

Part IV

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

INTRODUCTION

(taken from Maryvale Institute)

The present day represents the age of inclusion for persons with disabilities. Most children with disabilities who come to a parish religious education program will already be in an inclusive education program in their public school. They are learning side by side with their typical peers. When children with disabilities are in a parish religious education program, they are to be in a regular classroom with support. The key to successful inclusion is support. Special children learn their faith side by side with their typical peers of the same chronological age. Even if a child has mental retardation, he or she is not to be placed with children younger than himself/herself. This type of placement does not respect the dignity of the human person.

Children learn best when they learn together. When children with disabilities are with their typical peers, it is often the typical child who benefits the most. Typical children have the opportunity to grow in understanding, acceptance, and compassion when they grow together with special children. All of this interaction is a healthy preparation for adult life.

TEACHING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

One of the pastoral challenges facing catechists is to meet the needs of those who have special needs of any sort. Certain principles underlie this catechesis:

1. Get to know the individual

As part of preparation and assessment, getting to know the individual in a special catechetical situation allows possible insights into the person which can help decide how the catechesis is going to be delivered and what the appropriate approach or program should be. The opportunity to practice or learn greater social skills may be an important component of catechesis and should be part of the equation.

2. Identify need and gifts/strength

Working with an individual's strengths will facilitate meeting his or her needs – ex. child who is gifted in art will benefit from catechesis through artwork.

3. Be inspired through Scriptural reflection

Scripture is filled with accounts of exchanges between Christ and others in various need, (Philip and the Ethiopian who doesn't understand, the man who cannot walk and is lowered through the roof by his friends etc)

4. Place yourself in the shoes of your participants

"What might capture my attention? When have I felt bored?" "When have I felt confused by something?" "Who helped me understand, and how?"

5. Call the individual by his or her name

The Gospel message is given to each individual by name. This emphasis the value of the person addressed and the personal character of the message, puts the message in the 'here and now' and draws our attention back if we are 'wandering'. To be called by one's name is very powerful. The tense is usually the present and any activity and symbol is either experienced within the session or referred to because it is familiar, occurring regularly and recently in the candidate's life. This approach is typical of symbolic catechesis.

6. Work with the individual's parents

Express your sincere desire for the individual to feel welcome and do well in your setting. Ask what helps at school and at home. No one knows the individual better than the parents.

7. Do some research

Search the web or catechetical resources for adaptations that fit the need you are seeing. Sometimes basic accommodations can be made with a few simple steps.

8. Consider where the best venue for catechesis will be and the timing of the sessions.

Those who live in institutions or require a caregiver, like everyone else, have times of the day when they feel more alert. They may feel more comfortable in some environments than others and they may wish for a period of time before or after a catechetical session when they can be quiet, or can have a cup of tea. Some children as well as adults use a wheelchair, which may necessitate a particular form of transport to go outside the usual residence. Most importantly adults particularly may want the right to receive catechesis without the presence of staff or family caregiver. The inner process can be a very private thing. However, there can be a tendency in most of us to work with the routine of the institution, the rota of the staff, the requirements of the caregiver or own convenience.

9. Consider the choice of language and presentation.

The Church is very aware of the value of ritual, of drama even (think of the mediaeval mystery plays), and general presentation. The vestments worn in the Mass at different seasons of the year, the music and the incense all attract the senses. Holding aloft the Gospel Book and showing it to all the people is a very explicit gesture, holding the attention and indicating the tremendous importance of the Word of God. When a liturgy is done well it has a richness of presentation that reinforces and strengthens the catechesis contained. If for some other reason, individuals have difficulty in hearing or understanding the words, catechists need to become aware of that and help them to find a way of compensating. Since liturgy is primarily symbolic communication, it is very possible that someone unable to put the experience of faith celebrated in a sacrament into words and logical categories might nonetheless be very well prepared for its reception.

10. Consider how to integrate the individual into catechetical activities.

"Evangelization and catechesis for individuals with disabilities must be geared in content and method to their particular situation ... great care should be taken to avoid further

isolation of people through these programs, which, as far as possible, should be integrated with the normal catechetical activities of the parish."

Option One - Preparation within a peer group in the parish. Weigh up what is in the best interests of the candidate but also consider whether peers will benefit. If two catechists are working with thirty children, one of whom has a very limited attention span and constantly requires attention another approach has to be devised. However, if there is sufficient support for the child with special needs, the other children are not distracted and she/he will clearly benefit from the parish program, proceed.

Peers can benefit from mixing with children with extra needs from an early age. Adults can gain a greater awareness and respect, seeing another human being rather than a problem.

