

## INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 58,935 students in Religious Education classes in grades Kindergarten to 8 in the Joliet Illinois Diocese. Using the percentage of students with disabilities in the general population, of these students about 15% have disabilities which prevent them from participating full time in a classroom or necessitate that they are accommodated within the classroom environment with special help. With these numbers in mind, it is important that Religious Education Programs, as much as possible, consider and respond to the special needs of their families. Much of the information contained in the following pages is basic information that will be helpful when beginning a parish program for anyone just starting out whether DRE, volunteer coordinator, or parent.

“The parochial assembly provides continuity in the sacramental life of all its members, including those who are developmentally disabled. If families cannot bring *all* their members to the parish church, where can they bring them? If each person does not have a place before the table of the Word of God and the table of the Bread of God, where is there a place?” (Page 1, Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation for Developmentally Disabled Persons, Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, Archbishop of Chicago. Liturgy Training Publications, November 1, 1985)

Cardinal Bernadin’s paper “Access to the Sacraments of Initiation and Reconciliation for Developmentally Disabled Persons” is an important one because not only does it state that “I want your parents, brothers and sisters, and friends to know that you are full members of the Church. By Baptism and Confirmation, you have a place in the Church that no one can ever take away from you,” but goes on to say: “Religion is neither fundamentally abstract nor purely conceptual. It is primarily relational, and, for that reason, the developmentally disabled person can be educated in faith.” And further: “It was often said in the past that such persons needed only the sacrament of Baptism in order to go to heaven. However, today we see how persons - even those with severe disabilities - are transformed by belonging to a loving community of faith.”

There are many types of disabilities. All humans have disabilities of one sort or another. For example, many of us cannot spell difficult words, some of us cannot read well and do not enjoy it, some of us are unable to memorize a long poem and retain that memory, some of us cannot sing on key (my husband is one of these), some cannot play a musical instrument no matter how hard they try or practice, some of us cannot run a mile, some of us cannot ride a bicycle, and these are only a few disabilities that are common to many human beings. When we talk about disabilities, we mean the types of things that we cannot do that hinder us or prevent us from learning. (Such as an inability to hear, see, have muscular control, learn the common things known at a specific age.) Physical or mental disabilities are the most obvious and understandable reasons for an inability to achieve and maintain basic levels of learning.

There are also students who show no outward signs of mental or physical disability but have severe emotional and/or behavior problems, family problems that are overwhelming, a learning disability caused by a chemical imbalance or even by parental cocaine or alcohol addiction. Strategies to help these children “fit into” the learning environment require creative solutions that are as varied as the disabilities identified.

### **PUBLIC SCHOOL APPROACH**

In recent years, many students with disabilities attending public schools have been “main streamed” rather than isolated from the general school population in self-contained classrooms. This is primarily in response to a parental desire to allow their children access to a “normal” education. Students are placed in a classroom of other students their own age with an aide or helper who works with them on an individualized goal. The student may be main streamed for the whole or part of the school day. Public schools complete a process which results in an evaluation of the students needs, strengths and weaknesses. This evaluation is the basis upon which the students educational process is determined. Parents are invited to a staffing which discusses the evaluation instrument and the educational direction the school will follow. Parents may agree to the process or ask that certain aspects be changed or modified according to their knowledge of their own child. This arrangement allows the child to be part of the school community and sensitizes the school community to the needs and potentials of persons with disabilities.

### **DIOCESE OF JOLIET**

The current diocesan program is based upon the same premise as the public sector, that the most effective approach to children with special needs is a program individualized for each student’s abilities, temperament, etc. However, main streaming into the regular RE classes is usually not a part of the program.

Parish programs within the diocese have taken many different approaches to Special Needs Religious Formation. Some provide one on one instruction for students with disabilities using modified materials and specially trained catechists, others mainstream students with an aide in the regular Religious Education class, while a few follow the REACH or SPRED programs and still fewer follow a Home Schooling approach.

