

Adaptive Learning and Special Needs

Read and Reflect

As your parish implements ***Encounter with Christ***, your leaders are committed to giving you a comprehensive and personal experience in Sacrament preparation. Ongoing formation assists you in preparing and accompanying the children and families you serve.

Prior to completing the following reflection activity, read the essay titled *Adaptive Learning and Special Needs* on pages CG24-CG25 from the Catechist Guide (included at the end of this document). Record your responses for this reflection activity in the spaces provided or on a separate sheet of paper. Refer to your responses for later discussion or complete as instructed by your catechetical leader.

For Reflection

Catechists like you often face challenges that surface in a group of children as you get to know them. Special learning needs can become most visible in a learning environment. They potentially pose obstacles to participating in activities or mastering the material being covered.

- Developing a relationship of trust with your children's parents will make it easier for them to offer information about their child. How will you go about building that relationship?

- Go to the online Session Planning section of the ***Encounter with Christ*** website (sacraments.osv.com) and find an adapted activity. Write about an insight into the learner's world that the activity provided.

- Praying for your learners is an essential part of walking in faith with your children. Praying for patience and wisdom in helping children with special needs will open you to the power of the Holy Spirit. Write a short prayer below that asks for that help. Rewrite the prayer on the inside cover of your Catechist Guide. Say it before the children arrive.

- The use of multi-sensory methodologies is necessary for all learners but especially important when children have special needs. Create a small checklist for yourself that helps you to keep track of how many different ways you are engaging the children.

Addressing Special Learning Needs

Our Church is one of rich diversity. Each of us has areas of talent, gifts, or strengths, as well as areas of need—things we’re not as good at or need some extra help with. As a welcoming Church, we celebrate our unity and diversity by embracing the gifts of each one of our members and striving to meet the needs present among us. And as disciples of Jesus, we show special care and concern for those among us who are most vulnerable. This includes individuals with special needs.

Special learning needs are issues that become most visible in a learning environment and potentially pose obstacles to participating in activities or mastering the material. They may include attention issues such as ADHD, learning disabilities or other cognitive differences, emotional or behavioral problems, and physical disabilities.

Regarding persons with special needs, the *National Directory for Catechesis* states the following: “Catholics with disabilities have the right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community. All forms of the liturgy should be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the

essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. As much as possible they should also be invited to play a more active role in the liturgy and should be provided with proper training and aids to do so” (36, 3b-3).

Adapting our approach for children with special needs can feel like a daunting task to many catechists and teachers, especially if we do not have any experience with the particular needs the child brings. Sometimes catechists, teachers, and administrators look for a one-size-fits-all approach to special needs, seeking a resource or program that will meet all the special needs of children in their group. In reality, this is not feasible, because every child is unique and comes with a different combination of gifts and strengths. This includes those with special needs. However, there are skills that can be learned and applied by catechists and administrators that will help us adapt our material and methods as necessary to meet the needs of all the children in our group. Here are a few steps for getting started.



For adaptive learning approaches for children with special needs and session-specific resources go to sacraments.osv.com.

Adaptive Learning & Special Needs

Difficulties with Attention and Impulse Control Research tells us that **children who have difficulties with attention problems or impulse control** often have more difficulty paying attention to auditory input than to other stimuli, such as visual cues. As you begin the activity on page 30 (What Do You Hear?), face these children and invite them to do what you do. Have them imitate various gestures and facial expressions but eventually become very still. Challenge them to try to hear something that is very quiet. After the activity, invite them to show and tell what they did to listen.



Session activity adaptations to meet various learning needs can be found at sacraments.osv.com.

Getting Started

Welcome children with special needs and their families. Ask parents to let you know if there are needs you should be aware of.

Get to know the family and child. Find out the child's interests and strengths as well as his or her needs. Ask the parent what is helpful in other settings, such as home or school. Does the child have an individualized education plan at school? If so, are there any strategies from that plan that might also be used in the catechetical setting? The National Catholic Partnership on Disability offers a parent interview form for this purpose on the website in the section on autism resources. You can find a link at sacraments.osv.com.

Consult the *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments for Persons with Disabilities*, written by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. It is usually possible to make the Sacraments available and accessible, even in special circumstances. You can find a link at sacraments.osv.com.

Do some troubleshooting to determine if there are physical barriers present in your facilities or environment that would keep some learners from participating. Can children with physical disabilities get to the space used and move around appropriately once there?

Use multisensory methodologies where possible. Some children learn best by seeing, others by hearing, and still others by doing. In *Encounter with Christ*, we have made great efforts to involve multiple senses and accommodate a diversity of learning styles. This is especially important when children have special needs that might pose a barrier to learning in one particular sensory way.

Role-play and practice participation in the Sacraments, and make these learning experiences as concrete as possible. *Encounter with Christ* includes liturgical responses and concrete ways of preparing for the Sacraments. These will be especially helpful for learners with cognitive differences.

Child Book



Catechist Guide

