





A PARISH-BASED APPROACH

HOW TO

Welcome,
Include, AND
Catechize

Children with Autism
and Other Special Needs



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4

Roles in the Program

A religious education program using one-on-one catechesis resembles a football team or an acting troupe. For the program to succeed, many people playing different roles have to work together smoothly. The spotlight is on the relationship between faith mentors and their students. They are the players on the field or the actors on the stage; their work is what everyone comes to see. The program coordinator orchestrates and supports the action, like the coach on the sidelines or the director of the play. The pastor of the parish and the director of religious education are the producers; they make the show possible. Parents, family members, and other people in the parish are the audience, watching intently; it's an audience that has an active role to play in the program, too.

In this chapter, I discuss these roles. I want to emphasize that success comes only when everyone works together. If we get too focused on roles, job descriptions, and responsibilities, we lose sight of the larger picture. The point of this is to bring children to the fullest degree of spiritual maturity of which they are capable. A closely related goal is to help the parents and families of these children live an active life of faith. The larger picture is easy to see; one of the attractions of the program is the satisfaction of seeing progress every week.



A Pastoral Attitude

The most desirable quality for everyone involved in the program is a pastoral attitude. Pastors take the broad view. They act for the long-term good rather than short-term efficiency. They are decisive when they need to be, patient with difficulty, and compassionate in the face of suffering. All of us can strive to approach our work with a pastoral mind-set. The root meaning of *pastor* is “shepherd.” Jesus described himself as the “good shepherd” who would lay down his life for the good of the flock but who was also willing to go to any length to save an individual who wandered away. That’s the skill of a pastor: moving the group toward a common goal while caring for each person individually.

A pastoral attitude is the remedy for the considerable anxiety that participants bring to the program. Social unease and general uncertainty is common among children with autism. Many are in a perpetual state of anxiety. They can’t predict what other people are going to do, and they lack the ability to quickly understand new social situations. They struggle to figure out what is expected of them. School is especially fraught with uncertainty.

It’s no surprise that parents are typically apprehensive and tense as they bring their children to religious education. Their children may have been ignored, teased, and even bullied by other students in school. Parents might have seen how teachers and other adults are uneasy with their kids. Many aren’t sure that religious education will work for their children at all. They wonder, “Will the mentor ‘get’ my child?” The teen mentors are also anxious. Teenagers like to test new things gradually from a base of security and familiarity. Teen faith mentors in the program are thrown into a situation where everything is new. They’re often assuming their first role of service. They’re building a relationship with a child who reacts in unfamiliar ways. They’re

being called on to relate to adults in an adult manner. It's a challenging, often fragile situation. Those in charge of it need a pastor's heart.

One family I know suffered a double pastoral failure. Their son Paul, the seven-year-old with autism I mentioned previously, had a hard time in a regular religious education class. He was in the habit of getting out of his seat and wandering around the classroom. Several times he left the room. The alarmed program director expelled the boy from the program, citing concerns about the parish's liability if the boy wandered out into the street. The boy's father, angered by the decision, stopped coming to church for some months. One Sunday he returned to Mass. Then one of the parish ministers greeted him and said he knew that the man hadn't been to church lately; he said, "I noticed that your envelopes haven't been in the collection for a while." The remark infuriated the father, who once again stopped coming to Mass.

Another parish minister reached out to the hurt and angry father. Eventually, he enrolled his son in the program. I found that the fears about the boy's safety were exaggerated; he would never have left the building, much less wandered into the street. He did, however, need to learn to stay in the classroom. He gradually learned this lesson through the patient work of a teen faith mentor who built a trusting and close relationship with him. The boy's father had a lot to get off his chest. Over the course of time, he was heard during the weekly parents' meeting. He was able to return to Mass and has become active in the parish again.

