

A PARISH-BASED APPROACH

HOW TO

Welcome,
Include, AND
Catechize

Children with Autism
and Other Special Needs



LAWRENCE R. SUTTON, PH.D.

LOYOLA PRESS.
A JESUIT MINISTRY

Chicago





LOYOLAPRESS.
A JESUIT MINISTRY

3441 N. Ashland Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60657
(800) 621-1008
www.loyolapress.com

© 2013 Lawrence Sutton
All rights reserved.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover image of *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* used with permission of the United States Conferences of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C.

Autism and Theory of Mind chart in Ch. 2 is adapted from *Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Tantrums, Rage, and Meltdowns* by Brenda Smith Myles, PhD and Jack Southwick (AAPC Publishing: Shawnee Mission: KS, 2005).

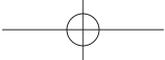
ISBN-13: 978-0-8294-3890-1

ISBN-10: 0-8294-3890-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013948175

Printed in China.

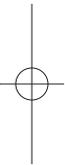
14 15 16 17 18 RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3





3

The One-on-One Catechesis Method



Most parishes in the United States operate a religious education program, and many of them accommodate children with developmental and physical disabilities. Many parishes use an individual religious education plan or something like it to note the learning strengths and needs of the student and to develop adaptations to suit the needs of individual students. Thankfully, individualized plans are becoming more and more common. Sometimes children with disabilities are “mainstreamed,” or placed in regular classes, because they don’t require any special adaptations.



Nevertheless, children with autism and some other developmental disabilities do have special needs, and parishes using the mainstreaming model take various measures to accommodate these children. Some programs leave it up to the catechist-teacher to overcome the barriers to learning. Sometimes parents, tutors, catechists, or other support staff will sit with the child in class to give whatever assistance is necessary. Some programs supplement the mainstreaming approach with special services. Children might receive special tutoring outside of class, or they might split their time between the regular class and special instruction in another room.

Some parishes have special classes that supplement their mainstreamed class, where children with disabilities come together and learn about God as a community. In this way, they are exposed to their peers but also receive some form of specialized instruction.

The catechesis method that I have developed provides an alternative approach. In it, the children are not mainstreamed until they are confirmed. Neither are they put in a special group of their own. Instead, each child is taught individually by a near-peer mentor in an environment suited for children with sensory-processing impairments and intellectual deficits. This method has proved highly effective in preparing children for the sacraments and teaching them the basic tenets of our faith. In my experience, children with autism learn more effectively with this method of instruction.



The Program in a Nutshell

Our parish program features one-on-one instruction provided by volunteer teen mentors, who are supervised by a catechist, program coordinator, or catechetical leader. These mentors are teenagers from the parish who have been trained to work with children with autism and other special needs. The children and teen mentors are carefully matched, and almost all the instruction is personal, one-on-one work between them, which enhances communication and attention. This

approach also involves customizing materials and strategies to particular learning and communication styles.

Students and teen mentors work in rooms that have been arranged to minimize distractions. The lighting is low and indirect. The decor is simple. Furniture, globes, plants, and other educational material in the classrooms are put aside as much as possible. Every effort is made to shield the room from outside noise. Teen faith mentors and their students work in a quiet and sensory-benign environment.

The teen mentors work from lesson plans that have been developed by the program coordinator and/or catechetical leader to meet the needs of children with developmental and intellectual disabilities. Teaching emphasizes narrative stories and visual learning. The curriculum covers core material in a religious education program, including sacramental preparation for the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Confirmation. When a child enters the program, catechists, teen mentors, and program staff work closely with the child's parents to develop a course of study that fits the child's capacities and abilities. Each child works toward this goal at his or her own pace. The overall goal is to see that each child is confirmed as an adult member of the Catholic Church and is welcomed and encouraged to participate in the life of the Church to the best of his or her individual ability.

An important feature of the program is parents' participation. Parents work closely with teen mentors, as parents usually know their child's abilities and learning style better than anyone else does. Mentors review each lesson with the parents, and parents are expected to repeat the lesson at least once at home. During class, the parents sit together for a facilitated discussion; at our parish the volunteer facilitator has experience working with families affected by autism.

