

A Religious Education Curriculum for Children with Autism and Other Developmental Disorders

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Why a special setting for *some* students with developmental disabilities?

- Some students cannot function in a regular classroom, due to:
 - Extreme anxiety
 - Difficulty with unstructured social interactions
 - Extremely short attention span
 - Problems regulating sensory input

Why a special curriculum for *some* students with developmental disabilities?

- Some students fail to learn through a regular curriculum, due to:
 - Extremely poor auditory processing
 - Extremely concrete thinking
 - Severe cognitive limitation

A setting and a curriculum *designed* for these students, not *modified* for them, allows them greater growth in understanding and faith

The Saint Mary's Program:

- Began in 2000; first group of six students has now been confirmed
- 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

Who are our students?

- Learners who need:
 - multi-sensory, primarily visual, input
 - concrete explanations
 - lots of repetition
- Students possessing prerequisite skills for participation:
 - ability to follow a point-prompt
 - understanding that pictures represent real objects
 - some basic receptive language

The curriculum

- 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
 - Opening prayer (see slide 1, presentation_pix)
 - 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

- Heavy emphasis is placed on pictures¹ 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

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The curriculum

- 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

- 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>

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

- 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

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: uncertainty, 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
- 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

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