

## **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

**Office for Parish Life Ministry with Persons with Disabilities  
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Every one of us is brought into life as a very precious gift, formed by our gracious Creator and loved into life by our parents. We come “wrapped” with a variety of qualities, skills, desires, and needs. What we do with the gifts we are and the treasures we become, takes a life time of formation and appreciation.

As catechists and religious formators, we have the privilege of preparing and guiding our students to live as faithful, loving followers of Christ. Every student who comes into our care has the right to be catechized and spiritually nurtured by virtue of their baptismal call.

Recognizing the fact that every student is unique, we must look at ways of addressing the specific ways in which we can best make the faith accessible and alive for them. The students sitting before us present a “cross-section” of life with all the characteristics and qualities of persons loved, redeemed, sanctified and appreciated as cherished children of God.

“Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: “Therefore...we are members of one another (Eph.4:25). Baptism incorporates us into the Church. Having become a member of the Church, the person baptized belongs no longer to himself, but to him who died and rose for us ( Cf.1Cor 6:19;2Cor 5:15). Just as Baptism is the source of responsibilities and duties, the baptized person also enjoys rights within the Church: to receive the sacraments, to be nourished with the Word of God and to be sustained by the other spiritual helps of the Church.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church assures the catechist and student of the baptismal rights of all baptized Christians. People with disabilities are not to be denied the rights and duties of Baptism.

Children with disabilities should be encouraged to learn, live and share the faith with others. They must learn to respond to the call of Baptism to the best of their abilities. Therefore, we are to give them opportunities to share their faith (to the best of their abilities) with all they meet. Oftentimes, they serve as models of great inspiration and perseverance to many.

In situations where students with disabilities are included in the regular classroom settings, there is a great deal of learning through a common give and take among all the students. Faith is taking root and coming alive in the daily lived experiences of the whole class.

“Evangelization and catechesis for persons with disabilities must be geared in content and method to their particular situation. However, care should be taken to avoid further isolation of persons through these programs which, as far as possible, should be integrated with the normal catechetical activities of the parish.” (Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops in Persons with Disabilities)

### **INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

Pope John Paul II, of blessed memory, made it a point to encourage the inclusion of students with disabilities into the parish religious education programs. In his encyclical, *Catechesae Tradendae*, he wrote: 41. “Children and young people who are physically or mentally handicapped come to mind. They have a right, like others of their age, to know the “mystery of faith.”

Our parishes programs must provide welcome and acceptance to the students who have physical, sensory or intellectual disabilities.

Every student who has a disability has a right to the best possible religious education program.

Our hearts and our doors must be open to provide opportunities for these members to actively participate (to the extent they are capable and desire) in the life of the parish community.

Grace Harding, M.A, M.S.Ed., Diocese of Pittsburgh, Department for Persons with Disabilities, speaks of **Levels of Inclusion**: **physical, spiritual, social and academic**. Grace shares the following explanation of the ways in which students who have disabilities can and should be included in our parish religious education programs.

**Physical**: the religious education of the students should take place in the same setting as the non-disabled students, i.e., school building, parish church /hall, or family home, so they will have the same opportunity to know each other. The religious education of the special student should also take place at the same time as their chronological peers.

**Spiritual**: Special students should take part in all spiritual and liturgical events of their chronological peers. They should be involved in the planning if possible, and be visible at the events.

**Social:** Special students should take part in all the social activities in which their chronological peers in the parish are involved. As with the spiritual activities, they should be part of the planning if possible, and be visible at the events. They should socialize with their chronological peers, although there are often times in a parish when intergenerational events occur. Students with disabilities should take part in all parish activities.

**Academic:** Special students should be taught religious education in the same class, side by side with the non-disabled, chronological peers whenever possible. They are a part of the regular religious education program as long as they are able to feel successful in learning the academics required at that level. If the academics begin to become too difficult, a “pull out” support can be initiated for part of the class.

A quality inclusive program will work when supported by caring and interested people such as the DRE, catechist, parent and teacher assistant. Appropriate Curriculum resources also provide support to the catechist. Inclusion works well when adequate and on-going support is utilized.

In the inclusive religious education class, the special students should spend as much time as possible with the non-disabled students during each catechetical session. The level of inclusion is determined individually for each student. They may be present for the opening and closing prayer, the teaching of the objective of the day, and the class activity. It is important that the non-disabled and special students realize that they are classmates, even though they may have different religious education goals.

All students with disabilities are included in a parish on the physical, spiritual, social and academic levels, *without exception*. When this is a challenge to a program, employ the various levels of support necessary to make inclusion work. Not every student will be fully included on the academic level. A prepared catechist will find ways to include a student on this level whenever possible. Support from a teacher assistant or a “buddy” may be all that is needed for successful inclusion.

*When developing programs to serve students within a parish, remember that inclusion is for everyone, but it does not have to look the same!*

Please note: these principles will apply to students who have developmental disabilities ( Down syndrome, autism, learning disabilities), as well as sensory and other disabilities.

## **MODELS OF INCLUSIVE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

### ***DEGREES OF INCLUSION & VARIOUS SCENARIOS***

The following inclusive religious education models are examples of the ways in which our students with special needs may be included in the parish religious education programs:

1. The student is fully included in the regular religious education program and is experiencing success with the curriculum used for the typical child
2. The student is included in the regular class, but requires tutoring with the regular curriculum within the classroom. A “peer tutor” is assigned for this student.
3. The student is included in the regular religious education program, however, this student needs additional help in learning concepts. He/she needs more help than a “peer tutor.” This student will remain in the classroom for the following:
  - Opening prayer
  - Presentation of the learning concept
  - Any liturgical activity
  - Any musical activity
  - Any arts and crafts activity

He/she student is removed from the classroom for individual instruction on the actual learning objective.

3. The student is in the regular classroom for the :

- Opening prayer
- Liturgical activity
- Music

The student is removed from the regular classroom and is taught using the lessons from the \* **“Kennedy Curriculum”** ( *“The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Program to Improve Religious Education for Children and Adults with Intellectual Disabilities.”*) The student is educated in the same building at the same time as his/her typical peers. The student joins his/her chronological age group for all spiritual and social activities. The student is taught in a small group or individually with the **“Kennedy Curriculum.”**

4. A student attends the first part of the class only while the learning objective is taught from the regular textbook. There is also supportive catechesis with the regular textbook. Supportive catechesis with the **“Kennedy Curriculum”** is done at home.
5. Homeschooling: the student is taught at home using the **“Kennedy Curriculum.”** The student is welcomed at any spiritual and social activities of his chronological peers whenever it is possible.

The **“Kennedy Curriculum”** is a leveled religious education program which was designed by the Department for Persons with Disabilities in the Diocese of Pittsburgh with a grant from the Kennedy Foundation.

This program is available from: The Office for Parish Life, Ministry with Persons with Disabilities, Diocese of Scranton. In-servicing is also offered for those who would like to implement the program.

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