The Pastor's Role

The pastor is the chief shepherd of the parish, and his support is essential to any adaptive religious education program. His involvement can take several forms. Some pastors take the lead. Services for people with disabilities are a priority for them. Pastors might initiate the one-on-one catechesis program, encourage their staff to implement it,

and take a hands-on role. More often, someone else initiates the program—the catechetical leader, a deacon, or other parish staff. Typically, this person acts in response to parishioners who have asked that their children with disabilities be prepared for the sacraments. Someone on the parish staff takes up the issue, discovers that a significant number of children could benefit, and decides to talk about starting a program.

The question quickly comes to the pastor, whose support is essential if the idea is to go forward. The pastor needs to understand that any religious education program for children with disabilities might cause disruptions and ruffle some feathers. It means that children with autism and other disabilities will be present at Mass. Their fidgeting and vocal stimming can be reduced but not eliminated, and some people accustomed to their “quiet Mass” will complain. There are likely to be questions about whether the parish should invest so much effort in a program that benefits relatively few people. Some will ask why “God’s special children” need religious education at all. There will be doubts about relying on teenagers to instruct; questions about the need for special expertise in autism and other intellectual, physical, or developmental disabilities; concerns about safety and order in class. At every point, the pastor needs to stand solidly behind the choice of welcoming all parishioners with disabilities into the full life of the parish. This can include starting an adaptive religious education program using an individualized catechesis method. The pastor needs to be a friend to persons with disabilities.

Then there is the upheaval and change that any new program brings. In my parish, the adaptive religious education program made a sizable footprint on Sunday mornings. We needed a lot of space for one-on-one instruction, so we took over rooms that other classes and parish activities had used. Our pastor heard many complaints. Through it all, he never wavered in his support for the program.

Much of the pastor's role consists of this kind of behind-the-scenes support and advocacy. He needs to be informed about the program in order to defend and support it. He does not need to be an expert in disabilities, and he does not need to take a highly visible hands-on role. Pastors have plenty to do. With good people in charge, an adaptive religious education program does not have to be a drain on the pastor's time.

The pastor does get directly involved in the program when administering the sacraments. The most challenging is the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The sacrament goes differently for children with limited language, impaired social skills, and sometimes intellectual deficits. The priest must be willing to learn how to communicate with these children and understand what they say. In our program, the teen mentors or program coordinator help the priest learn how to effectively and efficiently communicate so that the sacrament can be successfully administered.

The pastor may have to say a special Mass for children with especially severe disabilities. Our pastor did this for several children in our program who are too sensitive to visual and auditory stimulation to attend a regular Mass comfortably.

The Catechetical Leader's Role

It is the responsibility of a parish's catechetical leader or director of religious education to ensure that any child with a disability receives an appropriate religious education. An adaptive religious education program should be considered an integral part of the total parish program. The catechetical leader should work closely with the program coordinator and should review and approve the curriculum. The catechetical leader must, in consultation with the program coordinator and mentor, ensure a child's readiness for the sacraments. The catechetical leader ensures that all teen faith mentors and volunteers fulfill

any necessary safe-environment requirements. When appropriate, the catechetical leader sees that the teen mentors receive the same orientation and training as parish volunteer catechists, in addition to any specialized training that is needed, including catechetical certification. In addition, the catechetical leader collaborates with the program coordinator to review the annual schedule and to integrate the children into parish events.

The Program Coordinator's Role

The program coordinator plays a key role. He or she is the go-to person. You might compare the program coordinator to the director and stage manager of a play—the person responsible for determining sets, casting, lighting, script, schedule, and everything else. Ordinarily, the director of religious education should not try to be the adaptive program coordinator as well. As the tasks and problems are different from those of typical religious education classes, I believe the best arrangement is for the catechetical leader to be in overall charge of all religious education, including the adaptive religious education program, but to leave the administration of the program up to the coordinator.

