A PARISH-BASED APPROACH

HOW TO
Welcome, Include, and Catechize
Children with Autism and Other Special Needs

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Imagine that you are the program coordinator for a parish that uses one-on-one instruction. You’ve launched the program; now you must run and develop it. Prepare for growth. Chances are the program will be successful. Your success will be noted as young people with developmental disabilities receive the Eucharist and Reconciliation and are confirmed. Parents will be pleased; some might even be astonished at what their children have accomplished. Word will spread, and more parents will come knocking on your door. With more students comes the need for more mentors, more space, more materials, and more meetings. You will be running a program with many moving parts and many constituencies.

There are challenges and issues you will face as the program goes forward. The most important are developing the program content, working with parents, recruiting and training teen faith mentors, and helping them work effectively with students. These are the known challenges. You will never be prepared for everything. There will always be surprises.

I was surprised on the first warm spring Sunday during the program’s first year. I turned on the overhead fan in the library before
class started. A boy named Timmy came in and became hypnotized by the spinning blades, so I turned the fan off. Timmy left the room, went into another classroom, and turned on the fan. I followed him and turned it off. Timmy went to the next classroom, and the next, and the next, turning the fans on; I followed and turned them all off. Timmy returned to class only after he had turned on the fans in all fifteen classrooms in the building. I was taken by surprise, even though I knew from my professional work that people with autism are often fascinated by spinning things. Now we know. I call it the Timmy rule: never turn on fans in the rooms being used for the adaptive religious education program.

Practicing Rituals

It’s important to adapt to children’s needs—hence the term adaptive. One such adaptation is the practicing of sacramental rituals before the students receive the sacrament. In our first year of the program, four of the five students were preparing to receive the Eucharist. As First Eucharist drew near, I decided to have the students practice receiving Holy Communion. This practice has turned out to be one of the most important features of sacramental preparation.

Practicing the ritual is important because children with autism become anxious in new situations. Receiving Holy Communion for the first time can be an exceptionally anxious experience; practice reduces the number of unknowns and helps children become accustomed to this new thing. Observing and practicing also demonstrates reverent behavior to children who are often concrete thinkers who have difficulty with abstract concepts such as reverence. I begin by having the teen mentors walk through the correct way to receive Holy Communion: process with hands together in prayer, bow before approaching the Eucharistic minister, extend their hands for the host, and say “Amen” in response to “The Body of Christ.” The students
watch all this intently; then they line up and do the same. Most are visual learners. They “get it” when they see it.

Our class practices receiving the Holy Communion in January and again in March as First Eucharist time approaches. We practice together as a group, older children who have already received their First Eucharist along with the younger ones. Teen faith mentors serve as practice Eucharistic ministers. (One of my hidden agendas is getting teen mentors to think about taking on other roles of service in the parish, such as becoming extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion.)

The Eucharist is the only sacrament we practice together. Students preparing for Confirmation practice the sacrament individually, with mentors playing the roles of bishop and sponsor.

Practicing the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is somewhat more involved. Many children are not able to memorize the prayers that are usually part of the sacrament, and many of them have difficulty grasping the concept of sin. Sin involves the breach of a relationship, and children with autism have trouble understanding the needs, motives, and feelings of others. Mentors often draw parents into the process of preparation. They can provide examples of behavior with family members at home that help the child understand what to bring to God for forgiveness.

Although challenging, we have successfully prepared children with little or no verbal language for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. My teen mentors have become very good at teaching our pastor how to communicate with their students, so that confession takes place.

The Liturgical Year
Like all religious education programs, the adaptive program pays attention to the liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Holy Week and Easter. The seasons are very popular with the students.
They like the Advent wreath, candles, Christmas tree, ashes, crucifix, and other objects and symbols connected with the liturgical seasons.

In our program, we suspend regular lessons in early December for two sessions on Advent and one on the birth of Jesus. I display a giant Advent wreath and demonstrate lighting and extinguishing the candles. The candles are an immediate hit with the students. Everyone has to take a turn blowing out the candles. I also do two sessions on Lent and one on the Resurrection.

