



Special Needs Child PARENT PAGE

Parents have the unique responsibility for the education of their children; they are the first educators or catechists. They teach by their witness of the faith, through their values and attitudes, by their Christian example of love for Christ and his church. When children are baptized, parents accept the responsibility to raise their children in the practice of the faith...(National Directory for Catechesis 234-235)

Dear Parents,

In a special document entitled *Letter to Families*, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Parents are the first and most important educators of their own children, and they also possess a fundamental competence in this area; they are educators because they are parents”(16). You are the first and best role model for your child in these growing years. Your role as parent to love, teach, and lead your child to Jesus is a remarkable and noble vocation.

Children with special needs, like all children, are a mixture of joy and tears. As parents, prepared or not, we rise to the occasion of being not only our child’s parent, but friend and teacher. At times we might have felt insecure and lacked confidence in ourselves to adequately meet our child’s physical, educational, psychological and spiritual needs. But, obviously God has more faith in us as parents than we have in ourselves. With his grace, we are able to rise to the occasions. We are people of vision and the strongest advocates our children will ever know. Our faith is the cornerstone of our lives as parents. It is certainly by example that our children learn to love God and enter a life-long relationship with God.

As parents, you are the strongest symbol of Catholic faith to your child. No one loves your child more than you do, no one wants to see your child reach his/her full potential more than you do, and no one can offer your child the faith better than you. This is where the faith begins for all of us, so it must be no different for the child with a disability. We know that we teach with our lives. We bring God’s love alive through our care and affection. We teach with hugs, blessings and prayers, with the symbols of the faith displayed in our homes. When we appreciate our children and shower them with praise, they experience God’s love. As their parents, you are the human example of the love our heavenly Father has for them, and they need to experience God’s love every day of their lives. Remember, the way you present the teachings of the faith to your child will be critical to how they will respond to Jesus’ invitation to know Him and to love Him.

Children with special needs, like all children should know:

- ✠ That there is a God who loves them
- ✠ That God is our Creator and loving Father who is always there for them
- ✠ That God always listens to them, even when it seems as though family members or teachers don’t hear them
- ✠ That God speaks to them through their parents and through the Church

Our diocese provides many resources and materials that will help you better understand the faith and work with your child at home. The Department for Persons with Disabilities (412-456-3119, e-mail mrgurich@diopitt.org) is available to help with any resources, questions or concerns you might have regarding your child’s catechetical experiences. Other resources such as the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, an adaptation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can be obtained through the Department for Educational Media at (412) 456-3120 or by e-mailing jhurst@diopitt.org.

SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

BACKGROUND FOR CATECHISTS

Know Your Audience

Just like Jesus, every good catechist knows their audience.

“The catechist – must take into consideration all the human factors of a particular age level in order to present the Gospel message in a vital and compelling way.” (NDC #48)

Who Are Your Students With Special Needs?

Children requiring Special Religious Education include those with cognitive disabilities, those with developmental disabilities, those with learning disabilities, people who are emotionally disturbed, persons with physical disabilities, those who are hard-of-hearing or deaf, those who are visually impaired or blind and others. Every disability has variations that are specific to the individual. The only way to serve a particular child is to know the specific needs of that child.

In 1978 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in their Pastoral Statement on People with Disabilities declared, “We are a single flock under the care of a single shepherd. There can be no separate Church for persons with disabilities.” The National Directory for Catechesis (NDC) supports the Bishops’ statement by saying, “All persons with disabilities have the capacity to proclaim the Gospel and to be living witnesses to its truth within the community of faith and offer valuable gifts” and “Every person, however limited, is capable of growth in holiness” NDC 49. In the Diocese of Pittsburgh, we embrace a philosophy of inclusion for our religious education programs. Inclusion, however, does not need to look the same for all students. There are levels and degrees of inclusion. Levels of inclusion include:

PHYSICAL

Religious education for students with special needs is best when it takes place in the same physical setting as the non-disabled students, i.e. school building, parish church or hall, family home, so that students have the opportunity to know each other. In addition, it is best if the special student begins and advances in religious education at the same time as his/her chronological peers.

SPIRITUAL

Special students need to be invited to take part in all spiritual and liturgical events of their chronological peers. They can be involved in the planning if possible and be visible at the events.

SOCIAL

Special students need to be invited to take part in all the social activities in which their chronological peers in the parish are involved. As with spiritual activities, they can be part of the planning if possible, and be visible at the events. It is important that students with special needs have the opportunity to socialize with their chronological peers. They can also be invited to participate in all parish activities.

ACADEMIC

Special students can be taught religious education in the same class, side by side with non-disabled, chronological peers whenever possible. They are to be included in the regular religious education program as long as they are able to feel successful in learning the academics required at that level. If the academics begin to become too difficult, a “pull out” support program can be initiated for part of the class.