The program coordinator might be a professional in the field of developmental disabilities and perhaps (but not necessarily) a member of the parish. Such a person has to be a Catholic in good standing and will likely work with the catechetical leader, school principal, or pastor as co-coordinators. Sometimes a parent or other relative of a child with disabilities will apply for the job of program coordinator. The parent might be the spark who got the parish staff interested in starting a program, and he or she may be a highly articulate, knowledgeable, and vocal advocate for the interests of children with disabilities. Although firsthand experience of the strains and challenges of raising a child with a disability may be helpful, it's not a core requirement. Other qualifications are more important.

Religious Education Experience

Chief among the important qualifications for a program coordinator to have is religious education experience. The coordinator needs to have a strong background in the religious education of young people, including preparation for the Sacraments of the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Confirmation and the major topics covered in the curriculum. The coordinator needs to understand the curriculum and what the adaptations to it are trying to accomplish. Communicating spiritual concepts to children with a range of disabilities calls for considerable creativity and ingenuity, and adaptations will be successful only if they are firmly grounded in an understanding of the principles and methods of Catholic religious education. The program coordinator must understand those principles thoroughly and be able to communicate that understanding to teen faith mentors. Any curriculum adaptation should, like the *Adaptive Finding God Program*, include consistent instruction; it should provide customized strategies to build on a variety of strengths, and communication and learning styles; and it should include learning tools to make catechetical concepts concrete.

Working with Teens

The coordinator must be good at recruiting and training teen faith mentors. Most teens have misgivings about the idea of becoming a mentor in a one-on-one catechesis program. The most common objection is, “I don’t know enough about religion to teach anybody about it.” Most teens are apprehensive about the prospect of working closely with a disabled child. Further, teens tend to be shy about relating to adults, and one-on-one catechesis requires them to work closely with the student’s parents.

These doubts are not without foundation, and successful program coordinators can overcome them with inspiration, encouragement, reassurance, and warmth. Successful coordinators are able to assure

teens that they know more about their faith than they think and that they possess the talents to build relationships with their students and their students' parents. They need to make sure that teens know that they will get the training they need to be effective mentors. Encouragement is most crucial at the beginning. Once the teen faith mentors begin to work, their student will likely keep them motivated and focused.

It's especially important for the program coordinator to match students with the right mentor. Take your time with this. Don't be afraid to try different combinations of mentors and students. Look for natural synergy. Often the mentor will find a solution to a problem that has eluded everyone else.

This was the case with Derek, a bright boy with autism who was extremely distractible. He would pay attention to a mentor for a minute or so before his attention would begin to wander. We tried various tactics, but nothing seemed to help until a teen mentor named Jake came in one day with a small whiteboard and a marker. Derek paid close attention as soon as Jake showed him the board. Jake wrote a question; Derek wrote an answer. The board was a focusing device; it was the solution we'd been looking for. Jake became Derek's teen faith mentor, and they worked their way through the lessons by writing on the whiteboard.

Knowledge of Special Needs

The program coordinator needs to know about autism and how it affects learning and social interaction. This doesn't have to be the knowledge of a professional in special education with firsthand experience. But the coordinator must know enough about autism to be able to guide a curriculum adapted for these children and to create a learning environment suited for them.

I am convinced that any capable religious educator who is well organized, able to work with teenagers, and possesses a heart for this work can acquire the necessary knowledge of disabilities with a reasonable investment of time. In my travels helping dioceses and parishes implement the one-on-one catechesis method, people often note that few parishes will have a program coordinator with the expertise that I have. I'm an ordained deacon with a doctorate and a license to practice psychology, and I have extensive professional experience working with people with autism. One diocesan official told me that an adaptive religious education program "is easy for a parish with someone like you. How can an ordinary parish do it?" I responded that it's not easy even in my parish, but I also told him that virtually every parish can acquire the expertise it needs in a reasonable period of time with focused effort.

