

# Teaching the Faith to Kids with Special Needs – Why and How!

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## CATECHISM AND THE FAITH

Sharing our faith and evangelizing others is what every Catholic has been called to do and is ostensibly the goal of every catechist. Catechists usually focus on the visible practices and rituals of being Catholic, along with the supporting doctrine. While this is so important, it is not always possible to teach the faith in this same way when working with people with special needs. Something different can and does work!

Our pedagogy, or art of teaching, should imitate the pedagogy of God. God gave us His Son, Jesus, to teach us how to live! Jesus was the first catechist. He called, accepted, and loved each disciple despite, or because, they were imperfect sinners. He taught them using stories, signs, examples, parables, and by living the life He wanted them to imitate. Jesus expected the disciples to learn the faith and how to grow the Church by teaching them how to live! By imitating the love Jesus had for all people, catechists are able to guide students to Jesus and to recognize the hand of God at work in their lives.

Religious education is the life of the Church – the teachings of Jesus have been structured to become the guidelines of our faith and perfected by the Holy Spirit over two the past two thousand years. When Jesus was a catechist, people of all abilities, including those with disabilities, were included by Jesus in His teachings. We must follow this example and acknowledge and include people with disabilities in the Church.

In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, specifically sections #1700 and #1701, denotes that all people are created in “the image and likeness of the Creator” and must be afforded the opportunity to contribute their unique gifts to the Church spirit and life.

## STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

“*Special needs*” is a term that typically includes people with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, traumatic brain injury, physical disabilities, and other intellectual disabilities. People with intellectual disabilities are typically unable to process and retain information when compared to typical peers. They may not understand instructions and struggle to remember what someone just told them. They may never master reading, spelling, writing, and/or math skills. They may struggle to distinguish right from left; have trouble identifying words or tend to reverse letters, words, or numbers; (*for example, confusing 25 with 52, "b" with "d," or "on" with "no"*). People with disabilities may struggle with activities requiring large motor skills, such as walking, running, and playing sports. Fine motor skills, such as holding a pencil or tying a shoelace, may also be weak. They may have difficulty keeping track of homework, books, or other items and not understand the concept of time. The concepts of "yesterday, today, tomorrow" may never be understood.

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SPECIAL NEEDS**

Throughout history, people with special needs have been excluded from mainstream society and often not educated or included in religious activities. Recognizing that the Holy Spirit can always effect change, enlightenment can happen at any time! Jesus lovingly nudges His modern-day disciples to reach out to all His children so that their gifts and talents may become an inspiration to His Church.

A non-traditional way of teaching helps people with special needs come to know Jesus. By developing relationships and trust, catechists are able to follow the same path Jesus used when He taught His disciples! This may require additional supports, but the effort is worth the result. Separate classes or inclusion in typical classes are possibilities.

Regardless of the type of class, basic teaching structures should be implemented. It is critical to establish predictable routines, provide visual and oral instruction, have additional adult or peer assistants available, and most importantly, develop personal relationships with students and parents. Provide a schedule that incorporates movement, includes study centers, and additional space to accommodate various student needs, including room for wheelchairs. Organize class material to make things accessible for student, and provide visual displays of rules, procedures, and schedules. When lessons are engaging, active, and well-planned, problems become minimized and true learning can take place! These methods are simply good teaching and planning strategies, and are helpful for all learners, but especially for people with disabilities.

So how do we actually teach people with special needs about ethereal concepts, especially Jesus truly present in the Eucharist! Dissect the obvious - visual, tactile, and sensory experiences are more meaningful and longer lasting than sitting and listening. Show pictures. Let students touch a chalice, let them create a model of a chalice that actually shows Jesus' presence in the consecrated host! Help them to understand the special prayers the priest says at Mass during the consecration, invite a priest to tell them what happens during consecration! Let them see the special vestments and materials used during Mass. Things look completely different when you are sitting in the pew! Specialized, separate programs have the flexibility to use many creative teaching methods.

### **SPRED**

The Special Religious Development Program (SPRED) was created in Chicago in 1966 when parents and families sought to include family members with disabilities in the Catholic faith, share the grace of the sacraments with their special children, and teach them about Jesus. No programs existed. Through divine inspiration, they created a program that would emphasize abilities versus disabilities. Using music, stories, movement, crafts, and quiet contemplation, learning the faith became the joyous experience it was always intended to be. In the SPRED program, adult catechists use symbolic instruction to gently guide friends with disabilities to an understanding of the concepts of faith and the knowledge that despite their imperfections, Jesus loves them. In this way, people of all ages and abilities learn the foundations of faith, receive the graces of the sacraments at a time appropriate for them, and come to know Jesus as their friend and savior. SPRED is active in the Arlington Diocese, and available for people of all ages with

significant disabilities that might preclude them from participating in more traditional religious education programs.

## INCLUSION

Inclusion in religious education and parish communities is the respectful compassion and recognition of our shared communion with one another regardless of ability, that allows all to be members of the Body of Christ with equal privileges to share at His Table. From the top down, the Church supports inclusion –

“Think of a priest who does not welcome everyone - what advice would the pope give him? Close the doors of the church? **Either everyone or no one.**” *Pope Francis.*

Inclusion in the Catholic community is not optional – it is required. People with special needs have differences that once understood can be mitigated.

## EFFECTIVE CATECHISTS

Catechists are unique teachers because they are typically volunteers - not professional teachers - who feel called to share their faith with others. Catechists can learn basic teaching strategies in order to be effective religious leaders. Lindsay E. Jones, president and CEO of the National Center for Learning Disabilities recently shared five strategies, modified here for catechists, found to be the most effective when teaching people with learning disabilities.

**Organize and Focus Instruction.** It is absolutely necessary to create structure, guidelines, and class rules. Establish and adhere to routines and expectations. Identify the concepts and facts you want to share, determine the method of instruction you will use (visual, auditory, sensory), gather appropriate material, and keep everything simple. The strategies should be based on the topic, student abilities, time, and curriculum. This requires forethought and preparation, and for catechists, prayerful thought. Reinforce previously taught concepts to ensure understanding before moving on to new concepts.

**Focus on Strengths.** Knowing your students, or audience, helps ensure success and is just as important as knowing the concepts or facts being taught. Everyone has abilities and dis-abilities and by tapping into what people are able to do, catechists can ensure students feel successful. Parents are great resources and usually know their child’s strengths and weaknesses. Ask them to become partners in instruction and to work cooperatively. If they are willing to share public school documents, the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) holds a treasure trove of information about student strengths and weaknesses. Parents must also participate in religious education by living their Catholic Faith and leading by example to avoid “isolated skills.” Students must practice skills in authentic settings, including blessing themselves, using holy water, receiving the sacraments, praying, singing, and attending Mass.

**Prioritize Active Learning and Deep Engagement.** Simply stated, this means that students learn more when they are active learners. Hands-on, project-based learning reinforces concepts and new skills. Students can create a collage, draw a picture, sing a song, write, or tell a story to show understanding. Have students *do something* to demonstrate comprehension instead of taking a test.

**Age Matters.** This sounds simple enough except that chronological age may differ greatly from cognitive age for people with disabilities. Lessons must reach the level of understanding. A teenager may physically look like an adult, but actually think like a much younger child. Keep it simple!

**Teachers Hold the Key.** Catechists need training, support, patience, a sense of humor, and a deep commitment to the Catholic faith. A religious education program is effective to the degree teacher volunteers are trained and prepared!

And as I like to say:

Know **who** you are teaching  
Know **what** you are teaching  
Know **how** you are teaching  
Know **why** you are teaching

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