

The Saint Mary's Curriculum for Students with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, Delays and Disorders

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Characteristics of Autism

- Social impairment
- Communication impairment
- Sensory impairment
- Can be cognitive delays, but this is often difficult to separate from communication issues

Social Impairment

- Mind blindness
- Facial expressions read by area of the brain that reads objects
- Can't read non-verbal cues
- Problems with unwritten rules, exceptions, etc.
- Devastatingly honest

Communication Impairment

- Low-functioning:
 - receptive language impairment
 - expressive language impairment
- High-functioning:
 - social use of language impaired
- *Literal* understanding of language

Sensory impairment

- Difficulty knowing where one's body is in space
- Fluorescent lighting can seem to flicker and buzz
- Reflections off windows can be distracting, empty rooms can echo
- Difficulty finding the edges of things, understanding part-to-whole relationships

Sensory impairment, continued

- Pain
 - G/I issues
 - lack of communication means
may not be able to convey
when you're in pain
- Exaggerated fight/flight response

Sensory impairment, continued

- Cross-channel shifting
 - may not be able to simultaneously process what they hear/see/feel

Recommended Books

- Temple Grandin:
 - Thinking in Pictures
 - Emergence: Labeled Autistic
- Donna Williams:
 - Somebody Somewhere
 - Autism: An Inside-Out Approach

Implications

- Difficulties making sense of the environment
- Anxiety
- Need for sameness
 - routine
 - clear rules

Implications, continued

- Sensory-friendly (calm) environment
- Lots of repetition (not rephrasing)
- Multi-sensory information delivery
 - emphasis on visual, kinesthetic input

Implications, continued

- Explicit explanation of how things affect the student, e.g. “Jesus is Karen’s friend, Jesus is John’s friend, etc.
- Need to address each student individually, not as part of a group

The Setting

- Accessible (ramp, etc.)
- Room
 - bare as possible
 - rug, shades
 - ability to shut the door

Class Structure

- Maximum of three students per class
- Reverse inclusion: typical peers volunteer to participate in a class designed for students with disabilities
- Not a drop-off program; a parent or caregiver attends, either within the class or on the premises
- Meets every other week – *not* Sundays

Who Are Our Students?

- Students fit the following profiles:
 - Lower-functioning students who were never able to participate in a regular religious education class – these students begin our program in a first-year class, generally at age 8 or 9 (some have been as old as 11)*
 - Higher functioning students who either:
 - begin our program in a first-year class, generally at age 6 or 7*
 - participated in the first year or two of regular religious education, but were left behind by increasingly abstract material – these students are placed in a class based on the material they have already learned

* We use common sense in age/size groupings: 6 and 11 year-olds are not grouped together.

Who Are Our Students?

continued

- All students possess these prerequisite skills for participation:
 - ability to follow a point-prompt
 - understanding that pictures represent real objects
 - some basic receptive language

Who Are Our Students? continued

- Diagnoses include:
 - Autism
 - Asperger's syndrome
 - Down syndrome
 - Mitochondrial disease
 - Non-verbal cerebral palsy

Who Are Our Teachers?

- Relatives of persons with disabilities
- Special education teachers or aides
- Community members who may have worked with a child with a disability in a scout troop or some other organization

The Curriculum

- Loosely adapted from the Rose Kennedy curriculum
 - First year: God; we are God's children; we take care of God's world; we are like God; Jesus; Christmas; Jesus helps me; the Sign of the Cross; the church is God's house
 - Second year: types of prayer; the Our Father
 - Third year: the Hail Mary; parts of the Mass
 - Fourth year: the Holy Spirit; the Trinity; review of Baptism, Reconciliation and the Eucharist
 - Fifth year: the life of Jesus
 - Sixth year: the Ten Commandments
 - Seventh year: the Beatitudes
 - Eighth year: the Apostle's Creed
 - Ninth year: Confirmation in the fall

The Curriculum, continued

- Short, predictable activities, in the same order, give students a routine, but also allow them a break and a chance to get up and move around
 - Prayer corner (see slide 1, presentation_pix)
 - Opening prayer
 - Circle, using felt board pictures
 - Snack, possibly accompanied by a story
 - Making a poster (slide 2) or prayer book page (slides 3 and 4), using stickers (as the students get older, role-playing is often substituted at this point in the class)
 - Closing prayer