The necessary training often comes from local people. Many communities of any size in the United States have at least some services for people with disabilities. In many communities, these services are quite extensive. They are provided by social workers, psychologists, special education teachers, occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, and other professionals, most of whom are eager to assist anyone who wants to help people with disabilities learn and flourish. In fact, working with families, educators, employers, clergy, and other community leaders is part of the job description of most of these professionals. They are available for workshops, orientation sessions, and consultation. Parents of children with disabilities are often quite knowledgeable and willing to share their expertise with the coordinator and other parish staff. Parishes can also often draw on diocesan staff in charge of disability services and coordinators of nearby religious education programs that serve children with developmental disabilities. In addition, the website for the National Catholic Partnership on Disability has invaluable resources for catechesis.

Administrative-Managerial Ability

The coordinator oversees a highly decentralized program in which change is happening constantly: instruction is individualized; every student and every mentor is different; every parent seems to have a question every week; adjustments large and small are being made constantly. Coordinators of an adaptive religious education program must be able to handle a constant flow of questions, decisions, and problems. At times they'll feel like they're experts in navigating chaos.

Facilities The coordinator needs to make sure that the rooms used for this program are suitable for this type of learning. Ideally, rooms should be quiet, with subdued lighting, and allow for only a minimum of distraction. Practically, this often means that the coordinator needs to get there early to arrange classrooms for the program and stay late to make sure they are returned to their original condition afterward. If you do not have multiple classrooms available, you can divide a room using desks or dividers.

Planning The coordinator must be well organized and able to plan ahead. He or she must set the calendar for the program well in advance. The calendar needs to include sessions for orientation of teens, parents, and students; training of teen mentors; and meetings with parents. The program must be coordinated with the parish calendar and with the schedule for the standard religious education class for events done together, like Mass and the sacraments. The coordinator will frequently juggle schedules to accommodate busy students and mentors.

Availability The coordinator must be available to parents, teen mentors, and parish staff. I give my e-mail and telephone number to mentors and parents, and I insist that they let me and one another know when a student or mentor will miss a class because of sickness or other unavoidable obligation. The program coordinator must

also be able to reach everybody quickly when there is a last-minute change in class for weather-related reasons.

Keeper of Materials The program will generate a considerable amount of material—lessons, visual aids, resource books, magazines, and handouts. The program coordinator needs to prepare this material and distribute it, often in advance. And don't forget the paper, pencils, crayons, and other supplies that any school program needs!

Parents The coordinator oversees the plan for the parents who accompany their children. In my program parents sit together for a facilitated discussion with a counselor while their children are working with their faith mentors.

The Near-Peer Faith Mentor's Role

Again, the key to the program's success is the relationship that develops between the student and the teen mentor. When that relationship is close and meaningful, students learn. When it falters, students make fitful progress or none at all. It's no exaggeration to say that the most important helper in the program is the teen faith mentor.

The idea of using teenagers as faith mentors was something of an experiment when I started the program. I had seen religious education programs that used one-on-one instruction, and I was familiar with programs that involved adolescents as teaching assistants and aides. But I had never seen a program that combined the two, using teens for one-on-one instruction. In my professional work, I had observed that children with autism seemed to learn best from people their own age or close to it. A bond seemed to form that facilitated learning. I thought that teens might relate more easily to children with autism because they lack the prejudices and expectations—and also the self-doubt—that many adults seem to have. If so, they might be able to

develop a personal relationship with these students that would make learning easier.

These suppositions proved correct. But I didn't anticipate what has turned out to be the most important outcome of using teens as mentors—the way mentors become role models for their students. Most children in the adaptive religious education program form strong bonds with their mentors. They come into the program looking for help. And sadly, many don't have many similar-aged friends; they don't really know how to “make friends” with someone. They are unsure of themselves, anxious, and lost in social situations they don't understand. Along comes the faith mentor, a cheerful young person close in age, interested in the student, and happy to spend time with them every week. Students quickly become attached to their mentors. They work hard to please the mentors. They watch how their mentor dresses, talks, and relates to adults and other mentors. The faith mentor becomes a model for how to be in the world.