I introduce these lessons myself (with the help of mentors) at the beginning of class in which parents as well as students are present. I find it very important that basic concepts are conveyed and that parents hear them and follow or practice them during these special seasons. The sessions on the liturgical year are good opportunities to encourage parents to introduce Catholic prayer and devotions into their family life.

**Supplemental Materials**
When I started the program, I did not anticipate how important supplies and supplemental materials would become. Most of our students are visual learners. Some learn this way exclusively. When using a one-on-one catechesis method, it’s often beneficial for mentors to use hands-on learning tools that engage but do not distract or cause anxiety for the student. For years, faith mentors have developed their own materials. Now, based on individualized instruction, the *Adaptive Finding God Program* includes catechetical instruction for teen faith mentors to follow, as well as a variety of hands-on learning tools, including puzzles, concept stories, and songs.
It’s important to have a good supply of materials necessary for this kind of teaching on hand—construction paper, colored pencils, markers, crayons, and the like. You will also need to provide the supplies for craft projects—scissors, paste, tape, and so forth. Mentors often bring supplies from home, although they shouldn’t be expected to do this. As the program begins in the fall, it is critical to observe how your teen faith mentors are adapting the lessons so you can provide the necessary materials.

**Recruiting Teen Faith Mentors**

One of your most important and critical duties—and one of the biggest challenges—is recruiting and training talented and committed teen faith mentors. This is a constant task. You will need more mentors as your program grows, and mentors who move on in their lives will need to be replaced every year. Recruitment is easier when your parish is welcoming to people with disabilities, when they are visible in your parish, and when parishioners are frequently reminded about
the successes in the program and the ongoing needs of their fellow parishioners.

A direct appeal is usually effective. I preach regularly at Our Lady of Grace, and a couple of times a year I invite teens to consider becoming faith mentors in the program. I invite young people to talk to me after Mass and to observe a lesson; people always do.

I have had great success recruiting at local high schools, both Catholic and public. Many high schools require students to complete some hours of community service. Also, students are often looking for community-service opportunities to strengthen their college applications. Some high school students are considering careers in special education and are looking for experience in the field. I ask high school guidance counselors to send me students who might be interested. As a professional in the field, I’m often invited to speak about developmental disabilities at high schools and at parent meetings; when I do, I always mention the needs of children with autism and the need for teen mentors. Perhaps people in your parish who are professionals can do the same when they talk to community groups.

Some of the best recruiters are the mentors themselves. Many come to the program because a friend has told them how rewarding it is to help a child with disabilities receive the sacraments and develop a relationship with God. I always ask interested teens to bring a friend along to
informational meetings, and most of them do. Teenagers are intensely social. Teaching in the adaptive religious education program is something productive and interesting that friends can do together. The program is a place where they can make new friends. Some mentors have even recruited their younger brothers and sisters into the program.

Many faith mentors have had personal contact with a child with disabilities before they come to the program. One of our excellent faith mentors is Gary, the brother of a boy with autism. He came reluctantly at first; his parents prodded him. But after a few weeks he developed a close bond with his student. One morning the student, a small boy, clung to Gary’s leg and could hardly be persuaded to let go. Gary was disarmed by the boy’s devotion. He liked the feeling of being loved; he liked the idea that he really had something important to offer to someone who needed him.

Another source of faith mentors is the program itself. One of our mentors is Adam, a fourteen-year-old boy with autism who was confirmed after four years in the program. Usually, students leave the program after being confirmed, but Adam wanted to stay on. I paired him with an experienced mentor, and the two of them worked with a young boy who was preparing to receive the Eucharist. The boy connected strongly with Adam. This thrilled Adam, who was very pleased to be able to offer himself to another person.

That’s not unusual. The program has a powerful, positive impact on many teen mentors, who, after all, are struggling with the worries and uncertainties of adolescence themselves.

