

This Is Sacred Space

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That my child knows there is a God to pray to," is a response that came from a parent with a special-needs child, and the question was: "What are your expectations for your child in this religious education class?"

To assist all of our children so that they may know in their hearts that there is a God who knows, loves, and calls them by name is a goal we as catechists can all strive to achieve. If we believe that religious education is about "falling in love with God," and that each person deepens that relationship on his or her own individual journey, then certainly we can say yes, our children with special needs will "know there is a God to pray to." It really is that simple!

The message is that God loves you; the experience of that love is manifested in each child through expressions of deep joy and a sense of peace. We know, however, that how a child hears and takes in that message can vary from person to person. In the area of special education, we have witnessed an increased sense of awareness and desire to form all of our children in the faith. In this spirit of inclusion we will have children with learning disabilities, hyperactivity, or attention deficit disorders as part of our group. For the most part, how we as catechists relate to these children will affect how they hear this message of God's love. The catechist is the most important component in faith formation.

So, for the short period of time we have each week, what do we do for the children who come to us with special needs and challenges?

Prepare the Environment

Let us consider the child who has attention deficit disorder (ADD). A child with ADD will often appear restless, may have difficulty remaining seated, and is easily distracted. These children often have difficulty waiting their turn, interrupt frequently, and have a hard time listening. One child with ADD can create chaos in a classroom if the catechist has not made some special adjustments in how the environment is organized. It is crucial that we prepare the environment, because in a carefully prepared environment the child with ADD can have a positive experience.

Preparing the environment can mean creating a sense of the sacred in our classroom. This will help the child slow down. How we speak, move chairs, and handle the material can demonstrate that what we are here to experience is sacred and holy.

Using a soft tone of voice followed by a few seconds of silence before we give directions can settle a child who is feeling restless. Playing silence games, for example, or asking the class to listen to their breathing, or ringing a soft chime that tells students they may now move to the next activity introduces a feeling of calmness and a silence that comes from inner serenity rather than being "teacher imposed."

Help Children Focus

Children who have ADD can be assisted by means of multi-sensory strategies that help them to focus. For example, if your lesson is about the liturgy, consider bringing in beautiful articles that the students see used at Mass, such as the chalice and the paten. Hands-on presentations help to focus students' attention. Working in a small group and setting up a model altar-complete with

altar cloths, candles, crucifix, chalice, and paten-can help children in an indirect way realize how precious the Eucharist is, so precious that we use these beautiful vessels and linens to honor it.

We may want to ask a child who needs some assistance staying focused to spend time taking care of the environment-polishing the precious vessels, for example, or watering and taking care of the plants on the prayer table.

What does polishing a chalice have to do with learning about God?"

Now you may think, "What does polishing a chalice have to do with learning about God?" Asking a child to polish a beautiful chalice or care for the environment enables us to reach the child with ADD through a multi-sensory approach. The child has the opportunity to engage in movement, to develop fine motor control, and to realize the calm of a contemplative environment. As the child engages in these tasks in a quiet and reverent manner, a sense of the holy and sacred is conveyed.

Bring Scripture to Life

So often our words get in the way of the experience, and we lose the child who has difficulty listening. Using beautiful but simple materials to share the stories of the Bible, and asking simple questions that add to the sense of wonder and awe are very effective in getting and keeping children's attention. As we begin each new liturgical season we can use the stories of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter to further a sense of wonder and delight.

By reading from the Bible in a reverent way, perhaps lighting it candle and using three-dimensional figures to further demonstrate the story, we invite children to enter into the mystery.

If we want to conduct a discussion after the reading, our questions should be open-ended, thus enabling the child who has difficulty staying focused to feel comfortable taking part in the conversation. For example, when talking about the Annunciation, we may ask, "I wonder how Mary felt after the angel left her?" or when reading about the Resurrection, we might ask, "How do you think the women at the tomb felt when they saw Jesus was gone?"

This form of "wonder question" will focus children on the mystery before them. Learning will feel less like another "school subject" and more like a personal encounter with the transcendent. Children with ADD can become bored and easily distracted if they are in situations that require them to be passive listeners. Keep them thinking and wondering. Give them the opportunity to touch, see, and experience the mystery of this God, who knows them personally.

Trust the Holy Spirit

If our purpose as catechists is to nurture the spiritual life of the children before us, then we must meet children where they are on their journey to God. As we gather together, can we remember to spend this time as holy time? It is true that we need to transmit information and help children learn about our faith. But this process needs to include a knowing with the heart as well as with the intellect. After all, when we fall in love with someone, we want to learn all we can about that person.

Let us prepare the environment, help children focus, bring Scripture to life-and trust that the Holy Spirit, the one True Teacher, will bring all of our children into a deeper relationship with God.

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