

Special Needs in Religious Education

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Catechesis, a joyful but demanding task, can appear particularly challenging when considering those with special needs. Whether discussing true disabilities, or learning or behavior that is just not typical, there are supports available to ensure that we succeed in sharing the "Good News."

First and foremost, it is essential to remember that God created diversity. He has formed a multitude of people, with varying strengths and weaknesses, and he desires us to help draw all of them closer to him. To accomplish this, an excellent teacher accepts students as they are and helps them to grow to new heights. The command to go forth and make disciples of all nations (Mathew 28:19) reminds us that catechesis is for all. And, the *Bishops Pastoral Statement of 1978 on the Catechesis of Persons with Disabilities* increases our understanding by emphasizing:

Furthermore, realizing the unique gifts individuals with disabilities have to offer the Church, we wish to address the need for their integration into the Christian community and their fuller participation in its life.

With the certitude that we are called to catechize all, knowing that this experience will draw us closer to God, we look for ways in which to accomplish this task. The ideal method is for those with special needs to participate to the maximum extent possible in the typical activities and events that make up the life of the Church, including religious education. To achieve this, we must consider the following:

- *Disability is a normal part of human experience.* Most of us will experience a disability at some time. Embracing this reality means accepting that those with disabilities are not "different." Planning for catechesis involves planning for everyone.
- *Individuals with special needs are an extraordinarily diverse group, with individual needs.* Many professionals refer to "High Incidence Disabilities" (HIDs) and "Low Incidence Disabilities" (LIDs). These descriptions answer the question, "How common is this disability?" HIDs, such as learning disabilities, are very common, and present in perhaps 8%–10% of all people. Many feel that HIDs are so common that they are simply "differences," not disabilities. LIDs, (i.e. Down Syndrome), are not common, often found in less than 1% of the population. Our personal knowledge (accurate or not) of a condition may be affected by whether it is a HID or a LID. Thus, treating everyone as an individual is essential—there is no such thing as one program or approach for any general category of disability.
- *Universal Design Principles can be applied to overall planning of Catechetical Programs.* Education has borrowed the idea of Universal Design Principles from

architecture. Just as curb cuts provide access for all pedestrians using wheels, principles can be applied to educational programs to give access to the majority of participants. (See Tip Sheets for examples.)

- *Small things make a big difference.* Along with Elijah, (1 Kings 19:11-13), we have an opportunity to understand that God is present in the "still, small, voice." Planning small changes, accepting small improvements, rewarding small accomplishments—this type of thinking will bring success to our endeavors with those who have cognitive, physical, educational, or emotional challenges.

Recommended Resources:

<http://www.cec.sped.org> Council for Exceptional Children

<http://www.ncpd.org> National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD)