

Catechesis for Children and Youth with Disabilities

*At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus proclaimed
that He had been sent to announce a joyful message to the poor,
making it plain and confirming by His Life
that the Kingdom of God is for all human beings,
beginning with those who are most disadvantaged.*

*Indeed He made Himself a catechist of the Kingdom of God
for all categories of persons,
great and small,
rich and poor,
healthy and sick,
near and far,
Jews and pagans,
men and women,
righteous and sinners,
rulers and subjects,
individuals and groups.*

He is available to all.

*He is interested in the needs of every person, body and soul.
He heals and forgives, corrects and encourages, with words and deeds.*

*Jesus concluded His earthly life
by sending His disciples to do the same,
to preach the Gospel to every creature on earth.
(GDC 163)*

Table of Contents

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| | |
|--|-------|
| Introduction | Dis-3 |
| Leadership | Dis-3 |
| Categories of Disability | Dis-4 |
| Catechist Selection and Formation | Dis-6 |
| Program Development and Administration | Dis-7 |
| Identifying Children | Dis-7 |
| Budget | Dis-8 |
| Environment | Dis-8 |
| Curriculum Resources | Dis-8 |
| Sacramental Catechesis for First Penance, First Eucharist and Confirmation | Dis-9 |

Guidelines for Meeting the Catechetical Needs of Children* and Youth with Disabilities (GDC 189)

The universality of Jesus' mandate to teach all peoples includes those who are marginalized because of their disabilities. The Church's responsibility is to nourish the faith of every baptized person to the full extent of the individual's capability.

Special Religious Education is a ministry that responds to the religious and spiritual needs of persons with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities which might impair their functioning in a regular Religious Education session. Because of that disability a child may require small group or individualized instruction or may be mainstreamed into the regular Religious Education Program with individual assistance provided.

The Church continuously reaffirms the sacredness of all human life. It places special emphasis on the respect due to those who are fragile in mind, spirit and body. Religious Education Programs reflect the love and concern of Jesus and of the Church for persons with disabilities.

Leadership

The Special Religious Education Program of the parish, with all its children and sessions, is under the authority and supervision of the Director/Coordinator of Religious Education.

The Catechetical Office's Director of Special Religious Education assists parish Directors/Coordinators in developing the Special Religious Education Program by such means as:

- assessment of the special needs of students,
- recommendations on curriculum and resources,
- on-site consultations,
- ongoing Catechist formation in special religious education.

The Catechetical Office's Director also assists parishes by providing spiritual support to parents and guardians of children with special needs.

The Archdiocesan Catechist Formation Program in Level I introduces the Catechist to Special Religious Education and in Level II gives an eight-hour training course.

Parents, above all, have the responsibility for their child's faith formation. They must be consulted regularly about the child's participation and progress.

In the Archdiocese of New York, Special Religious Education in all the Parish Religious Education Programs is guided by the Catechetical Office book: *Recognizing the Gift: a Parish Resourced Guide for Welcoming Children with Disabilities*.

- * For the sake of the brevity, only the word "child" will be used throughout the Guidelines but the intent is to refer to both the child and the young adolescent.

Categories of Disability

In order to meet the needs of children with disabilities it is necessary to have at least a general understanding of the kinds of disabilities. The following definitions are broad. Within each category of disability there are wide ranges of ability, of acceptance of the disability, and of a willingness to learn.

Children Who are Developmentally Disabled

Intellectual disability refers to significantly sub-average intellectual functioning which interferes with the children's ability to grasp concepts, make judgments and apply information to their own experience.

The impaired ability requires simplification and repetition of content through activity-oriented lessons.

Children Who Are Learning Disabled

Learning disabled children have average, or above average, intellectual ability but experience difficulty in the process of acquiring, integrating, recalling or expressing information. The impairment may be a difficulty in listening, thinking, speaking, reading or writing, or in fine or gross motor body movements.

Children with learning disabilities can, for the most part, be mainstreamed into the regular Religious Education Program. Mainstreaming can be accomplished:

- if extra assistance is provided,
- if the Catechist uses a multi-sensory approach,
- if the Catechist uses a variety of teaching styles,
- if the necessary adjustments are made in the quantity and kind of material learned.

Children Who Are Behaviorally Disturbed

Behaviorally disturbed children exhibit one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree:

- an inability to build and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or adults,
- inappropriate types of behavior or feelings in normal circumstances,
- a general or pervasive mood or unhappiness or depression,
- withdrawal: lack of interest and involvement with people and with the environment.

