

Babysitting During Mass/Mother's Day Out Programs

Many parishes supervise and care for young children in settings outside of a classroom. This includes babysitting during masses and Mother's Day Out programs. Good adult supervision is always emphasized. The ratio of adult supervisors to children is always affected by the children's ages, the activity taking place, and whether it is in a controlled area. For any of these operations, there should always be at least two supervisors present. It is also recommended to have nursery employees and volunteers complete a screening questionnaire.

Babysitting during Mass

For babysitting during mass, the nursery room should have restricted access. A sign-in and sign-out log should always be utilized. Many larger churches issue a card or similar item which must be presented by the parent or guardian when signing out the child they signed in. A best practice would include obtaining a phone number from the guardian to call in the event of a medical emergency with the child.

Keep your staff-child ratios as high as possible. Minimum ratios should be 1:3 for children under 2; 1:5 for children ages 2-5; 1:10 for children ages 5-7; and 1:15 for children over 7. Keep in mind that staff refers to those at least 21 years of age. Younger adults can be used as helpers, but should not be considered as part of maintaining the appropriate staff-child ratio.

Carefully check the area these children will be occupying and playing in. Are free standing shelves, floor cabinets, or other items stable and/or secured to eliminate tip-over potential? Toys and play equipment should be age-appropriate for the safety of the children. These items should be regularly inspected and discarded if they are broken or potentially hazardous. Toys and equipment should also be cleaned and disinfected to reduce the transfer of germs. Diaper changing tables should be disinfected after each use. Changing tables should have a rail along the edges to prevent the infant from rolling off. An infant should never be left alone on the table, no matter how briefly.

While conducting your safety checks, ensure that all cribs are in good condition and the latches and locks for any adjustable side rails work properly. Electrical outlet safety caps should be placed over all unused outlets.

The nursery should have an incident/accident form to document accidents. The information on this form should include what happened, whether there was any injury,

and a listing of any witnesses. A first aid kit including bandages, sterile gauze, and disposable gloves should be available to treat minor injuries. All staff should be familiar with the location and use of a portable fire extinguisher. All staff should also be familiar with two paths of exiting in the event a fire emergency occurs. Smoke detectors are an additional safeguard recommended for the nursery.

Always check the Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) website for warnings and recalls on toys with choking hazards, furniture such as cribs/high chairs, strollers or other baby equipment/supplies.

Mother's Day Out programs

Some parishes may allow this type of child care/babysitting program on a weekly or monthly interval. Usually, it is organized by parishioners with little or no involvement or supervision by the church. As this activity is taking place on your property, even though you may have no direct involvement, your parish could still be held responsible for an accident or injury.

Therefore, your parish needs to make sure that all adults involved with the program are aware of applicable rules, procedures, and supervisory requirements. Items reviewed under the previous section of this article are applicable for Mother's Day Out programs. A sign-in and sign-out sheet should be utilized. In addition, all parents and guardians participating in the program must provide a completed and signed form listing necessary medical and health information on the child as well as consenting to medical treatment in the event needed. This form would be similar to what is required by a school or day care facility and is necessary as the parent/guardian will be leaving the premises. An incident/accident form should also be available.

If your parish does not have a room which would be conducive to providing a safe and controlled area, we would recommend against allowing this program. Under these circumstances, parents may elect to rotate the use of their own homes which would separate the church from potential exposure, provided that the parish does not sponsor the activity.

During one parish's Mother's Day Out program, a three-year old boy left the room unnoticed through a door which was not closed and latched as it should have been. An extension cord running through the doorway prevented proper closure. The boy went up a flight of stairs immediately outside the room and fell through an open railing located above the concrete stairway. Miraculously, he suffered only minor injuries. Please do your part in assuring that children are provided a safe and protected area during these activities.