Take into account age when considering this option. It would not be appropriate for instance for a forty year old (with a young mental age) to be prepared for First Communion with a group of eight year old children in the parish.

Option Two - Allow candidates to be included among their peers, while providing extra support. A catechist who has taken the time to know the candidate can be a support within the parish preparation and assess whether extra input is required at the same time. If it is, sometimes it is useful to adapt the parish program so as to concentrate on a salient point in the theme of a session. For other candidates extra sessions using Symbolic Catechesis are more productive. Whichever way forward is chosen the candidate has the right to be prepared by someone who is aware of suitable methods and approaches in preparing children and adults with learning difficulties or other special needs. Flexibility and respect for the uniqueness of the individual is probably the key.

Recognition of a candidate's age and experience does not mean that we dismiss the learning difficulty. Stages of development are important too and it is usually the case that language, example/ illustration and activity should recognize the power of the concrete. If the individual can relate to a 'lived' experience we are half way there. Concepts are too nebulous. Questions can prove threatening, either because they can smack of the interrogator or the teacher, or because they are not understood. Avoid the question 'why?' particularly. 'Why' requires quite a complex thought process followed by an answer that can formulate that thought process into words.

Option Three – Symbolic - Much thought, study and practical application has led to its eventual development as a valid and respected method of catechesis. Influences have come from education, especially Montessori, and developmental psychology as well as religion and the experience of pastors and catechists in Europe and the U.S.A., in particular SPRED.

In particular symbol, ritual, sensory input and narrative mime and drama are effective means of preparation for people with learning difficulties. As a picture does not need

words, so symbolic catechesis actually benefits from an economy of words, which have been carefully chosen so as to be within the comprehension of most people without being patronizing. Crucially, words should be used to convey only one point at a time.

Many of us are able to combine the cognitive and the intuitive in our nature to a greater or lesser extent but some have a considerable bias towards the cognitive rather than the other as we grow older. While intuition can be strong in childhood we tend to suppress our intuitive side in favor of logic and reason as we move into the ability to recognize and develop conceptual thought. Developmentally, a preponderance of adults with learning difficulties continue to use their intuitive ability. Their 'understanding' therefore is not easily expressed in the accepted way simply because it is not a cognitive understanding. What we, as catechists, are looking for is the response of the heart, which is not often expressed verbally but is much more subtle. That is why it is so important that candidate and catechist get to know each other well. It is only when there is an easy and trusting relationship that the intuitive response can be called forth and recognized.

It is this 'I getting to know' that is the key to the preparation of profoundly disabled people, who may have no verbal language or other recognized communication skill. There are other signals, other skills that we gradually perceive or are helped to see by others who know the individual well. Body language is an obvious one, though it can be very deceptive if, for instance, the candidate has cerebral palsy. Sometimes it is a smile, an eager expression on the face, eyes lighting up, that says 'yes, this is it'. This unique person, made in the image of God, is wanting a faith relationship and maybe here, at this moment, is aware of the presence of God.

Resources used for this article:

(Mark R. Francis C.S.V., 'Celebrating the Sacraments with those with Developmental Disabilities: Sacramental Liturgical Reflections', in Foley, Edward (ed.). *Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access*. Liturgical Press, 1994.)

(Pastoral Statement of u.s. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities, rev. ed. 1989 par. 25)

[Special Religious Education Department] (see The series: Sharing our Faith).

ATTITUDES

Teacher Attitudes and Expectations

Your attitudes toward students with disabilities set the tone of the classroom and shape the interactions among students. One important aspect of attitude is expectation. Research findings have repeatedly emphasized the influence of teacher expectation on student performance. If teachers expect students to have behavior problems, students may very well fulfill this expectation. Labels may affect expectations. Frequently, labels introduce a set of preconceived characteristics (stereotypes) causing a teacher who is assigned a class including a student with a disability to envision a specific behavior pattern before even meeting the student. You should be aware of your own attitudes and expectations

and should ascribe to labels no greater import than the information they provide about how the student learns and what the student needs.

Student Attitudes

Placing students with disabilities into the "mainstream," or regular class, does not guarantee that they will be liked, accepted, or chosen as friends by their peers. Without careful attention by sensitive catechists, such a placement could even be a harmful experience.

