

Acceptance grows for autistic kids in church

by [Kelly Heyboer](#)

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CALDWELL, N.J. (RNS) Halfway through a Mass in Caldwell College's campus chapel, Chase Keith rose to his feet for one of the most challenging parts of a challenging day.

It required the boy from Basking Ridge, N.J., to offer his hand to strangers in the traditional sign of peace. With his mother whispering in his ear and guiding his arm, the 7-year-old stuck out his small hand toward a fellow parishioner.

"How you? Peace," Chase said.

Afterward, his mother slipped him a Goldfish cracker as a reward for his correct behavior. Chase had gone through months of intensive training with a specialist to get to this point -- where he could sit through a Catholic Mass with his family.

Chase, who has autism, is among a growing number of children with developmental disabilities who are being welcomed at religious services.

Autism is particularly acute in New Jersey, which has the nation's highest rate of autism, affecting about one in every 94 children, compared to the national rate of about one in every 150 children.

The symptoms of the disorder differ from person to person, but most children with autism have social, behavioral and communication problems. Some may shout or laugh at inappropriate times or have trouble keeping still. Others have an aversion to loud noises or crowds.

That makes attending a Catholic Mass -- with its big crowds, loud music and periods of silence -- daunting for many families dealing with

autism. Some report receiving disapproving looks from fellow churchgoers and scoldings from ushers. Others say their children have been denied Communion by disapproving priests or been told by parishioners that they "don't belong" at Mass.

In Minnesota, one church made headlines in 2008 when it got a court order to ban a 13-year-old with autism from Mass because of his loud outbursts.

"The church has a wonderful theology and heart. ... We don't always live it out well," said Anne Masters, the director of pastoral ministry with persons with disabilities for the Archdiocese of Newark.

Masters oversees a program designed to welcome Catholics with disabilities. Her "Attends Mass" program includes training for religious educators and support groups for parents. A handful of churches offer special monthly Inclusive Family Masses, where children with autism and other disabilities are permitted to be loud or disruptive without fear of being asked to leave.

"There is some more awareness being developed in the parishes," Masters said. "They're asking for it."

Other religions have also made efforts to be more inclusive of children with developmental disabilities, though the programs are usually local and not well-known, advocates say. Some synagogues have programs to help children with autism make their bar or bat mitzvah.

Mary Beth Walsh, a Caldwell College adjunct professor and parent of an autistic teenager, is on a seven-member task force formed by the National Catholic Partnership on Disability to study how churches across the nation deal with autism.

"Autism can be a very isolating diagnosis," said Walsh, of Maplewood, N.J. "Sometimes the only place you can go as a family is church."

Walsh began taking her son, Ben Hack, to church when he was 5 years old. In the early days, Walsh said she wondered if it was worth the

trouble. "How's he ever going to have a personal relationship with someone he can't see?" Walsh said, referring to God.

In the end, Walsh decided it was enough for her son to have a relationship with people gathering in Christ's name. Ben now considers church one of his favorite places and plans on being confirmed, Walsh said.

At a recent Mass, Ben helped bring the bread and wine up to the altar. He smiled and laughed through the service, paying close attention to the priest. When the bishop donned his tall miter at the end of the service, Ben put his program on his head, copying the gesture.

About a dozen children across the state have gone through a special free training program where they work with autism specialists, called "Mass mentors" and "Mass buddies," who slowly teach them how to attend Mass. The one-on-one training starts by taking children to the last five minutes of a service.

"All they were required to do was sit quietly," said Jessica Rothschild, a Caldwell College graduate student who served as a Mass mentor for four children.

The children go to Mass a little earlier each day or each week for months, in a practice known as "backward chaining." They are given food or other rewards for correct behavior. Eventually, most are able to attend the entire service, said Rothschild, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on the method.

Caldwell College's new Center for Autism and Applied Behavior Analysis is preparing undergraduate and graduate students to use a campus chapel to train children with autism to go to religious services, said Sharon Reeve, the center's executive director.

"I can turn that chapel into a synagogue, a mosque, whatever they need," Reeve said. "The procedure is applicable to any denomination."