





A PARISH-BASED APPROACH

HOW TO  
**Welcome,**  
**Include,** AND  
**Catechize**

Children with Autism  
and Other Special Needs



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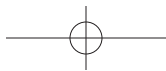


# 1

## Religious Education and Children with Disabilities

Jesus loved children. A passage much beloved by religious educators is Matthew 18:1–5, in which Jesus calls a child to him and tells the onlookers, “Unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” He continues, “And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.” Jesus showed great compassion to people on the fringes of society, including people with disabilities: lepers, and those who were blind, deaf, and mute. When you hold a banquet, he said, don’t invite your friends and rich neighbors, but “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13).

Jesus’ words and example challenge everyone in the Church, particularly pastoral leaders of our parishes and dioceses. Everybody belongs in the Church, especially those who are poor or afflicted and others who may not fit our expectations of who belongs alongside us in our pews. It’s not always easy to make room for people with disabilities. By definition, they are different: disabled, which means that they lack abilities that most others have. We must reach out, listen, make accommodations, and take extra steps even when those steps take us down unfamiliar pathways.



Nowhere is this challenge greater than in religious education. In most parishes, religious education—formal and informal—takes more time, effort, and resources than anything else the parish does. And rightly so; nothing is more essential.

Too often, children with disabilities are not fully included in this process, and many aren't part of it at all. Many parents assume that their children can't be part of a program designed for "normally abled" children. Many are afraid that others in the parish won't receive their children well. Many parents are afraid that their children will fail. Children with disabilities like autism often struggle in normal religious education programs. The typical techniques of explanation, discussion, and participation in group projects don't suit their learning styles. Most catechists lack the training to adapt materials for children with sensory-processing difficulties, underdeveloped social skills, and other impairments.

It's a challenge to form children with these types of disabilities in the faith, but it's a challenge that we're fully capable of meeting. The skill of teaching is the ability to present material effectively to children who learn at different speeds and in different ways. Children with autism spectrum disorder simply stretch these skills further than usual. Most of these children can learn the most important ideas and tenets of the Catholic faith. They can learn more than we think they can. What's needed are tools and a strategy to extend the skills that religious educators already have to include children who don't learn the way most children do.

This book presents an approach to the religious education for children with autism and other special needs. This program works. The average parish, or a cluster of parishes, can make it work with the resources already available in the local faith community. And the *Adaptive Finding God Program* makes it even more achievable by providing materials that break down the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* into

simple, concrete lessons, using learning tools and activities for different levels and learning styles.

Before we explain the approach, let's consider what the Church has said about the religious education of Catholics with disabilities.

## What the Church Says

The Church has spoken in several important documents about the pastoral needs of Catholics with disabilities. In 1978, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued the *Pastoral Statement on Persons with Disabilities*, and in 1995, it published *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*. Catechetical issues were discussed in *General Directory for Catechesis*, published by the Vatican in 1997, and in *National Directory for Catechesis*, published by the USCCB in 2005. The following sections summarize the main points of these documents.

Guidelines for the Celebration  
of the Sacraments with  
**Persons  
with Disabilities**



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
Washington, D.C.

## People with Disabilities Are Full Members of the Church

The 1978 *Pastoral Statement* puts it this way: "Persons with disabilities . . . seek to serve the community and to enjoy their full baptismal rights as members of the Church" (no. 33).

This is the central principle we must keep in mind when thinking about Catholics with disabilities. Every baptized Catholic is fully part of the Church. This point sounds self-evident, but it's really not. We often ascribe special statuses or categories to various Catholics, but doing so has its risks. Catholics with disabilities have sometimes been put into a category of "special people," set apart from others. The *Pastoral Statement* reminds us that people with disabilities have the same

identity and the same right to participate fully in the life of the Church as everyone else.

## The Church Isn't Fully Itself Unless People with Disabilities Participate Fully in Its Life

According to the 1978 *Pastoral Statement*, “The Church finds its true identity when it fully integrates itself with [persons with disabilities]” (no. 12).

