

## Tips for Creating Sensory-Friendly Prayer Spaces

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God created us body and soul, which means there are many ways to pray not just with our minds and hearts, but also with our bodies. Providing opportunities for children to involve their five senses in prayer without overstimulating them can help them stay grounded and focused, enabling them to engage with God on a deeper level.

One way to do this is to create a special prayer corner (or nook, den, or tent) in a room where your child feels safe. Choose a quiet spot that can be set apart and used only for prayer. The goal is to make a space where your child can be calm and present with God. This will foster your child's ability to interact with God in whatever way comes most naturally. It will also help him or her and cultivate positive associations with prayer and God through their senses.

Below are several ideas to help you get started with making a prayer space. Choose what to include or not include based on your child's specific needs, age, and personality. Consider what will most foster prayer and what might instead become distracting or overstimulating. Make the space feel cozy, welcome, and special while keeping the space open and not too cluttered.

### Ideas of what to include in a prayer space:

- A plush or textured rug, comfy pillow, beanbag chair, or homemade prayer mat for a comfortable place to sit or kneel. Cork mats can also absorb the sounds of movement within this space.
- A soft drape or curtain to set the space apart while still allowing for non-intrusive adult supervision.
- A small table or dresser covered with a nice cloth to set things on.
- An electric candle, lantern, fairy lights, or sensory lights to set the mood.
- A device that can play meditative music (such as monastic chant or instrumental versions of favorite hymns) and audio prayers (especially gentle repetitive ones like a rosary for children).
- Soothing windchimes or a hanging mobile.
- An essential oil diffuser, incense, or a scented candle (to smell, not to light). Choose a calming scent or a scent that reminds your child of church, such as frankincense, myrrh, or nard.
- Favorite images of Jesus, the saints, a Bible scene, or a holy site that has special meaning for your child.
- A crucifix or statue of Jesus that your child can touch or hold without it breaking.
- A place to display favorite holy cards.

### Sensory aids to prayer

Sensory aids can help your child pray in different ways. You can teach your child what each of these aids mean and how to use them. Some of these items can also be packed in a portable prayer bag for taking to Mass or on trips.

- An age-appropriate rosary (*note*: rosaries are available in different sizes, weights, textures, and colors. Find one that your child wants to hold.)
- A prayer shawl or weighted vest/blanket to remind the child of the warmth of God's love or Mary's mantle
- Noise-canceling headphones or a sound machine that plays brown, pink, and white noise if the space isn't as quiet as your child needs it to be
- A children's Bible and a few favorite religious books
- A plush doll of Jesus, a favorite saint, or an animal that is significant in the Bible (such as a lamb or a dove)
- A smooth wooden pocket cross
- A necklace or string of saint medals (many of these are embossed so that the child can feel the image as well as see it)
- Religious coloring books
- Scraps of paper and crayons or pencils for drawing or writing prayers and messages to Jesus

- A special bowl or a string with clothespins for keeping these prayers and messages
- A felt board or magnets with images from Bible stories
- Religious-themed crafts your child has made, such as decorated prayer stones (painted with favorite symbols of the Faith) or glitter jars (filled with gold or white sparkles to recall the beauty of God's grace)

### Liturgical seasons

You can also add special decorations and items to the prayer corner for different liturgical seasons, such as:

- *Advent*: Advent calendar or Advent wreath (with paper or electric candles)
- *Christmas*: a child's nativity set, a small artificial tree to decorate with homemade prayer ornaments, or a birthday card for Baby Jesus
- *Lent*: a purple paper chain to count down the days to Easter
- *Easter*: plastic Easter eggs filled with prayers of gratitude and petition in an Easter basket for Jesus
- A basket of liturgically colored tablecloths (green, purple, white, and red) that your child can lay out on the dresser or table for each season.

### More tips

Encourage your child to spend time in the prayer corner whenever he or she wants to talk to God or is feeling overwhelmed and in need of quiet. (Be careful not to use this as a "time-out" area. Ideally, your child will perceive the prayer corner as a sanctuary, not as a punishment). By having an accessible holy space where children can engage with different types of prayer through sensory experiences, they can learn to love spending time with God and grow more familiar with ways of quieting themselves to better hear his voice.

To find sensory-friendly prayer environments outside the home, you can check if your parish or diocese offers a sensory-friendly Mass (a Mass where overstimulating elements of the liturgy are lessened or removed and the congregation is well-informed about children with diverse needs). If your child finds incense overstimulating, you can also call your parish or check their website before feast days to see if they offer a Mass without incense. Help your child prepare for public prayer services by explaining ahead of time what to expect, and arrive early enough to find a spot to sit where your child will be most comfortable.

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\*These suggestions are based on creating a prayer corner in a home setting for one child. In a family with multiple children, you could either let each child have his or her own prayer corner so that it can be personalized to each child's needs and stage of development, or you could create a shared prayer corner that can also become a center for family prayer. If the prayer corner is shared, it is helpful to lay ground rules about respecting the quiet and giving siblings space when they are using it. These suggestions can also be adapted to a classroom setting.

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