DEGREE OF INCLUSION

In inclusive religious education special students need to spend as much time as possible with the non-disabled students during each catechetical session. The degree of involvement is determined individually for each student.

All students with disabilities are to be included in a parish on the physical, spiritual, and social levels, *without exception*. Not every student will be fully included on the academic level. A prepared catechist will find ways to include a student on this level whenever possible. Support from a teacher assistant or buddy may be all that is needed for successful inclusion. Special students may be present for any or all of the following; the opening and closing prayer, the teaching of the objective of the day, the class activity. They may be “pulled out” for part of the class or offered additional one on one instruction as needed. It is important that non-disabled and special students realize that they are classmates, even though they may have different abilities.

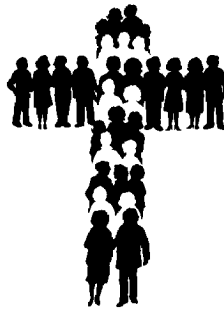
Most children with disabilities who come to a parish religious education program will already be in an inclusive education program in their public school. They are learning side by side with their typical peers. When children with disabilities are in a parish religious education program the goal is for all students to be exposed to a regular classroom with support. The key to successful inclusion is support. Special children learn their faith best when they are 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.

A quality inclusive program will work when supported by caring and interested people such as the Catechetical Administrator, catechist, parent, teacher assistant. Appropriate curriculum resources also provide support to the catechist. Inclusion works well when adequate and on-going support is utilized.

GENERAL PROCEDURES FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMS

1. All registration forms for Religious Education must ask for information regarding any special needs/disabilities a child may have.
2. Registration information must be updated every year since a disability can develop at any point in a child's life.
3. Upon receiving a registration that indicates a child has special needs the following steps must be taken:
 - Catechetical Administrator (CA) notifies Pastor about child's needs and plans (as outlined below) to contact the parent, etc.
 - CA contacts parents to get further details using Special Needs Checklist (below).
 - CA offers support, reassuring parents that necessary accommodations will be made.
 - CA informs parents about the services available through the Department for Persons with Disabilities (brochures available).
 - CA obtains permission to contact education professionals at the child's regular school when necessary.
 - CA, catechist and parents meet to develop a plan. Items for discussion will include:
 - Appropriate levels and degree of inclusion.
 - Methods to be implemented
 - Training for teacher/aide
 - Ongoing support/resources available
 - Use of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Curriculum
 - If further assistance is needed, the CA contacts the Department for Persons with Disabilities for help in planning
 - As the plan unfolds the CA is to contact the Department for Persons with Disabilities if there are difficulties or if there is a need for adjustments to the plan.



Special Needs

SPECIAL NEEDS CHECKLIST
(for use when contacting/meeting with parent)

- Let the parent/guardian know that you have received the registration that indicates that their child has a special need and that you would like to gather some information regarding the child's specific needs.
- Ask about the child in general. For example, "How is John doing?"
- If details have not been given on the registration form and are not offered in response to the question above ask, for example, "What is Sarah's disability/special need?"
- If you are familiar with the disability, share what you know or any experience you have had of persons with that disability. For example, "My nephew has Down Syndrome. He is a great blessing to our family."
- If you are not familiar with the disability say, "I am not familiar with _____, what can you tell me that will help me understand?"
- Explain that whatever information the parent can give you will help you to better serve their child.
- Ask the parent what accommodations are being made for their child in the regular education classroom?
- Ask for their insights. For example, "In your experience as a parent, what have you found is most helpful for Lucy?"
- Ask if there is anyone at the child's school that you could contact (realize that you can only contact the school with the parent's permission. If the parent is reluctant to give the information do not press the issue).
- Inform the parents about the Diocesan Department for Persons with Disabilities (412) 456-3119 or mrgurich@diopitt.org
- Close the conversation by reassuring the parent that necessary accommodations will be made.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

1. **If you are not familiar with a disability you can find pertinent information in journals, books, magazines and on-line.**
2. **Encourage planning that keeps the student to be as independent as possible. It may require effort on your part to keep from helping the student with a difficult task. If it is within the student's ability, encourage but don't intrude.**
3. **Be sure to include in your plan a discussion about the nature of the disability with the other students when appropriate. Your attitude toward the student with a disability will determine largely how the class responds. Emphasize that all students are more alike than different.**

TIPS FOR TEACHING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

The following information will help:

- **Catechists who have children with disabilities in their classrooms.**
- **Special education assistants who work with students in the classroom.**
- **Catechetical administrators who want to know more about directing the catechesis of all children, including children with disabilities.**

Dealing with a child who has disabilities is dealing first with a child. All children learn differently, and the catechist's challenge comes in recognizing and adjusting to the individual. Thus, the ideas that follow are simply suggestions, which catechists are to accept, reject or modify to match the needs and characteristics of individual children.

