





A PARISH-BASED APPROACH

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



Children with Autism  
and Other Special Needs

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**LOYOLA PRESS.**  
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Chicago



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Chicago, Illinois 60657  
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[www.loyolapress.com](http://www.loyolapress.com)

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Autism and Theory of Mind chart in Ch. 2 is adapted from *Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Tantrums, Rage, and Meltdowns* by Brenda Smith Myles, PhD and Jack Southwick (AAPC Publishing: Shawnee Mission: KS, 2005).

ISBN-13: 978-0-8294-3890-1

ISBN-10: 0-8294-3890-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013948175


Printed in China.

14 15 16 17 18 RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3




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# Starting a Program



The key decision makers in your parish have made the decision: you want to implement an adaptive religious education program for children with autism and other special needs. How do you get started? What's involved? How long will it take? What are the things to watch out for? To continue the theatrical analogy, this chapter is about the work involved in getting a show ready for opening night. The actors are merely the players on stage. People who are literally behind the scenes—writers, electricians, stagehands, dressmakers, producers and directors and their staffs—do much of the work.



This chapter is about getting the show ready for opening night. The next chapter is about keeping the show going.

### The Scope

Most people reading this book know about parish programs. You know how complex they can be; how challenging it is to find, train, and motivate volunteers; and what it feels like to have a seemingly endless list of details needing immediate attention. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize the broad scope of our program. Offering individualized instruction to children with autism and other disabilities is a logical extension of an existing religious education program. But while it is integral to a parish's religious education offerings, it comes with

its own unique characteristics and challenges. It serves parish families coping with challenges that most families never face.

This broadens the scope of the challenges facing catechetical leaders. Every child's impairment is different, as are his or her strengths and abilities. Each child reacts differently and learns differently. Every child must be taught in a way that suits his or her unique abilities and learning style. In typical religious education classes, a catechist makes choices that help the whole class. With one-on-one catechesis, each decision about instruction is based on the needs of a single child.

## Preparing the Parish

Starting a program that uses one-on-one catechesis is easier when the parish is alert to the needs of people with disabilities and is accustomed to seeing them in visible, active roles in the parish. It's easier to recruit teen faith mentors, easier for parents to come forward with their children, and easier to get funding and pastoral support. It's easier to achieve the ultimate goal of this program, which is to bring young people with autism and other disabilities into the fullest degree of spiritual maturity of which they are capable and to see them integrated into the local parish community.

Crucial in the preparation for an adaptive religious education program is parish awareness and the steady advocacy for the needs of parishioners with disabilities. The goal is a parish community that eagerly seeks out, embraces, and welcomes people with disabilities, young and old alike. People with disabilities—especially children—aren't much in evidence in our parishes. They often don't rank high in the list of groups and causes that parishioners are typically exhorted to support: young people, older people, singles, young professionals, single mothers, people who are homeless or those who are grieving, disaster relief, pro-life, evangelization, among others. Paying sufficient attention to people with disabilities requires intentional effort.

The pastor and other clergy need to take the lead in this, and they need to do it in the right way. Often parish leaders will seek support for parishioners with disabilities (and other special groups) by insisting, “Our parish must be open to everyone.” This is certainly true; including people with disabilities in parish life (and in society as a whole) is a requirement of justice. But the assertion that a parish must be open to everyone is a very general statement that is heard quite often in connection with many groups with particular identities and special needs. This attitude needs to be supported with practical action.

Effective advocacy for people with disabilities can often be quite subtle, rendered with little fanfare. Parish leaders can simply mention people with disabilities in a natural, unforced way whenever they can. They can draw attention to their needs by providing large-print Mass materials, providing interpreters at Mass, ensuring that parish events are accessible to people in wheelchairs, and supporting local organizations that serve people with disabilities. They can take small steps to make people with disabilities visible, comfortable, and involved. As I mentioned, in my parish a man with autism has been an usher at the 9:30 a.m. Mass for fifteen years. A man with a hearing impairment is a lector. When pastors speak about people with disabilities from the pulpit they can remind their parishioners that virtually everyone will cope with a disability at some point in his or her life.

