

# Meeting Diverse Learning Needs in Catechesis

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What do we mean by “diverse learners?”

Learners with diagnosed disabilities (e.g., autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, etc.)

- Learners who just seem to “learn differently.” This is especially common in today’s media rich, technologically-saturated culture.

Why an inclusion model?:

Some practical reasons

- Smaller parishes may only have a few children who would fit into a “special program”/class.
- The whole community benefits from the presence of persons with learning differences and from inclusive practices.

What our Bishops say ...

“Persons with disabilities should be integrated into ordinary catechetical programs as much as possible... They should not be segregated for specialized catechesis unless their disability makes it impossible for them to participate in the basic catechetical program.”

-- *National Directory for Catechesis*, 49

“Catechesis for persons with disabilities is most effective when it is carried out within the general pastoral care of the community... The whole community of faith needs to be aware of the presence of persons with special needs within it and be involved in their catechesis.”

-- from the *National Directory for Catechesis*

How do we accommodate? –

A practical framework for inclusion

- Welcome persons with learning differences and their families.
- Make learning multisensory to accommodate various learning styles and needs.
- Include individuals with learning differences as part of the community.
- Use best practices from special education and Church documents.
- Prepare learners to live what they have learned.

Welcome diverse learners and their families

- Welcome persons with learning differences before you even encounter them.
- Get to know the family and child. NCPD parent interview form: [www.ncpd.org/ministries-programs/specific/autism](http://www.ncpd.org/ministries-programs/specific/autism).
- When doing sacramental preparation with a child with diverse learning needs, be sure to consult the *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments for Persons with Disabilities*
- Do some troubleshooting to determine if there are physical barriers present in

your facilities or environment that would keep some learners from participating.

Make learning multisensory to accommodate various learning styles and needs.

- Look for adaptations and modifications in the catechist manual and website
- Act out Bible stories, using costumes and props, or to make the story interactive in other ways.
- Use music.
- Alternate between large group/small group, individual formats
- Play games

Include individuals with learning differences part of the larger community.

- Consider the use of an “educational assistant.”
- If a learner has learning or mobility differences that are visible or obvious to the other children, help the group gain information considerately.
- Build a “positive climate.”

The Positive Climate

- Gifts/Talents are appreciated
- Positive feedback is given
- The best is expected and encouraged
- Catechist facilitates collaboration: “We help each other.”

Use “best practices” from special education and Church documents.

- Learn some “best practices.” A wealth of information exists online on sites devoted to special education (e.g., [understood.org](http://understood.org)). Another excellent resource: National Catholic Partnership on Disability ([www.ncpd.org](http://www.ncpd.org)).
- Individualized Religious Education plan – specifies the learning goals and objectives and what types of accommodations and modifications will be used.

For learners  
with autism

- Use language that is concrete and specific
- Give advanced warning when making transitions
- Ensure that the environment is “sensory-friendly” if the child has sensory sensitivities (e.g., tactile defensiveness or sensitivity to loud noises).
- Provide a picture schedule of the classroom routine so the learner will know what to expect.

For learners  
with ADHD

- Seat learners near the front (or near area where instruction will be given) to minimize distractions
- Move and change positions often (sitting to standing, move from one area of

the room to the other).

- Give directions both verbally and visually.
- Provide positive reinforcement for on-task behavior.

For learners with reading or writing challenges

- Read the material to the child when necessary.
- Allow the child to respond to questions verbally, rather than in writing, if this is helpful.
- Use music and rhyme to help the child memorize prayers or points that require memorization

For learners with visual impairments

- Take care to make sure there are clear paths for navigating through the learning environment to minimize risk of injury (look for tripping hazards, etc.).
- Use materials in braille or large print, as appropriate.
- Use music, tactile (touch) activities, and other activities that involve multiple senses to involve alternative pathways for learning.

For learners with hearing impairments

- Seat the learner near you, and look in his/her direction when speaking.
- Offer instructions visually as well as verbally.
- If the child is deaf, investigate the possibility of involving an interpreter trained in American Sign Language.
- When singing, use songs that have signs and/or hand motions.

Prepare learners to live what they have learned.

- Use person-first language.
- Use the “Saint Awards” activity to name the gifts you see in each of your learners
- Throughout the year, be sure to include lessons on saints with disabilities so children can recognize the diversity of our communion of saints and appreciate that each person has unique gifts to offer our Church.
- Use multisensory methods and concrete language to help learners with disabilities remember what they have learned and share it with others.
- Use social stories and role play to discuss and practice ways to serve others.