This point flows directly from the principle that people with disabilities are full members of the Church. The word *catholic* means “universal.” The community of faith is impoverished when people with disabilities (or any others) are

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excluded from it or fail to fully participate in it. We are less than we should be. This gives the principle of inclusion a certain transcendent importance. The Church is not inclusive in any contingent sense, when it is merely convenient, affordable, or easy. By its very nature, the Church includes everyone to the fullest extent possible.

## People with Disabilities Have Something to Offer

The USCCB’s Guidelines for the “Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities” state, “By reason of their baptism, all Catholics are equal in dignity in the sight of God and have the same divine calling.” The *National Directory for Catechesis* says of people with disabilities: “Their involvement enriches every aspect of Church life. They are not just the recipients of catechesis—they are also its agents” (no. 49).

All Catholics, including Catholics with disabilities, are capable of proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing to the truth of the Salvation that comes through Christ. People with disabilities make the Church

the inclusive, universal community it is meant to be. Through their love, generosity, and patient endurance, they carry out the virtues that all Christians hope for.

### The Parish Is Where Inclusion Happens

According to the 1978 *Pastoral Statement*, “The parish is the door to participation for persons with disabilities, and it is the responsibility of the pastor and lay leaders to make sure that this door is always open” (no. 18).

As much as possible, Catholics with disabilities live their lives as Catholics in parishes, not in special programs operated away from their parish community. The parish is where they worship, serve, and receive their religious education. The responsibility for ensuring that they are served well falls squarely on parish leadership. Thankfully, many parishioners often have skills, interest, or latent talents and can help meet this responsibility in caring and creative ways.

### Programs and Services Must Fit the Particular Abilities and Circumstances of People with Disabilities

The *General Directory for Catechesis* urges that “personalized and adequate programs” be developed for persons with disabilities (no. 189).

To make catechesis effective, educators must adapt existing materials, develop new materials and methods, and embrace new classroom approaches. That means that they must understand each individual child’s disability well enough to design and adopt effective teaching strategies. This book is intended to help catechetical leaders do this.

### There Are No Excuses

Pope John Paul II wrote in the apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (*On Catechesis in Our Time*) that children with disabilities “have a

right, like others of their age, to know the mystery of faith” (no. 41). The *National Directory for Catechesis* says that “the Church owes persons with disabilities her best efforts in order to ensure that they are able to hear the Gospel of Christ, receive the Sacraments, and grow in their faith in the fullest and richest manner possible” (no. 49).

The parish must provide people with disabilities with meaningful access to catechesis and to the sacraments. It’s a matter of justice. It’s a matter of being who we are meant to be: the Body of Christ.

## Children with Disabilities in the Parish

Children with disabilities need to be incorporated into the parish as all parishioners are. Pastors and catechetical leaders need to reach out to them, understand their disabilities, and meet each individual child’s needs. In many cases, parish educators will need to find and identify these children. Their parents may be apprehensive about how the parish will receive their children and whether the parish can accommodate their special needs. Indeed, one of the biggest tasks is to educate the parish as a whole about the needs of parishioners with disabilities. The following sections present some of the tasks that parish ministers need to accomplish.

### Understand Disabilities—and Abilities

Ministry to children with disabilities begins with understanding. You don’t need to become an expert, but you do need to know enough about the child’s disability to determine what the child needs and how to meet those needs.

The best source of information is usually the child’s parents. Parents know their child better than anyone else, and many of them have acquired considerable knowledge about their child’s particular disability. You might also draw on the expertise of professionals in the field of special education. Some may even be members of your parish. At the



same time, it's important not to label children or stereotype them. A good approach is to focus on what the child *can* do and then build on the child's strengths. It's especially important to understand how the child communicates and how he or she learns best.

Sometimes this task is relatively straightforward; sometimes it's quite difficult. The problem is that children with autism often cannot communicate easily, making it difficult to assess their abilities. George, a young man with autism, illustrates some of these challenges. When he was entering kindergarten, George scored a 64 on a standard IQ test, a score that placed him in the range of mild intellectual disability. Ten years later, in high school, George scored a 72, placing him in the borderline range of normal intellectual functioning. When he was twenty-one years old, a government vocational agency administered a third IQ test; this time George's score was 94, a result that put him in the average range of intelligence. Each time, the psychologist administering the test certified the results as accurate. It's widely thought that a person's IQ is a measurement of an innate ability that doesn't change over a lifetime. Why, then, did George's IQ score change so substantially?