In a welcoming parish, one-on-one catechesis is a natural outgrowth of a long-standing concern for the needs of people with disabilities. The reverse is also true; the adaptive religious education program can promote the well-being of parishioners with disabilities in other ways. At the Our Lady of Grace parish, the adaptive religious education program on Sunday mornings gradually led to the 9:30 Mass becoming a time where people with disabilities feel at home. At this Mass, their presence in the parish is especially visible. It’s a noisy Mass. A child periodically runs in the aisles. Others flap their hands. At every Mass

someone is sure to make noise when quiet is called for. But it's OK. These children and adults are not only at home in their parish; they make it whole.

## Does Your Parish Need a Program?

Parish ministers need to determine the need for an adaptive religious education program. If a child presents him- or herself to a parish, we need to address the child's needs. The average parish almost certainly has children with special needs. These parishioners include children at the usual ages for sacramental preparation, teens and adults who have never been confirmed, and even some who have never received the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

Potential students may be there, but identifying them is another matter. They may reside within parish boundaries but not attend Mass. As noted earlier, parents are reluctant to bring forward their disabled children for religious education. They are protective of their children. Their kids don't fit in. They've been teased and bullied at school and in other social settings. They are sensitive about the label "disabled." It carries a stigma and can make it difficult for the child to fit in.

Many parents simply assume that their children aren't eligible for religious education. Their children usually receive special education services in the public schools, and they've dealt with therapists, special education teachers, classroom aides, and other specialists. Since these supports aren't available in parish religious education programs, parents might assume that their children won't be able to learn in this setting. It's also the case that parents can underestimate their child's abilities. In my professional work, I have often seen children perform much better than people expected them to. With a focused, one-on-one, child-centered method, remarkable things can occur. Children need

time and patient encouragement—and the opportunity to express themselves.



Many parents don't think about religious education until their child reaches the age to receive First Eucharist. (This is true for parents of all children.) Some parents might approach a parish minister to talk about it. Many will not. It's a bold move for anyone to approach the pastor and ask the parish to provide a special service. Parents need to be invited.

Parish ministers can make good use of private networks and personal contacts to find these parents. Members of the parish staff may know some of them already and can recommend they ask for religious education. There are likely members of the parish who work with people with autism professionally as teachers, speech or occupational therapists, psychologists, or social workers. Many children in the program in my parish came because I got to know them in my work as a psychologist specializing in autism spectrum disorders. I'm not unique. Identify and consult with parishioners who work with people with autism and other disabilities.

The program at Our Lady of Grace began with five students. Your program, like mine, will probably grow over time as word gets out. Over a few years, my parish's program gradually grew to about fifteen

students. Then the numbers suddenly shot up to twenty and then twenty-five.

You might consider the possibility of operating the adaptive religious education program jointly with another parish (or several parishes). This adds a layer of complexity to planning, but it enlarges the pool of potential students and brings more human and material resources into the picture. Many diocesan bishops strongly encourage joint programs and the pooling of resources among parishes. Offering religious education to young people with disabilities is an obvious way that parishes can work together.

Word will spread. If you offer an adaptive religious education program on your own, expect parents from other parishes to come knocking on your door. You might want to decide in advance how you will handle this. Our Lady of Grace accepts everyone into the program regardless of parish membership. Some families travel long distances on Sunday mornings to be part of it. Of course, this is not the ideal. Every parish has a responsibility to serve the needs of its parishioners. And we're ready to help any parish that wishes to start an adaptive religious education program of its own. A dozen dioceses in the eastern United States have begun formal review of a program using the one-on-one catechesis method, and several parishes are formally offering it as a parish religious education program. The development of the *Adaptive Finding God Program* makes it possible for every parish to respond meaningfully to each family in need.

## Publicize the Program

When it's time to announce the adaptive religious education program, do it strongly, not quietly. The pastor or catechetical leader should speak about it from the pulpit at all the Sunday Masses. It should be presented as an important new initiative that is part of the parish's broad commitment to meeting the needs of people with disabilities.



