

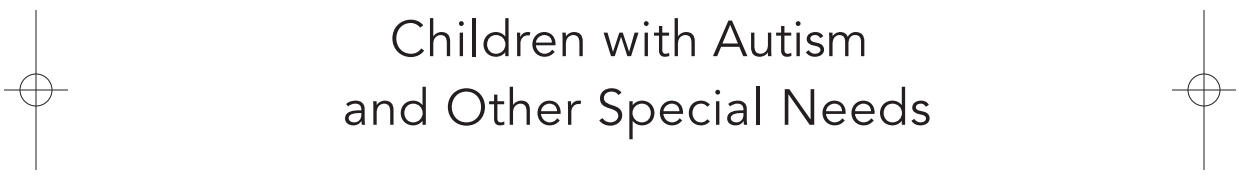


A PARISH-BASED APPROACH

HOW TO

Welcome,
Include, AND
Catechize

Children with Autism
and Other Special Needs



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Surprises

Several things about our program have surprised me. Some are things I observed, and others are conclusions I drew after reflecting on six years of experience.

First, here are some things I observed. I had a hunch that teenagers would make effective mentors, but I was surprised at just how good they were. They dedicated themselves to the work. They got attached to their students very quickly. They “got” their students. Understanding the child is a crucial and elusive skill. Those who communicate well with children with autism must discover what interests them and how they communicate. Teenagers are very good at this—better than I thought they would be.

I was surprised and pleased at how creative the teen mentors were. They would take a lesson plan and figure out a way to communicate the ideas in it using words, pictures, stories, games, puzzles, songs—whatever helped their student understand it. Teen mentors aren’t attached to one way of teaching. They are more adept at visual, nonverbal methods than most adults, which is essential for the many children whose word and language abilities are impaired.





I have observed some collateral benefits to having teen mentors which don't directly relate to religious education. The teens enjoy being with one another on Sunday mornings. They joke and mingle before and after class. They make friends with one another. It is an opportunity for young men and women to be together in an emotionally safe place.

I have also watched some of the older students carefully observing how their faith mentors interact with one another. They imitate what they see their teachers doing. Most young people with autism need to learn appropriate social behavior. Their teen faith mentors not only teach them about God, but they also teach them how to be typical teenagers.

I am surprised and pleased at the way parents and families have benefited from the program. Few religious education programs require parents to attend with their children; we felt we could require it for practical reasons. Children are usually more secure with their parents around, and parents are able to help mentors understand their child. But the parents benefited personally as well. The facilitated discussion gave them an opportunity to share their frustrations and their hopes and successes. Some parents made friends with one another. For some,

the Sunday-morning classes began a process of reconnecting with the Catholic Church.

My final observation has to do with the surprising degree of success the program has had. I'm not surprised that the program has worked; I'm surprised at how well it has worked. Every child who has stayed with the program has received the sacraments. We have found a way to communicate the essential truths of the Gospel to children with a wide array of sensory, intellectual, and social impairments. I was surprised to see some of the older students becoming faith mentors after they were confirmed. Some of our older students with autism have been accepted into academically competitive Catholic high schools. I think the program can take some credit for instilling the self-confidence necessary for a young person with disabilities to do something like that. I am also pleased that a number of our mentors have gone on to prepare for careers in special education, psychology, or medicine.

After reflecting on my experience and observations, I've reached certain conclusions that may be of help to you as you consider starting a program yourself.

First, young people are capable of more than you think. This is true of both students and mentors. Children with autism can learn more than most people think they can. All they need is the opportunity, sufficient communication, and teachers who don't have low expectations of what children can do. Teenagers make fine mentors; some are extraordinarily creative and effective. This surprises many people. That only proves my point: teens can do more than we think. Like their students, all they need is the opportunity and encouragement from elders who don't have fixed ideas about the capabilities of adolescents.



Second, this is religious education—something that all parishes do, and something that all parents do if they desire an active life of faith for their children. Children with autism and other special needs present a particular set of challenges, but these are challenges that mentors and catechetical leaders can rise to. Teenagers can learn how to teach the faith to children with autism and other developmental disabilities.

This leads to the question of professional expertise. An experienced religious educator with an open mind and a flair for working with teenagers can run your program. People like that can probably be found in your parish; if not, they can be found in the parish next door. You do need to draw on the expertise of professionals in order to understand children's disabilities, but you can find these professionals in your parish and in your community. Materials are being developed specifically for children with autism and other special needs; the *Adaptive Finding God Program* uses teen mentors, as well as learning tools, to make the *Catechism* concrete and teachable.

One of the lessons I've learned as a professional is not to overthink my role. The aura of professional expertise can hinder good practice instead of enhancing it. Often, the best course is to let the child, teen, or adult with a developmental disability guide me in the right direction, and to be confident enough to do that, I need to know the person well.

And that's my final point—the essential thing is relationship. Religious education is about cultivating a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The way to help children with autism and other disabilities do this is through building a relationship with them. That's what one-on-one catechesis can help you do—essentially convey God's love.