Children with autism typically need structure and routine to focus their attention. At the beginning of each year, a consistent routine for class time is established. We begin together with a song (usually one of

the parents plays a guitar, or a recorded song is sometimes used), and we say some simple prayers together. Then each child goes to a quiet learning area for one-on-one work with his or her teen mentor. Teen mentors are trained to establish a routine for work with their students. Homework is given each week. After completing preparation, the students receive the sacraments with the larger religious education group, and often they attend Sunday Mass. Because the children practice the Mass rituals in class, they usually fit in well with the congregation. Occasionally, they join the larger religious education group on field trips.

| Sample 45-Minute Schedule | |
|---|--|
| Typical Steps | Approximate Time |
| Opening Song or Prayer Whole group: faith mentors, learners, parents, and leaders Mentors and learners go to designated areas for one-on-one work. |  5 minutes |
| Begin with Life Experience The one-on-one lesson starts with the learner's own experience. |  10 minutes |
| Connect Lesson concepts are presented in an approach that is customized for the learner and builds on his or her strengths. Learning tools and hands-on materials are often used. |  15 minutes |
| Close Lesson closes with concept reinforcement and prayer. |  10 minutes |
| Transition for Home Faith mentor talks with parents about "homework" experience for the learner to reinforce the lesson concepts. |  5 minutes |

The routine doesn't change, but the pace of learning varies for each student. Mentors do not proceed to a new lesson until the student shows a mastery of the current lesson to the best of his or her abilities, which the mentor determines in conjunction with the program coordinator and the child's parents. Progress is steady, if often slow. Some students are not confirmed until they are in their late teens or twenties. But every child with special needs who has stuck with the program has been successfully confirmed; they all receive the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, and they attend Mass regularly.

Advantages of One-on-One Catechesis

The mainstreaming method begins with the regular class and attempts to modify it to suit children with disabilities. In contrast, individualized catechesis succeeds because it is adapted to each child's needs. It doesn't try to fit a child with disabilities into a class of children with similar learning styles and normal sensory-processing abilities. It openly and directly recognizes children's different abilities and needs and accommodates them. One-on-one catechesis begins with children with disabilities and designs learning strategies to suit each child's unique abilities and strengths while maintaining a focus on their relationship with God and with others.

Paul's story illustrates the effectiveness of this method. Paul, a seven-year-old with autism, joined the regular religious education program to prepare for First Eucharist. There was trouble from the start. Paul was bright, but he was restless and had a short attention span. The class made him anxious. Periodically, he would get out of his seat, leave the room, and run up and down the hall outside the classroom. Paul's behavior distracted the other children and presented the catechist teaching the class with a difficult dilemma. Should she continue teaching the class or follow Paul and try to get him to return to class?

After a month of this, the director of religious education told Paul's parents that he would not be able to continue in the program. She cited liability concerns—what if Paul left the building?—but it was clear that she thought that there was no way that Paul could successfully stay in the program as it was constructed.

A year later, Paul came into the adaptive religious education program at my parish. We saw that his restlessness was not a behavioral problem but a form of stimming—a response to the rush of sensory data that overwhelmed him in a group setting. The noise, sights, and distractions of the classroom distressed him; he made the problem go away by leaving the room. But once he received instruction in a quiet classroom with a teen mentor who was focused entirely on him, Paul flourished. He received the Eucharist and is progressing toward Confirmation.

Like Paul, most children with autism do not thrive in a regular religious education class in which no modifications are made. Change is difficult for most of these children. They adjust to new environments slowly. Being thrown into a new school with new peers with little structure is difficult. Most children with ASD do not intuitively grasp the rules of a new social situation. They do not understand that others think differently than they do, and they are not adept at the give-and-take that makes for smooth personal relationships. It takes a long time for children with autism to feel comfortable in a classroom full of new people with different personalities. In fact, they may never feel comfortable there.

Take Jimmy, for example. Jimmy has been a good student in our adaptive religious education program for six years, but every new year he has a hard time getting started. Before the first class, he comes in to inspect the classroom and to go over plans for the year with his teen mentor (who has been working with him since his third year). He and the teen mentor spend the first three weeks of class just getting used to

each other again. Jimmy does very well once he settles into his routine, but he has never been comfortable with the short group meeting at the beginning of class. I doubt that he would ever be able to participate in a mainstreamed religious education class.