It's important to quickly follow up this announcement with an information session where parents can learn more.

#### How to publicize and recruit.

- Speak from the pulpit about the program.
- Seek out parishioners who are professionals in special needs education and therapy or government agencies.
- Schedule an informational meeting.
- Use all communications channels, including the parish's website, social media, e-mail lists, and bulletin.
- Visit local schools; talk to counselors.

This information session is crucial. There's a lot to explain, and parents need the opportunity to talk. Every child with a developmental disability is unique. Each needs an instructional approach suited to his or her personal style of learning and method of communicating. You might be surprised by the turnout for these sessions. I have participated in many of them; often parents wait patiently for a long time to have the opportunity for a private discussion with the program coordinator.

Use all the communication channels at your disposal. Place announcements in the bulletin. Put a description of the program on your parish website. Invite parish members who work in special education to let their Catholic clients know about the program. Announce the program in other parishes. Several families in our program first heard about it through an article I wrote in our diocesan newspaper.

## Schedule

At Our Lady of Grace, the adaptive religious education program is held on Sunday mornings. I think this is the best time for a program

that uses teens as faith mentors. There are too many competing activities for teens on Sunday afternoons.

When I decided to schedule the program from 8:30 to 9:15 a.m., several people warned me, “You’ll never get teenagers to get up so early on a Sunday morning.” These fears have proved exaggerated. Mentors do occasionally come to class shaking off sleep, but they’ve been quite capable of rising to the challenge of showing up at 8:30 ready to teach, particularly after they’ve met and made a connection with their student.

I chose the time because it makes it easy for families and mentors to attend the 9:30 Mass. Many children with disabilities (and their parents and siblings) do not attend Mass regularly. Mass is a sore point for many parents of children with autism and other disabilities. Many of their children have trouble sitting still. Sometimes they stim because they are overstimulated, anxious, or bored. Parents don’t like annoyed looks (or worse, negative comments) from parishioners who are used to a “quiet” Mass. You can understand why many choose to stay home. As I mentioned, the 9:30 Mass gradually became “our” Mass, and it’s now a comfortable place for parents and children to worship.

I also wanted to make it easy for the mentors to attend Mass. Teenagers can fall out of the habit of attending Sunday Mass, and I wanted the program to lead to attendance at Mass. Many of our mentors attend 9:30 Mass with their students since it immediately follows class.

Forty-five minutes of class time doesn’t sound like much, but it’s sufficient for what we need to do. One-on-one instruction is intense. So that’s enough time for the mentors, and it’s enough time for the students, some of whom have limited attention spans.

Class begins promptly at 8:30. We sing a song together, accompanied by a parent who plays the guitar. We pray a couple of short prayers. Then mentors and students go off for their sessions. At the end, mentors meet briefly with parents to explain the lesson, so that parents can reinforce it with their children at home during the week.

It's a good idea to make firm decisions about scheduling at the beginning; don't think that you will "see how it goes" and change the schedule later. Change is very upsetting for many children with autism. They rely on routine and can become alarmed when a routine changes. One year I decided to open class with the Lord's Prayer instead of the Hail Mary, as we had done the previous year. This disturbed one boy, who insisted that I was saying the "wrong prayer." I hastily reinstated the Hail Mary, but the boy still watches me carefully every week to make sure I say it.

## Facilities

Most children with autism do not thrive in an ordinary, crowded classroom. Because their sensory-processing abilities are often impaired, sights, sounds, and smells, as well as new things in the new classroom and school, overwhelm and confuse them. They have trouble separating important information from background noise. Many are hypersensitive to certain stimuli. Some fixate on seemingly irrelevant details. They are prone to distraction. Mentors work hard to keep their students focused on the lesson, and the learning environment shouldn't make this task any more difficult than it already is.