I think George had average intelligence all along. Autism is a condition that affects a person's ability to process information through language and sensory data. When he was young, George didn't have the language, processing ability, and/or confidence to express his actual intellectual abilities. Over time, George got better at taking tests and learned how to compensate for impaired processing ability. It's often difficult to determine what a child with autism knows. George's case illustrates why it is best to avoid labels and instead design an instructional approach that fits the abilities of each individual.

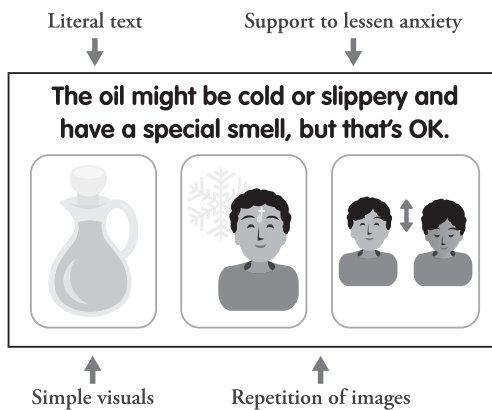
## Build Relationships

Relationships are the heart of catechesis. The point of catechesis is to help people have a relationship with God. We accomplish this in large

part through the relationships that we build with others in the parish. Specifically, the relationships that teen faith mentors develop with the children they teach and the children's parents are the key to providing one-on-one religious education.

Building relationships isn't always easy. Parish ministers must deal with barriers to good relationships. Communication can be difficult. Most children with ASD cannot process information as quickly as other children can. It takes them longer to understand what you are saying. It takes them longer to respond to you. Sometimes the delayed response can be painfully long—up to a minute or more. Don't be upset by this. Sometimes children might appear to be resisting you and acting out on purpose. Usually they are not; they cannot process information like others typically can.

Learning styles among children with ASD are varied. Because they have trouble with language, children with autism and some other disabilities often learn better when material is presented visually or in the form of a story. They like structure, routine, and predictability. When instructing these children in catechesis, it is important to prepare them by anticipating things that might produce anxiety for them and by repeating and making Catholic prayers and catechetical concepts visual.



Most children tend to be self-centered; children with ASD show this trait in abundance. They often appear very egocentric, taking little account of others' needs. This is not a moral failing; rather, it is an impairment that is directly attributable to the disability itself. Children with autism often have great difficulty understanding that other people have minds of their own, and this often manifests in times of stress. For example, a young man with autism might experience his mother's death as a personal assault against him and be unaware that his father and siblings are also experiencing profound grief. He might blame the doctor or God or perhaps the pastor of his parish.

Children with ASD often do not make eye contact. This is because they don't understand emotions and are unsettled by the feelings they see in another person's eyes. Don't be offended when children don't look at you or acknowledge you when you speak to them. It's not personal; it's a characteristic of the disability.

Parish ministers need to take these issues into account when building relationships. Remember that delayed responses, language problems, self-centeredness, and other traits are the consequences of a developmental disorder. They are not character defects that can be corrected or habits a child can break if he or she tries hard enough. Autism spectrum disorders are lifelong and permanent. Their social and intellectual consequences can often be managed to some degree, but they cannot be eliminated.

### Provide Individualized Catechesis

Children need religious education that suits their individual needs. They might learn differently, or they might relate differently, than other children. In many cases, the nature of their disability puts limits on what they will be able to understand and the degree to which they can participate in ordinary parish life. At the same time, parishioners with disabilities have the same need as everyone else to experience the

spiritual riches of the Catholic Church. Like everyone else, they need Mass, the sacraments, and prayer.