**Working with Parents**

The program frequently has a positive impact on parents that goes beyond the satisfaction of seeing their children learn about God and receiving the sacraments. Many parents are drawn into a deeper faith life through the program. Some reconnect with the Church after a
Five reasons parents are central to the success of one-on-one catechesis

1. Parents help teen mentors get to know their children, their strengths, likes and dislikes, and learning styles.
2. Sometimes a child’s anxiety in a new situation is eased by a parent’s presence.
3. Parents need to reinforce lessons during the week.
4. Parents need to see their child learn from a teen faith mentor.
5. Parents have their own facilitated discussion during class.

First, you must make contact with parents. Some will make their needs known to parish ministers, but many won’t. Many parents don’t think their children are eligible for religious education because the parish doesn’t supply the kind of support services they are used to receiving in public schools. Often, parents think that religious education is too hard for their children. They don’t want their children to be in a situation in which they will fail. Perhaps for this reason, many parents tend to underestimate their child’s abilities, especially when the child is young. In my professional work, I have often seen young people perform much better than expected when they have the opportunity to express themselves and when adults are patient with them.

Parents are required to attend the program with their children for several reasons. One is quite practical: it’s crucial that mentors get to know the child well, and no one knows a child better than his or her
parents. The mentor must understand how the child learns, what’s upsetting to the child, what he or she likes, and the strategies that parents use to encourage and reward the child. Having parents involved from the beginning and present for class greatly enhances this communication. Sometimes an anxious child who is new to the program will want the parent to sit in on the lesson.

Parents also need to attend because we ask them to reinforce the lesson at home at least once during the week. Many children need the extra instruction because they don’t grasp the full lesson the first time. At the end of each Sunday class, the teen faith mentor meets briefly with the parent to review the lesson. Parental involvement of this kind is desirable in all religious education. Fortunately, we have good reasons for requiring their presence in the adaptive religious education program, and their presence benefits everyone.

I also like parents to be present so that they can see their child learn. Many are skeptical when they’re told that a teenager will mentor their child. Many have seen little more than failure and disappointment when it comes to their child learning. Some don’t know what their child is capable of doing. Many parents are astonished at the progress their child makes during a forty-five-minute class once a week.

The final reason for asking parents to attend is to bring them together for a facilitated discussion while their children are having their lessons. As the program coordinator, I led this discussion myself for several years before passing the baton to another facilitator. Many topics come up in these discussions. Parents talk about how difficult their home life is with a child with disabilities. Sometimes they talk about their difficulties in church. They share ideas. They tell one another about services that are available for their children. Often families develop relationships with one another, which both helps the children who can have trouble making friends and breaks down the isolation that so often afflicts their parents.
Working with Faith Mentors and Students

The success of the program depends on the relationship between the teen faith mentor and the student. The program coordinator’s most important job is making sure that this relationship is working well. The coordinator must match students with the mentor who is best able to teach them. To do this, the coordinator must understand how each student learns and how individual mentors teach.

One of the biggest lessons I learned in the first year of the program was the importance of understanding how students learn. Four children were preparing to receive the Eucharist; each of them behaved and communicated very differently, and each was successfully taught in different ways.

Freddy was a boy with a high-functioning form of autism. He understood language very well, and he loved to play word games. He liked to distract his mentor from the lesson by posing riddles.

Benjamin didn’t speak much, and it took him a long time to process information. He learned by doing and seeing rather than by listening to the mentor explain the lesson. He loved crafts. That first year he made an Advent wreath out of colored construction paper. He took my hand, pushed it to the yellow paper flame and said, “Hot.”

James had a hard time staying focused on a topic. His attention would wander, but he would eventually return to the topic of his pet dog. He loved his dog and carried a picture of him in his pocket whenever he left home.

Keith was an extremely logical and concrete thinker. He understood that Jesus is the man who is depicted on the crucifix, but he did not understand how the same Jesus could be in a piece of bread. He said, “How can Jesus be up there [on the crucifix] and in this [holding the unconsecrated host we were using for practice]?”