You will find that working closely in advance with the parents, the student, and the resource or special class teacher, may be instrumental in preparing the student with disabilities for regular classroom experiences. To prepare the class for the entry of a student with disabilities, focus on student similarities rather than differences. Deal forthrightly and comfortably with students' questions, letting them know it is all right to discuss disabilities. Two other approaches can promote positive relationships among students: encourage cooperative learning tasks and establish ways for students to help each other.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING

In small groups, students work together on tasks that encompass all the students' abilities. Cooperative learning is the opposite of competition, which may not be fair to all students with disabilities. To teach cooperation, the catechist must be ready to help by:

1. Giving the student with the disability a structured role in the group.
2. Showing that each member of the group has different skills.
3. Emphasizing that the best work will need everyone's contribution.
4. Teaching typical students and students with disabilities how to cooperate.
5. Adapting the tasks so that the student with a disability can succeed. This may mean giving group members different tasks, and varying the amount of work each member receives, or using improvement rather than performance as a measure of success.

PEER TUTORING

Another way to promote acceptance among students is to encourage them to help each other. They do it all the time, informally. Given a little training, students can learn how to teach and encourage their peers, and in the process they can improve their understanding of the subject and of themselves. Students with disabilities do not always need to be on the receiving end. Their strengths can be used to help their classmates, and they can develop confidence in so doing. Students have great gifts of faith to share with their classmates. Peer teaching will not work without some guidance from catechists. In regular sessions with the tutors, catechists can demonstrate methods of instruction and answer specific questions, especially about the tutor's feelings.

One unexpected benefit of the peer teaching approach is the effect it may have on the rest of the students. Students may begin to look out for their new friend in other situations outside the classroom. As students see their classmates assuming the tutor role, they may

become interested as well, and associating with students who have disabilities may take on greater status. Above all, some real contact is being made between students who might otherwise never have gotten to know each other.

ORGANIZING THE ENVIRONMENT

THE PHYSICAL STRUCTURE

Catechists organize the learning environment all the time, consciously or unconsciously. There are some very simple steps a catechist can take to maintain order. For example, desks can be grouped in ways that encourage or discourage interaction among students, and learning centers can be set up to structure independent work or provide for small group instruction. Areas for rewards and punishment (time-out space) can also be designated.

Students with special needs may need special equipment. For example, young children with physical problems may need to use a prone board while doing fine motor tasks, because positioning in a certain way gives them the greatest control over their movements. Therapists will advise you about these kinds of special needs, but incorporating the special equipment into the classroom routine will be of help. Seating considerations are another important aspect of physically structuring the class. Children with hearing impairments who rely on lip-reading skills will naturally need seating that gives them a clear view of the catechist or other speaker with adequate lighting on the speaker's face. Children who are easily distracted may be best placed near quiet self-directed classmates, rather than beside other children who are easily distracted. Students with visual impairments should be situated so that it is easy for them to find their seats and equipment (braille writers, low vision aids, or other aids).

SUMMARY

Adequate support, the catechist's own attitudes, and a willingness to learn about specific disabilities are all facets of successful inclusion. In addition to structuring the physical environment, success will also be fostered by a well defined plan of classroom management. Such a plan should include carefully

reasoned steps and consequences for discipline, reinforcement for positive behavior, and strategies for helping a student cope with failures. Verbalizing the mental process while using specific skills and strategies and helping students to develop learning strategies that include self-encouragement and self monitoring can also assist students with special needs in the learning process. Being attentive to the needs of individual students does require extra planning, patience, and great energy. As a catechist comes to better know the needs of each student, he or she will become not only a better catechist of students with disabilities but a better catechist for all students.

Catechetical Resources for those with Special Needs

A Place for All

Mary Therese Harrington (S. H. Liturgical Press, 1992) Reflections on the lived experience of catechesis, liturgy and sacramental initiation with those who have significant developmental disabilities.

Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities

(US Conference of Catholic Bishops) ISBN 1-57455-027-6

Catechists for All Children

(Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2002) ISBN 1-931709-37-8

Celebrating the Sacraments with those with Developmental Disabilities:

Sacramental/Liturgical

Reflections', Foley, Edward (ed.) Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access. Liturgical Press, 1994.

Let the Children Come to Me

Pauline Books and Media, 2003 Guidebook and laminated cut-out figures to teach Scripture stories and parables.

God's House

Ellen Javernick (Pauline Books and Media, 1999) Small child size book of the objects we see in church. Simple explanations and pictures.

Who is Jesus?

Institute for Pastoral Initiatives University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio 1 888 532 3389

We Believe

William H. Sadlier, Inc
9 Pine Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10005 (001) 221- 5175

Share the Light (Bernadette Farrell, 2000)

Includes CD-ROM with Quick Time video showing sign language gestures to use with songs.

Baptism-A Promise to Disabled People

Institute for Pastoral Initiatives
University of Dayton, Dayton OH
1-888-532-3389