When working with a student who has a cognitive delay:

1. **Determine abilities to read and to respond in a classroom setting.**
2. **Set realistic goals for the student, keeping environment and abilities in mind.**
3. **Carefully sequence learning activities, from easy ones to difficult ones.**
4. **Use concrete concepts, simple phrases in your explanations.**
5. **Use pictures and symbols of faith whenever possible.**
6. **Supplement classroom work with simplified activities for home study.**
7. **After a lesson, clarify any problems the student may have.**

When working with a student who has a learning disability:

- 1. Determine the nature of the learning disability which is identified by the specific processing problem. It might relate to getting information into the brain (input/reception), making sense of the information (organization), storing and later retrieving the information (memory) or putting the information back out (output/expression).**
- 2. Use highly structured methods. Tell the student exactly what is expected.**
- 3. Understand that a learning disability may cause inconsistent performance.**
- 4. If the child has a receptive language problem, use short sentences and simple vocabulary at first.**
- 5. Allow students who have difficulty with written language to use tape recorders or the reproduced notes of fellow students.**
- 6. Use self-correcting materials for immediate feedback without embarrassment.**
- 7. Provide ample opportunities for drill and practice.**
- 8. After a lesson, clarify any problems the student may have.**

When working with a student who has emotional or clinical problems:

- 1. Provide adequate structure in the learning environment. Let the student know what is expected, but also indicate where there may be some flexibility.**
- 2. Reinforce appropriate behavior; ignore inappropriate behavior. Model and explain what constitutes appropriate behavior.**
- 3. Expect improvement on a long term basis. Understand that small gains may take time to become permanent.**
- 4. Be sensitive to individual differences. Try to create an atmosphere in which students are respected and learn to respect others.**
- 5. After a lesson, clarify any problems the student may have.**

When working with a student who has visual problems:

- 1. Before the school year begins, acquaint the student with the classroom and the building.**
- 2. Find out how much residual vision the student has and make sure that lighting is appropriate.**
- 3. Determine if the student is a braille reader. Most religious ed materials can be adapted to braille if this is what the student uses**
- 4. Encourage the student to use a tape recorder or other special equipment in class.**
- 5. Speak in a normal tone of voice.**
- 6. Set an example for the other students in the class by describing the things you see and relating them to their sounds.**
- 7. Teach other students the sighted guide technique or other ways to help without sacrificing the student's independence.**
- 8. Keep background noise to a minimum.**
- 9. Give the student ample opportunity and assistance to structure personal space.**
- 10. After a lesson, clarify any problems the student may have.**

When working with a student who has a physical disability or other health impairment:

- 1. Ask the student about aids and other adaptive equipment he or she may use.**
- 2. Find out from parents or therapists what physical or medical limitations the child has, if any.**
- 3. Don't do unnecessary things for the student. If he or she appears to want help, ask first.**
- 4. Encourage the student to participate as much as possible in the regular class routine.**
- 5. After a lesson, clarify any problems the student may have.**

When working with a student who is deaf or has hearing impairments:

- 1. Before the catechetical year begins, acquaint the student with the classroom and the building.**
- 2. If the student can read lips, offer preferential seating where he or she can see your lips clearly.**
- 3. If the student uses the services of an interpreter, put a notice in your bulletin to determine if someone in your parish has the skills needed to interpret for a religious education class. If not, you can get further assistance through the Department for Persons with Disabilities.**
- 4. Speak directly to the student with the hearing loss, not to the interpreter. The interpreter will translate what you say; there is no need to funnel requests or questions through the interpreter. You do not need to continually say, “tell him” or “tell her.” If you need to correct the student, use their name. The interpreter will know you are talking to that student and will convey your message.**
- 5. Become familiar with hearing aids or any other special equipment the student may use.**
- 6. Don’t speak with your back to the class or with a bright light behind you. Don’t inadvertently cover your mouth when you speak. Try not to pace or walk around as you speak to the class.**
- 7. Body language and gestures help students with hearing impairments understand the message.**
- 8. Speak in a normal tone of voice.**
- 9. Write assignments and directions on the board or on handouts. Have a hearing student take notes for a student with hearing impairments.**
- 10. After a lesson, clarify any problems the student may have.**

When working with a student who has a severe disability:

- 1. Work closely with parents to choose goals, teaching methods and evaluation strategies.**
- 2. Determine if the student must receive religious education at home. If so, encourage the parents to establish a prayer space in the home where religion lessons take place.**
- 3. Maintain consistency between homeschool assignments and program requirements.**
- 4. Use materials, reinforcers, and methods that are chronologically and physically age appropriate.**
- 5. Emphasize repetition and provide opportunities for using the skill once it has been learned.**
- 6. Promote skill generalization; teach the same skill in diverse settings.**
- 7. Provide as many opportunities for interaction with typical peers as possible.**
- 8. After a lesson, clarify any problems the student may have.**

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 a disability, 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 other 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 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.



Special Needs