I worked with mentors to find the teaching style best suited to help these boys learn. For Freddy, who was verbally adept, I found a mentor.
who was skilled at explaining and visually illustrating concepts, taking advantage of his good expressive language. (I also helped her avoid getting caught up in his riddles.) I matched Benjamin with a mentor who loved craft projects. When James’s mentor noticed his obsession with his dog, she made up stories with a religious lesson in which a dog (which had the same name as James’s dog) played an important role. James would listen to the stories intently, waiting for his dog to appear.

For Keith, I got involved myself. (In fact, his mentor came to me and said, “Deacon, you’re going to have to answer this one.”) Keith wanted a logical explanation for how the same Jesus who was on the cross could also be present in the host. I explained the consecration of the bread and wine as best I could, and I also told him that we can’t “prove” many things about the mysteries of our faith in the same way that we can prove things with numbers. Keith accepted that, but years later, he’s still puzzled. Whenever I see him, he wants to talk about the Real Presence of Jesus.

Keith’s story is particularly relevant for catechists. Many children with autism are logical and concrete thinkers (though usually not in as extreme a way as Keith is). They don’t grasp nuance and subtleties, and they dislike ambiguity. For them, it’s important that material be well organized and presented in a logical way that leads to a conclusion. Many truths and mysteries of our faith don’t fit neatly into this pedagogical model. Catechists who teach children with autism and other special needs need to adjust their teaching methods accordingly. I frequently remind mentors that they will never “prove” some things about our faith. If they keep trying, they will be frustrated.

Like the children they teach, mentors have their own special strengths. Some make up good stories; others are skilled at craft projects. Some teach with music; still others are good at designing games. I try to expose mentors to different teaching techniques so they can add new methods to their repertoire.
Learning to Communicate

Faith mentors need to learn how to communicate with their students. To do this, mentors must know about the characteristics of autism that most affect communication. I talk to faith mentors about this at the orientation workshop before class begins, and I continue to work on it throughout the year. The following are some of the most important points to understand.

**Learn to wait.** Many children with autism respond slowly. Most of us enter the ebb and flow of conversation naturally. Someone asks a question, and we answer. Someone makes a comment, and we make one of our own. Many children with autism can’t do this because their ability to process information is impaired. They can respond appropriately but only after a long pause. The pause can be as long as ninety seconds in some cases. Ten or fifteen seconds is a long time to wait for an answer to a question. Ninety seconds seems like an eternity.

When interacting with a person with autism for the first time, people are usually disturbed by this delayed response. I have been working professionally with children with autism for many years, and I still have to remind myself to wait for answers to my questions. More often than not, children will come up with the answer, but I have to be patient and wait for it. The latent response can also be disturbing to children with autism. They are aware that they are expected to respond more quickly to questions or to new information, but they simply can’t do it. This is one reason why children with autism often talk endlessly about the Civil War, automobiles, baseball team rosters, and other topics that they’ve studied to the point of obsession. It gives them something to talk about when they’re in anxiety-producing situations with other people.
Create a calm setting for auditory processing. People with autism typically have difficulty sorting out information from the various sounds they hear. They don’t hear what you’re hearing. You might be able to read a book while music is playing softly in the background or carry on a conversation while watching television. By and large, people with autism can’t push extraneous noise into the background to focus on what you are saying. This is why group singing, story time, and other group activities in organized academic-like settings often don’t work well with these children. That’s why classrooms used for one-on-one catechesis need to be quiet places.

Allow for adjustment time. People with autism typically need time to get adjusted to new situations, even those that they’ve encountered before, like Mass and school. They can usually do it, but they need time. A new setting (like the church or school) and new people (the priest, mentor, and other children) bring a flood of sights, sounds, and other sensory data that need to be sorted out and understood. Faith mentors (and others) can ease this transition by moving into new material slowly.

One of the most noticeable impairments of autism is the inability to make small talk. Small talk—chatting about the weather and insignificant events of the day—helps us ease into new situations.
For people with autism, small talk does not make sense. Instead of trying to make small talk, mentors can usually put students at ease by talking about their preferred topic.