I saw a powerful example of this outside of class. Twice a year, the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team gives our program the use of a luxury box at their arena, Consol Energy Center. Everybody—students, mentors, and some adult chaperones—goes to the hockey game for a night of fun. One season, I noticed that Billy, one of our older students, didn't seem to be enjoying himself very much. He sat a little apart; he watched the others fooling around and cheering when the Penguins scored a goal, but he didn't join in himself. A few months later we went back for another game. This time Billy joined right in with everyone else. I realized that during the first game, Billy had been learning how to have fun. He had carefully observed what people do at hockey games. The second time he put what he observed into effect. It may have been deliberate imitation, but Billy seemed to be having a great time.

This is for real. The mentors' first responsibility is to understand how important they are to their students. Frequently, teens don't realize how quickly their students come to depend on them. It's a relationship they need to take seriously. They need to know that their students are watching them carefully and will imitate what they see. Being a role model and mentor for children with autism requires a great deal of responsibility.

Know the student. The mentor gets to know his or her student very well, often better than anyone outside the student's family. They learn what "stims" really mean. They learn how the child communicates. They get to know how the child learns best. This is subtle knowledge. Children with autism don't communicate the way most people do. They often can't tell you that they would rather look at pictures than listen to you read from a book, that they don't like to be touched, or that loud noises disturb them. The mentor learns such things gradually, through patient observation and trial and error. Over time the mentor gleans how the child learns and is able to develop an effective approach to teaching.

Manage time well. The mentor needs to be on time, arrive at class prepared to teach, and teach with a good understanding of the purpose of the lesson. He or she needs to be in good communication with the coordinator and the student's parents. The mentor needs to review and prepare the lesson with the program coordinator before he or she arrives at the weekly meeting.

Work with parents. Parents know their children better than anyone else does. Teen faith mentors work closely with parents when they are first getting to know their students, and the relationship continues throughout the program. Mentors review the weekly lessons with parents so parents can repeat the lessons at home during the week. Parents and teen faith mentors need to communicate about

schedules. Sometimes mentors need to talk to parents about difficulties their children are having. This relationship is something of a role reversal. Some teens take to it naturally. Most need coaching and respond well to it. Often the program coordinator will need to help facilitate this relationship between teen mentors and parents.

Parents' Role

Parents are required to participate in the program with their children. There are practical reasons for this. Parents help mentors understand how their children learn and communicate. Often, the children need to have their parents nearby for stability and reassurance, especially in the early weeks of the program, which often are difficult. Teen faith mentors meet with parents at the end of each class, and parents are asked to repeat the lesson at home at least once during the week. At Our Lady of Grace, we encourage an active faith life at home. We ask families to observe the seasons of Advent and Lent, we supply materials for family prayers and devotions, and we ask parents to attend Mass with their children. The hope is that the child's participation in the adaptive program will be an occasion for the entire family to deepen their faith life.

In my experience, this happens if parents stick with the program. It usually takes time. The parents of our students cope with strains and disappointments that are far greater than the usual pressures on families. Over time, as their children receive the sacraments and grow in faith, most parents deepen their own faith as well. Facilitating this healing is deeply gratifying.

I recall Dominic, a father who did everything the program asked of him but with an edge. He brought his son to class but didn't interact with other parents easily. He didn't go to Mass. Over time, as his son learned about his faith, Dominic loosened up. He told me one day that I had been "on trial" for two years. He had been hurt by and

angry with the Church because of the thoughtless way some pastoral ministers had treated his son. He had brought his son to the program because his wife insisted that he do it. He didn't think the program would work. He had been watching me and the teen mentor carefully, waiting for the disappointment he'd come to expect. Instead, he found a program that helped his son and in the process gave him a way back into the Catholic community. I remember the big smile on Dominic's face when he and his son received Holy Communion together.

Dominic's story illustrates another important aspect of the program: success takes time. A spirit of patient trust is an essential virtue. It takes time to develop a program. It takes time for mentors to find the best way to teach. Children make progress at their own pace. This program is an opportunity for everyone involved—coordinators, pastors, mentors, parents, and students—to practice the virtue of patience in a culture that demands immediate results.