Catechists of children with behavioral disabilities should:

- be competent in the general principles of behavior management,
- have knowledge of the pressures, abuses, and family situations which may affect these students,
- discuss with the parish Director/Coordinator the situation of any child whose behavior frequently disrupts a session. Some children with behavioral problems may need to be placed in a one-on-one or small group situation.

Children Who Are Physically Challenged

Children with physical disabilities may or may not need special religious education, depending on the nature and complexity of the disability. Where there is no intellectual impairment, every effort should be made to mainstream the physically disabled child.

Visually impaired children, children who are hearing impaired or deaf, and orthopedically impaired children can be mainstreamed if special materials, resources, and Catechist Assistants are utilized, and if parish buildings are accessible.

Although physically challenged children are often eligible for mainstreaming, conflict in special bus scheduling often necessitates that special sessions be arranged for these children.

Catechist Selection and Formation

Catechists are recruited and selected by the Director/Coordinator of Religious Education according to the section of the Handbook entitled *Personnel Guidelines for Catechists and Other Staff Members*.

- To be successful in special religious education a background in special education is helpful but not necessary.
- The Catechist in special religious education should have an abiding sense of God's presence in all persons, a desire to work with children with special needs, patience, a sense of humor and enthusiasm.
- Catechists of special religious education are required to participate in the Archdiocesan Catechist Formation Program, Levels I and II, and to receive Archdiocesan Catechist Certification. As part of this formation program, they take the Level II course in special religious education.
- Older teenagers are often excellent Catechist Assistants for children with special needs, provided that they receive Catechist training and continual supervision and support from the adult Catechists.
- The Director/Coordinator of Religious Education provides formation and supervision for the Catechists following, as appropriate, the sections of the Handbook entitled *Personnel Guidelines for Catechists and Other Staff Members* and *Catechist Formation*.
- Parents of children with special needs are indispensable resources for Catechists on the most effective ways to work with and teach their child.

Program Development and Administration

The Special Religious Education Program of the parish is developed and administered within the context of the section of the Handbook entitled *Coordination of the Religious Education Program, Pre-School Through Eighth Grade*.

Identifying Children

Repeated efforts are often necessary to locate children with special needs. Many parents of children with disabilities need to be informed of their child's right to, and need for, religious education.

Some effective ways to inform parents about the existence of the parish special religious program are:

- parish bulletin announcements,
- parish website,
- announcements in local newspapers,
- announcements on neighborhood bulletin boards,
- invitations from the pulpit,
- reliance on parents of children with special needs to inform one another,
- home visitations,
- identification of parish children attending special education classes in the public school or private special education schools,
- identification of parish children in events such as Special Olympics.

Consultation with the child's school teacher can provide valuable information on what approaches are most successful in working with that child. Parental permission is necessary for this consultation.

Once a parent seeks to register a child with special needs in the parish program, they complete the form found in *Recognizing the Gift*, pages 37 to 40. This form will enable the Religious Education Director & the Catechist to instruct the child more effectively.

Budget

Each parish is expected to provide Special Religious Education. If a parish does not have a program, the pastor should make arrangements to share in the program of a neighboring parish. When children from other parishes participate in the parish Special Religious Education Program, the sending parish should make an adequate contribution to the program as specified by the Pastor after consulting the Director/Coordinator.

Because children with disabilities often require a multi-sensory approach and materials of a less abstract nature, sufficient funding must be made available for religious education curriculum and supplies.

Environment

As with all children in the parish program, Religious Education sessions for children with special needs should be held in rooms that are attractive, comfortable and adequately furnished.

Whenever possible these sessions should be held at the same time and in the same location as the regular sessions of the Religious Education Program so that the special education children do not feel isolated from the rest of the children.

Curriculum Resources

Modified development curricula are available for the child whose disability precludes the use of a religion textbook.

The Catechetical Office maintains updated information on special religious education materials and the Catechetical Office Director of Special Religious Education is available to assist the parish Director/Coordinator in choosing appropriate curricula.

Resources for assisting blind or visually impaired children are available from the Xavier Society for the Blind. With sufficient notice, religion textbooks can be converted into Braille or enlarged printed editions.

The Archdiocesan Catholic Deaf Center will provide resource materials, sign language interpreters and Catechists for children who are deaf.

Sacramental Catechesis for First Penance, First Eucharist and Confirmation

In *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, the U.S. Bishops provide the norms for bringing persons with disabilities into the sacramental life of the Church.

In the case of severe disability, the decision as to whether or not a child may receive the Sacraments of Eucharist and Penance should be made according to these guidelines.

Simplified lesson plans to prepare for the reception of the Sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Confirmation are available from the Catechetical Office.