

Child Development: Children with Special Needs

Introduction

The section on catechesis for persons with disabilities in the *National Directory for Catechesis* begins with the following quote from the bishops' previous statement, *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities*:

“We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities (1).”

The bishops go on to point out the valuable contributions to Church life and leadership that have been made by persons with disabilities, and our responsibility to meet their catechetical needs. A strong emphasis is placed on full inclusion of persons with disabilities in every aspect of parish life, including celebration of the sacraments (paragraph 36, sec. 3b-3) and participation in faith formation:

“Persons with disabilities should be integrated into ordinary catechetical programs as much as possible... They should not be segregated for specialized catechesis unless their disabilities make it impossible for them to participate in the basic catechetical program” (49).

The following are some suggestions to help you successfully include them in your sessions.

Article

When planning for children with special needs or disabilities, consider the following:

- It is important to realize that persons with disabilities have an

identity that extends beyond their disability. Care must be taken to avoid both the language and the thinking that identifies individuals solely based on their disability (e.g., “a quadriplegic” or “a schizophrenic”). Instead, we should use language that reflects our recognition that a person is more than his or her disability, that the disability is one characteristic among many (e.g., “a person with quadriplegia” or “person with schizophrenia.”) This is called “person-first” language, because we name the person first, and then the disability

- Recognize that everyone has strengths and areas of need. Some strengths and needs are more visible to us than others, but reflecting on the ways in which we sometimes need help can help us to experience solidarity with our sisters and brothers with disabilities and to appreciate the gifts they can bring to our communities.
- Pair students with special needs with especially skilled students to work together on some tasks. Research indicates that doing so can raise the learning of both students.
- Let children with special needs know they are very welcome.
- Listen attentively to the child’s parent or family member. Most of them have had to advocate forcefully on behalf of their child; if they are assertive, do not take it personally.
- Ask about the child’s regular school day—and find out what their teachers feel that this child needs to succeed.
- When needed, ask for a helper or aide to work one-on-one with the child or children during the session.
- Remember the overall goal—to help a young person learn about God and the Church, and to grow into a follower of Christ.

- Avoid “all or nothing” thinking. If John cannot behave appropriately in a class or activity for 45 minutes, could he possibly succeed for twenty? If so, plan for him to attend only half of the meeting. He may be able to build up to longer attendance as he matures, and a positive experience is always preferred.
- Is there someone in the parish with a degree in Special Education? If so, he or she can probably offer some suggestions for individual cases.
- Use technology resources. For example, students with proper documentation can get any book, including religion textbooks, on audio CD from Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (www.rfbd.org). This allows students with weak reading skills to listen to their assignments.
- Help children who are shy or who have trouble with speech to participate. Tell them in advance that you will ask them to share something. This way, the child can prepare his or her answer in advance and achieve success.
- Develop ideas for parents to supplement classroom lessons. When studying the Sacraments, perhaps a child can attend a Baptism or look through her parents’ wedding album. Is there a DVD that could help emphasize the life of a specific saint?
- Offer options for assessment other than pencil and paper tests.
- Be gentle when discussing the miracle stories in the Gospels. Consider how a child with epilepsy might feel about discussing Matthew 17:14-17.
- Studies have shown a relationship between a parent’s confidence in raising a child with a disability and the quality of his or her

childhood experiences with individuals with disabilities. Consider what the inclusion of a child with a disability in your religion class might mean to the faith formation and future parenting of his/her classmates.

Helpful Websites

- The [National Catholic Partnership on Disability](#) is the voice of the US Bishops on disability. They have a variety of teaching resources and links to useful websites.
- Information on [Universal Design and Curriculum Modification](#)
- [Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder](#)
- [Resources for Parents and Teachers of Children with Learning Differences/Disabilities](#)
- The [National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry](#) supports the inclusion of persons with disability in every aspect of parish life.