Most children with autism have a strong need for routine and structure (although they do not always feel this need as strongly as Jimmy does). In typical classrooms teachers and catechists set rules, of course, but they usually change the routines to keep children interested. In successive weeks they might show a video, teach a song, play a game, do a small-group craft project, tour the church, and greet the pastor for a special appearance. Interesting, attention-getting innovations like these stimulate most students, but they are disorienting and disconcerting for children with ASD. These children rely on routine and predictability to keep their bearings. Routine anchors them while they attend to surprises such as new children, noise, temperature changes, and the like. Without routines, they suffer in confusion and seem to never become settled.

By necessity, teachers must use some version of the lecture or small-group format to instruct a class of any significant size. This seldom suits the needs of children with autism. The lecture part of the class is aimed at children with typical abilities. The small-group part usually presents a formidable challenge to children with impaired social functioning who may also have auditory and other information-processing problems. They do better with individual attention, but catechists are not always able to work with them individually in the available class time.

The average classroom is a distracting place for children with sensory-processing difficulties. Bright and buzzing lights, loud noises, art projects, colorful streamers and wall hangings, the restless chatter of a room full of children—all of these things overstimulate and distract children who have trouble concentrating. Almost invariably, children with autism will react to this stimulation and confusion by

stimming. Stimming disturbs everyone else, thus making the mainstream classroom a difficult learning environment for neurotypical children as well.

Individualized catechesis, though, offers considerable advantages for children with autism and children with some other disabilities.

Benefits of One-on-One Catechesis

- establishes trusting relationships
- provides positive near-peer role models
- provides comfort of predictability in human interactions
- is adapted to each student's individual strengths and needs
- fosters acceptance of unplanned behaviors and responses
- offers routine structure
- provides for low-sensory environments based on individual needs
- offers the flexibility to repeat lessons as needed
- fosters inclusive community
- encourages service among parish youth

Relationship Inclusion

One-on-one catechesis as we practice it at Our Lady of Grace provides a program of relationships. You might call it a model of relationship inclusion. At the deepest level, it's concerned with building and strengthening the child's relationship with God. This relationship is personal; all children, those with disabilities and those without, can know God's personal love for them. It's also communal; every child relates to God as a member of a community of faith, lived out primarily in his or her local parish. The program nurtures both the personal and the communal dimensions of a relationship with God.

This happens primarily through a special relationship—the relationship between the child and his or her teen faith mentor. Children

with autism typically have trouble with personal relationships. Because they have difficulty reading social cues and understanding the effect of their words and actions on others, they are isolated from their peers, who too often respond to kids who are different with indifference or hostility. In this model of catechesis, the main channel of teaching and learning is the intensive, one-on-one relationship between the child and the teen faith mentor. This relationship deepens over time. Often, the faith mentor is the first peer or near peer to take an interest in the child and spend time with him or her. It's common for the children to develop intense relationships of trust and affection with their mentors, which creates the best possible context for the children to learn about a relationship with Jesus.



These bonds develop quite naturally between children and their near-peer faith mentors, like the friendship between Gabe and his mentor, Maria. When he came into the program, Gabe was a very smart ten-year-old with a high-functioning form of autism. He had a short attention span, and he loved to keep people off balance by changing the subject. Maria was just as smart and just as quick. When Gabe changed the subject, she had another lesson ready for him. The two bonded over a video game. Gabe was an expert in a particular game, and he wanted to talk about it all the time. Maria knew the game, too, so

she proposed an agreement; whenever Gabe worked on a lesson for ten minutes, Maria would talk to him about the game for three minutes. They clicked. Maria became Gabe's best friend. He made rapid progress in class.

Relationships with teen mentors lead children to a deeper relationship with the parish. Typically, teen mentors lead the practice of our rituals, accompany their students at Mass, and are present when they receive the sacraments. An adaptive religious education program is most effective when accompanied by efforts to make people with disabilities visible in the parish as a whole. It's not unusual for students who have completed the program to become faith mentors themselves. (Yes, people with autism are serving as mentors!) The student-mentor relationship brings healing as well as learning to children with disabilities.

