Church and the world) as only a child can. Teachers must create for them an environment in which their faith can be ignited and the flame of faith can grow stronger.

Learning the faith can be a positive experience for young people. Why not offer weekend or evening programs celebrating the liturgical season (Advent, Christmas or Easter), or a Christian theme with activities that are enjoyable? (The activity, *Sharing the Bounty*, mentioned in Chapter Eight, “The Catechesis of Christian Service,” on page 55, is one example.) Children’s work is their play. Why not use it? Through creative games and interesting activities, young people will learn.