The goal is inclusion, but what does inclusion mean for people whose impairments set them apart? The ever-present risk is that we will settle for a kind of partial, grudging inclusion. We've all experienced it. It's being invited to a party where you're not completely welcome. It's joining a group and feeling that you don't really belong, that the other people in the group would be just fine if you weren't there.

This book outlines a model of inclusion for children with disabilities that brings them into Catholic life in a way that maximizes their abilities, builds on their strengths, and compensates for their disabilities. It relies on near-peer-age mentors to provide one-on-one instruction and employs a variety of creative techniques and materials to communicate the concepts of faith and the sacraments in ways suitable for children with various impairments. In this way, they grow into Catholic life as deeply as they are able and are included as fully as they are able when they are confirmed.



## Educate the Parish

One of the most important challenges facing parish leaders is the task of educating the parish. Some parishioners are disturbed by people with disabilities, or they see them as “different.” Some children with

ASD cope with anxiety and sensory overload by self-stimulatory behavior, known as “stimming”—flapping their hands, bouncing up and down, making noises. Many are socially impaired. They don’t make eye contact, read social cues, or respond well to questions or instructions. Their presence can make Sunday Mass a livelier occasion than many parishioners like.

A common reaction is that parishioners avoid children with ASD or other disabilities. People with disabilities often aren’t invited into visible roles of service. Their needs aren’t considered when planning parish events. Too often, people with disabilities aren’t seen at all. Parents might keep their children with disabilities away from Mass and out of religious education, fearing that they will not be welcomed or understood. When this happens, the entire community is diminished.

Parish leaders need to make a concerted effort to make the parish a more welcoming, inclusive community. Parishioners with disabilities—children and adults—need to be welcomed into full participation. Their presence needs to be acknowledged openly, from the pulpit and in other public forums. The parish needs to seek them out, greet them gladly, and make whatever accommodations are necessary.

The second chapter of the Gospel of Mark recounts the story of Jesus healing a paralytic man. Four of the man’s friends had carried him on a pallet to Jesus’ house. Finding the house too crowded, the men cut a hole in the roof and lowered their friend into Jesus’ presence. The four men went to great lengths to bring their friend to Jesus. We need to be like them: willing to do whatever is necessary to bring our brothers and sisters with disabilities into the life of our parishes. We need to creatively find ways to bring them to receive Christ’s healing love.

## Getting to Know Nick

The story of Nick illustrates many of the tasks and challenges I've been discussing. Nick is a twelve-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who gets around with the help of a walker. He has significant hearing loss, and because his fine motor control is impaired, it is difficult for him to swallow food. Nick can read, but most of the time he can't speak clearly enough to be understood. Instead, he uses a communications device to talk to others.

When Nick came for religious education, the first step was to meet with his parents to understand his condition and to ask what they wanted the parish to do for their son. Did they want him to receive full religious education, or did they just want him to be able to come to Mass? Did they want us to prepare him to receive sacraments? Did they want him to receive private one-on-one instruction, or did they want him to be part of a larger religious education class? It's very important to listen carefully to parents and, if possible, to the child, too. The first question is, "What do you want?"

Nick's parents were apprehensive. They wanted their son to receive as full a religious education as possible, but they were uneasy about how he would be received. Nick's fine motor impairment made it hard for him to control saliva. He was constantly wiping his mouth, and sometimes he drooled. On several occasions, people had reacted to this with repugnance. This worried and offended his parents, and because of this they didn't bring him to Mass very often.

Nick joined the religious education class, but much of his class time was spent with a sixteen-year-old girl who had been trained as a faith mentor for children with disabilities. Nick related more easily to a near peer than to an adult, which is something that I've found is typical of children with disabilities—indeed, with most children. Nick began coming to Mass regularly. He used a hearing aid and followed along with the help of a detailed guide to the Mass. We talked to Nick's

parents and physician about how he should receive the Eucharist, and it was decided that he would receive it under the form of the Precious Blood only.

Nick became more a part of the parish. His disability is out there for everyone to see; he uses a walker, he has trouble speaking clearly, and sometimes he drools. But he is outwardly friendly and easy to like, and people who spend time with Nick like him a lot.

We are a better parish because Nick is part of it.