The Curriculum, continued

- Heavy emphasis is placed on pictures paired with sign language:
 - The same images are used repeatedly to create a picture vocabulary (slide 5)
 - Using sharp pictures or photos with little or no background, preferably not pastel images, improves comprehension
 - Using pictures of actual children in the class increases understanding (slide 6)
 - The use of pictures, signs, and tangible objects (felt board pictures, stickers, dolls) conveys information across a variety of sensory channels

The Curriculum, continued

- Classes are scripted: spontaneous language is not necessary for students to participate (slide 7)
- An attempt is made to elicit an active response (repetition of sign or word, acknowledgment with voice-output device) from each child for almost every key word; this helps students to learn key concepts and to match words, images, and signs together

The Curriculum, continued

- Creation of take-home materials (posters, prayer book, Mass book) affords students the opportunity for continued exposure to material, and gives them tools to help follow along and participate in the Mass (slides 8 and 9)
- Parental participation means parents can carry over teaching at home, and facilitate participation in the Mass
- Role-playing the Mass in the third year helps students to understand the purpose of the Mass and their role in it, and can improve behavior during Mass

Video

- This video has two parts to it. In the first part, the boy does not understand he is being filmed. In the second part, he does. Note how his behavior changes.
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoqL0w2ftgA>

Role-play

- Have trainees practice teaching one another
- You will need:
 - training scripts
 - training pictures
 - felt boards
- If parents are present, have them participate, asking them to respond in ways their child might

Elaborating Curriculum for Higher Functioning Students

- Don't forget the basics; elaboration doesn't mean elimination
- Students may *look* great, but it doesn't mean they have absorbed the idea; remember to get feedback
- Remain concrete; remember “Theory of Mind”
- Examples:
 - Color coding and the liturgical year
 - Drawing pictures of Stations of the Cross, and writing what they think Jesus is thinking at each one

Behavior

- Some people with autism can have behavioral outbursts (including scratching, pinching, etc); the program needs to be a place where volunteers understand such things may occur
- Behavior has a cause: pain, frustration, a desire to escape. Get students to *ask* for a break, rather than reinforcing negative behaviors
- Behaviors are more frequent in new and different situations

Behavior, continued

- Have parents/caregivers handle behaviors; the teacher should keep going with the lesson
- Increase space around a student who is acting out, for safety reasons, and to make it easier to continue the lesson
- Don't comment on a student's behavior in front of that student

Behavior, continued

- You will meet gun-shy parents, who have been asked to leave, glared at, etc. They may hesitate to sign their child up for the program.
 - It's important they feel welcome:
 - notice in the bulletin about the program
 - comments from the pastor, etc.
 - make it clear behavior is not a prerequisite

Thoughts on Mass Attendance

- Introduce idea through a social story; re-read story before Mass each week
- Initially only attend for a few minutes at a time, gradually extending the time (this can take up to three years)
 - work forward from the beginning of Mass, or backward from the end of Mass
- Allow child to bring toys/distracters (but nothing that makes noise)

Thoughts on Mass attendance, continued

- Expect certain behaviors: when congregation sits, child sits; when congregation stands, child stands; when congregation kneels, child kneels
 - caveats:
 - child may not be able to stand, kneel, etc. as long as everyone else;
 - it's never wrong to kneel in church, even if everyone else is doing something else

Thoughts on Mass Attendance, continued

- The child needs a way to ask for a break if he/she needs one
- Consider setting up a preferential seating arrangement, e.g. front pew of rear section, last pew, etc., particularly if a child has behaviors that can impact those around him/her – for instance, pulling ponytail holders out of the hair of people sitting nearby

Sacramental preparation

- First Reconciliation and Communion are not made in a specific year of the program
 - Parents and the program director consult on a child's readiness
 - Older students generally receive these sacraments in their first year, younger students wait

Sacramental preparation, continued

- Preparation is home-based, using a curriculum of stories (slide 10) read weekly or semi-weekly on a schedule (slide 11) beginning in October of the school-year in which the sacraments are to be received; the child also practices taking the unconsecrated host
- Reconciliation is made using a card comprising words and symbols the child can point to or read aloud (slide 12)
- The family may choose to have the child receive First Communion:
 - As part of a group (in which case it is recommended the child go second or third)
 - At a regular Mass
 - Privately

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