



“Attends Mass” – A Parent’s Introduction

Introduction to “Attends Mass”¹

- ✦ Program is based on the way people with Autism Spectrum Disorders learn, in context and with systematic support.
- ✦ This makes it the logical “first step” or beginning of the curriculum for celebrating First Reconciliation and First Eucharist.
- ✦ Being present in Mass allows your son/daughter to feel a part of the community and for the parish to view him/her as part of the community.
- ✦ The time your son/daughter is at Mass with Mass Mentor is actually part of his/her religious education, so the Mass schedule should be taken as seriously as that for religious education. Even more so considering the importance of consistency and repetition.

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**Parent to Parent:
A Few Words about the "Attends Mass" Program²**

What do we parents want for our children?

To be part of a family

To belong to a community

We are Catholic - attending Mass is part of who we are

All children deserve this

Baptism

We promised our children at baptism to help them grow as members of the Catholic community

When we need to teach them to behave in a way that will make the community want to embrace them, we help to fulfill our promises to them

Best thing about church – will provide community for life

Took us 2 years to learn to participate in mass; 5 years to learn to say the Our Father

Think long term

Autism: a marathon; not a sprint

What will this behavior look like in 5 years? In 10 years?

Think about adult lives of our kids

Changes to current routines are part of raising kids in the church

Teaching them to attend mass successfully will allow your child to be his/her own best advocate

Newark Archdiocesan "Attends Mass" Program

This opportunity is a gift

Most parents have to pay for this sort of expertise

Experts are here to guide you - trust them

Your child will not do anything these professionals haven't seen before

² Mary Beth Walsh, PhD

Overview of the Process and Things to Consider³

✦ Process/Timeline:

- ♥ *First time to Mass*, Mass Mentor observes the family attending Mass. *From this is learned what behaviors to work on and when the child should come into Mass the following week.* Utilizing backward chaining, s/he will come toward the end of Mass. Typically it is the last 5 or 10 minutes to begin with. As his/her skill increases in attending Mass, s/he will arrive earlier and earlier until present for the entire Mass.
 - *Determine which pew* would be good to sit in the following Sunday. This is usually coordinated with the ushers for the Mass. In fact it is helpful to speak to them if possible that day. Archdiocesan office will also help coordinate that with the parish. The Mass Mentor/Buddy will coordinate that with Archdiocesan office.
- ♥ The following Sunday, *the Mass Mentor should meet family outside of the church and bring your son/daughter into church.* It is preferable that you remain outside, but at least don't let your son/daughter see you go in. In the beginning though, it will be so late in the Mass, it makes more sense to wait in your car.
 - Because length of the Mass can vary based on who is presiding, it seems good to work out a signal system. For example, a 5 minute warning via cell phone text.
 - Mass Mentor and parents should discuss what would work best for a reinforcer. Remember the importance of maintaining the potency of the item.
 - *After Mass, Mass Mentor will return your son/daughter to the car.* Typically, there is no conversation at that time, other than to say, "nice job" and good-bye, and confirm time for next week's Mass. Any discussion would happen via email or phone, away from him/her and not right after Mass.
- ♥ *At the end of Mass*, time in Mass for the following week will be determined. Also confirm which Mass attending the following week, though it is recommended to attend the same Mass each week.
- ♥ Based on progress, the time in Mass will be increased.
- ♥ At some point, the Mass Mentor will "fade out" and will serve as consultant for the family.

³Linda Meyer, Ed.D., MPA, BCBA-Z, CPT; Meredith Dodds, M.Ed.; Casi Healy, MA, BCBA; Mark Mautone; Jessica Rothschild, MA; Sharon Reeve, Ph.D., BCBA-D

- ♥ When your son/daughter is attending the whole Mass successfully, the family can begin attending together. The Mass Mentor will be present for that as there may be transition issues. You will also be taught how to maintain the system.
 - ♥ How long this process takes really depends on the individual. Factors that impact this are: consistency, frequency attending Mass, using the correct reinforcer and maintaining its potency.
- ⌘ Important to think of long term goals for behavior
- ⌘ Age Appropriateness: be aware of the perceptions of different behaviors, for example hand holding is very acceptable for a 5 year old, however not so much with a 10 year old or older. Other behaviors to think about that want to be diminished as child ages: sitting on lap, cuddling in public,
- ♥ The ability to participate in a large group situation is called "crowd participation," to the extent that the person would not be picked out as someone with autism by an independent observer.
 - ♥ Paying attention to age appropriateness of behavior is an important part of preparing for independence, even though that may feel far off into the future, or at least for the time when parents are no longer present.
- ⌘ Basic Contingency Management /Reinforcement Systems:
- ♥ Important to use highly preferred item to reinforce desired behavior.
 - ♥ Withhold preferred item to only be used at Mass, or at least do not use it for three or four days before Mass.
 - ♥ Keep the amount or size of portion small. In the beginning it is given with high frequency. The frequency will diminish over time, but it is important to not do so too quickly.
 - ♥ Proactively supporting desired behavior requires immediate response. It is critical to be ready to reinforce when ready, otherwise can reinforce the wrong behavior.
 - ♥ Consistency is critical.
- ⌘ Flexibility:
- ♥ Typically, *lack* of flexibility is part of autism diagnosis
 - ♥ This is an important skill to teach people with autism for successful inclusion in the community
 - ♥ The Mass offers many opportunities for this: where to sit, the people nearby, homily, music, etc
 - ♥ Though it can feel daunting to do this, the long range benefits are large and touch all areas of life.