The program positively influences family relationships, too. Parents accompany their children to class and reinforce lessons with them at home. Parents meet for discussion during class time, which forms bonds of support and trust among parents. Quite often, the child's participation in religious education is the occasion for the parents to repair a broken or frayed relationship with the Church. The program emphasizes family prayer and Catholic devotions and imagery in the home. Often, siblings of children in the program become faith mentors in the program.

Finally, let's not overlook the program's positive impact on the faith mentors. The young mentors are drawn into a meaningful role of service in the parish, usually for the first time. They go to Mass regularly. They talk to their students' parents every week. Like all teachers, they learn the material better through the act of teaching it. Many of our faith mentors have moved into other roles of service inside and outside the parish; three have become special education teachers, two are

in graduate school studying psychology, one is studying speech pathology, and two more are interested in becoming occupational therapists.

This constellation of new relationships and deepening relationships is an appealing model for the inclusion of children with disabilities in the life of the Church. It is religious education in the finest sense—a path to a deeper relationship with God and other people, accomplished through trust and affection.

It is religious education in the finest sense—a path to a deeper relationship with God and other people, accomplished through trust and affection.

A Word About Parents

Religious educators often emphasize that effective catechesis is a family affair. The family is the most powerful force in the faith formation of a child. Parents raise their children in the faith. Religious education in the parish is an essential part of this process, but it's not the whole of it. Just as the home supports classroom catechesis, the parish's religious education program can have a powerful influence on the faith life of the family. It's not uncommon for parents to experience a deepening of their own faith as they participate in the religious education of their children.

This is especially true of parents of children with autism and other disabilities. They are different from other parents. When they bring their children to the parish for religious education, they bring a distinctive set of attitudes and needs. Some are scared and defensive. Some blame themselves for their child's disability. Some are ashamed. Some are angry. All of them are grieving. They experienced a profound shock when their child's disability was diagnosed. This may have come at birth (or even before) for children with Down syndrome and other genetic conditions. It comes later for parents of children with autism when problems with learning and behavior become too numerous

to ignore. Whenever it comes, parents are shocked and saddened; from that moment on, they face the task of continually adjusting to the changing realities of who their child is. This isn't the child they expected. They must continually accept the fact that their child cannot have what other children have, at least not right away.

Simply being with other parents in a welcoming setting can bring comfort. I think of Carol, the mother of a son with autism. She was sad and withdrawn when she first brought her son to the program. One morning after class she fought back tears as she told me her story. Life at home was difficult. Her husband had stopped going to church. She felt very much alone, especially when she saw three fathers at the parents' table who were involved with their children's religious education. Carol benefited greatly from the program. Her grief eased. She made friends. Today she makes a special point to greet new parents and sit with them.

Parents often mistakenly think that their children don't need or can't have a religious education like other children. Parents who do not have strong religious practices themselves are especially likely to think this way. They might also hold their children back from religious education if they have an overly intellectual view of faith. If they think that being a Catholic mainly means understanding doctrines, they'll likely think that a child with intellectual disabilities and learning problems will be hard pressed to do that.

Parish ministers need to counter these attitudes. Intellectual, physical, or developmental disability doesn't mean spiritual disability. A child who may never grasp the fine points of the Nicene Creed is still capable of understanding who Jesus is. A child who will never memorize the eight Beatitudes or the names of the twelve apostles can enjoy Mass, receive the Eucharist, and learn to be forgiving and generous.

I think of a sunny afternoon at Our Lady of Grace when the young people in our parish were confirmed. One of them was Craig, a

thirteen-year-old with a fairly severe form of autism. Craig had been in the program for five years. I participated in the ceremony as a deacon. When Craig was confirmed, I saw his grandfather standing nearby, tears streaming down his face. Later he told me that he never thought Craig would be confirmed. He thought it was a great gift, a kind of miracle. It was a great gift—to the grandfather as well as to Craig. He had experienced a sacrament as defined by the *Catechism*, an “efficacious sign of grace.”

There’s no substitute for a welcoming spirit. Our society is full of places that are not especially welcoming to people who are different. The parish should not be one of those places.