I use the classrooms of our parish school for the program. No more than two pairs of students and mentors are in a room at one time. Because many young people with autism are hypersensitive to stimuli, we work hard to eliminate sights, sounds, and smells that most people barely perceive. We use natural light as much as possible, because many students are bothered by the faint buzz of fluorescent light fixtures. This makes for dim classrooms on gray Sundays during the winter in Pittsburgh. In warm weather we don't use fans for cooling because the spinning blades of electric fans distract many children with autism. Flowers are another distraction because many children are

exceptionally sensitive to scents. We remove as many colorful banners, wall hangings, toys, and play equipment as is practical.

The preschool and nursery classrooms in our school are full of beautiful equipment. One has an elaborate castle that takes up one-third of the room. We've never been able to use these rooms in our program because the furnishings are so distracting.

In the first few years of the program, I used the parish school library. This was a large, quiet, carpeted space that worked well for a small program. However, it didn't work so well for a bright boy named Liam who had high-functioning autism. Liam loved books, he collected books, and they constantly distracted him from his lesson. Liam's mentor solved the problem by making a deal: he could look at books for five minutes if he first worked on his lesson for ten minutes. It worked like a charm. Liam held up his end of the bargain and made sure the mentor stuck to hers.

Even when rooms are prepared well, children with autism are still prone to distractions. I try to help mentors work with these distractions rather than fight against them. An example is Marcus, a boy who became fascinated with the view out the large window in his classroom. In the first few weeks of class, he would constantly leave his seat, walk to the window, and stand there, staring at the cars and people outside. The clever mentor soon stopped trying to get Marcus to come back to his seat; instead, she joined him at the window and taught him there and that's where they are every week, talking about Jesus and the sacraments while looking at the world outside.

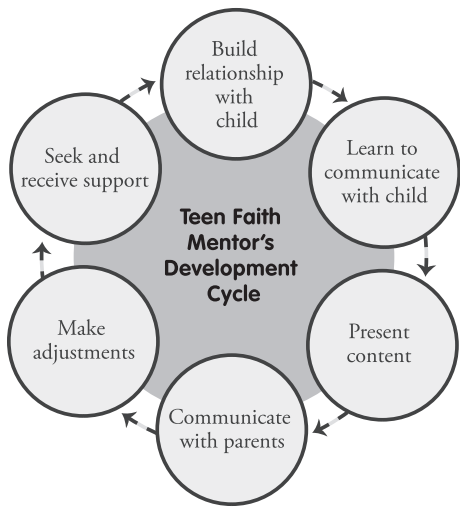
The boy at the window is a good example of one principle of effective teaching of children with autism: let the student set some of the rules. In a regular classroom, neurotypical children are expected to conform themselves to the teacher's rules. In our adaptive religious education program, mentors adjust to the students. If a student needs to get up and walk around every five minutes, then teaching takes

place in five-minute bursts. If a student has to look out the window, that's where the mentor goes, too.

## Getting Off the Ground

The first three classes are crucial. Mentors and students need at least this much time to get to know one another. Mentors must understand their student's unique personality and learning style, and students must do something that few of them have ever done before—establish a relationship with a friend. This relationship is the key to the success of the program; the foundation for it is laid during the first weeks.

The first month of the program can be difficult. Children with autism typically dislike new situations. Adjustment is hard for both new students and for those who have been in the program for a while. It takes time, and there's no way to speed it up appreciably. It is likely that during the first two or three weeks, not much content will be covered, since the mentor and student will be relationship building. It takes as long as it takes. The program coordinator can help by setting a routine for class that doesn't vary from week to week.



The program coordinator should work intensively with the mentors during this time to help them learn how their students communicate and learn. It's very important that mentors and students be matched well. Sometimes it's necessary to make a switch. Occasionally, I bring in a second mentor to help with a particular student. I pay special attention to helping mentors budget their time well. They need to come to class prepared to teach; they need to allow time to meet with parents after class and get to the 9:30 Mass on time.

It looks like a difficult balancing act. The people in charge of the program must, on the one hand, establish clear expectations and predictable routines. On the other hand, they need to set up a radically decentralized and one-on-one program tailored to each student's needs. But this is not an impossible task. You can do it, too.