**Stay concrete and literal.** Much of our language is metaphorical. We like puns, proverbs, adages, analogies. People with autism tend to think concretely and literally. Idioms like “this place is a madhouse” and “hit the nail on the head” can seem absurd and confusing. For them, words have one meaning. They often don’t get jokes. Humor that depends on wordplay, misunderstandings, and thwarted plans will be lost on them. What seems like affectionate banter to us might seem like bullying to a child who is a concrete thinker and who often really has been bullied by other children.

**Accept bad days with humor and compassion.** Children with autism are easily thrown off kilter. Bad days are caused by problems that seem small and ordinary to others—a snowstorm, not enough sleep, hunger, a spat with a sibling. A child might arrive at class angry and distressed because he didn’t get enough sleep or because his mother drove a different route than the one he’s accustomed to. Some days are just bad days; the mentor needs to accept that not much will get done on those days. It’s important that mentors and parents be in good communication about this.

Learning Moments for Teen Faith Mentors
I explain autism to faith mentors in an orientation session on a Saturday before classes begin. I talk for about three hours, and we provide lunch. New mentors are required to attend; returning faith mentors are invited, as are all the mentors’ parents. This orientation should be given by a knowledgeable person, usually someone who works in the field of autism and special education. These people are not hard to find; there are surely special education professionals in your
community and perhaps in your parish. Most of them are accustomed to explaining disabilities to nonprofessionals.

While we prepare faith mentors the best we can, there’s no substitute for on-the-job experience. I find that I’m best able to help them when “learning moments” arise.

One such moment happens when the mentor sees stimming in action for the first time. I talk about stimming in the orientation, but most mentors don’t really understand what it is until they see a child flapping his hands in class. Then I help them see it for what it is—a reaction to stress, happiness or excitement, sensory overload, or boredom.

Tantrums and meltdowns are also learning moments. When a child gets upset in class for the first time, most mentors get upset, too. They assume that either they or the student has done something wrong and that something must be done immediately to settle things down. But no one is to blame for meltdowns. They happen because something has upset a child who often lacks the verbal facility to say why. Sometimes the only thing to do is to let a tantrum run its course and then help the faith mentor find a way to allow the student to continue and finish the lesson if possible.

Very often I urge mentors to let students dictate some of the rules. Children with autism often cope with new and anxiety-producing situations by trying to control them, at least in part. Usually, it’s better to work patiently with these rules than oppose them. I tell mentors about Jim, a boy who is now in his fourth year of the adaptive religious education program. When he first came in, Jim insisted that his mother sit with him during the lessons. After a while he decided that his mother’s presence wasn’t necessary, but he wanted to be alone with his mentor in the classroom. Everything would go well until someone else came into the room; then Jim would fly into a rage. Gradually, Jim relaxed his rules. He’s now comfortable with the people in the program, and he is making good progress toward Confirmation.
Being Comfortable with Uncertainty
Successful faith mentors have to get used to uncertainty. It’s hard to know what a child with autism knows. It’s hard to understand the behavior of children with autism. They give their teachers less feedback than most children do. It’s difficult to understand why things go wrong and why things go right. Often, a student will suddenly do something that he’d been refusing to do. You don’t have to know why something went wrong; just be prepared to move to plan B.

All teachers wonder what they have communicated to their students. Faith mentors in the adaptive religious education program experience this uncertainty acutely. Often, the best mentoring and teaching means letting things unfold in their own way.

I think of Robert, a young man with cerebral palsy and a hearing impairment. He does not speak very much; he may have autism as well, but it’s hard to tell. Despite his severe impairments, Robert is very charismatic and he connects very deeply with some people. Faith mentors who understand Robert have been able to accomplish remarkable things with him. They engage in back-and-forth discussions with him, with Robert using a special communications device. At times Robert can be very animated in his interactions with mentors, something that his parents and therapists don’t often see. I haven’t been directly involved as much with teaching Robert. I stepped back and watched the teen mentors try different techniques until something worked.

The mentors have communicated the core truths of our faith to Robert. I think Robert grasps them, but, as is often the case, it’s difficult to know precisely what he knows. I tell mentors to do their best and trust the Holy Spirit. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola put it, “Make a competent and sufficient effort, and leave the rest to God.”