The whole prospect of providing for Special Needs Students may be overwhelming but remember that Jesus did not exclude those with severe problems, the leper, the blind, the lame, even those possessed by devils, but brought them into the mainstream of his community of believers and gave them an equal chance at acceptance and participation. Of course we cannot heal our “misfits” with a word as Jesus did, but we can make adaptations to allow them to participate as they are able in a community of loving, believing and caring individuals.

### **TAILORING YOUR PROGRAM TO YOUR NEEDS**

Developing a program for your parish means first assessing your needs. It is important to identify students with disabilities in your community, contacting parents and

discussing the student's special needs and the possibilities for meeting his/her needs in regard to his/her religious education.

Next it is important to assess the resources available to you. This includes the building to be used, catechists expertise, materials available, and possible time frame for classes. Any of these factors may be a problem. For instance, if your facility has stairs everywhere and is not wheelchair accessible, it may mean students confined to a wheelchair will not be able to attend. If your funding is limited, and special materials are needed, this may also be a difficulty. If the only accessible room in your building is the gym and it is used every day of the week for basketball, that is also a problem. If there is no-one in your parish interested in working with students with disabilities and parents see no need for their child to be included in a religious education program, that can be a major stumbling block.

The following pages and list of resources will help you establish a religious education program for a variety of students with disabilities. Also included are parishes with established programs that you can call for advice, ideas and support.

## **GETTING STARTED**

### **Identify Needs**

Look at your parish population and see if there are any obvious needs among those who attend. Ask your pastor and other staff members if they know of any children with disabilities within the parish. If your Parish registration form does not ask for identification of persons with disabilities, add a line requesting that information. Make sure your Religious Education registration form has a line for names of students with Special Needs and their disability. Put an article in your weekly bulletin explaining that the parish would like to start a program and asking for participants. Be aware that often parents with students with severe disabilities do not feel that Religious Education and participation in the sacraments is necessary or even possible for their child. Talk to the superintendent of your school district, explain what you are looking for and ask if there are students within the system who might be candidates for your program. If he/she is hesitant to give you names, ask if you prepared a postcard to be mailed, if they would send them out for you.

Once you have identified the participants, you will need to evaluate and assess the student's needs. It is best to ask parent(s) to bring in their child and discuss possibilities. At this time, ask parents to identify the child's disability and create a profile of the child including not only types of disabilities but also the best ways the child learns, the child's like and dislikes, and what the parent(s) would like their child to accomplish, to participate in, to complete.

Ask the parent(s) if they will give you written permission to approach their child's public school teachers for strategies for communication and/or discipline, how do they measure the child's success, understanding, accomplishments, etc.

Ask the parent if their child is main streamed into classes with other students. does the child have an aide that stays with him/her all day? Which classes are main streamed? Does the child participate in a self-contained classroom also and or only? Does the child have an IEP? Has the parent participated in a staffing for the child? What insights have they gained?

Most importantly with the parent's help, develop a goal for this year and write it down in the parent's presence asking the parent to read it and indicate if it corresponds to what they envision as reasonable for their child. The goal can be as simple as to introduce the child to God through participation in "church" or as specific as to prepare the child for one of the sacraments.

Once you have established the number of students and their needs, it is time to begin to design the program.

## **PROGRAM DESIGNS**

**Building a Core Team:** Because it is important to work within your parish community, form a Core group of Parents, professionals working in the field, persons who are empathetic to persons with special needs who are willing to be trained, Special Education Teachers, aides, anyone from your parish who has the willingness and time to help you access needs and plan possibilities.

To be effective, your program must not only respond to the needs of its students but also be doable. So while you look at your ideal program, look also at the resources of personnel, money and building facilities at your disposal and make your decision based upon both need and resources.

There are many different approaches that can be used. It is important to include not only learning experiences but also community building, spiritual development, liturgical celebrations and fun activities. Remember that more important than learning information, your goal will be to help your students communicate with God and celebrate the joy that He gives them.

Unlike most programs for learning challenged students in the public sector, your goal is not to teach your students how to cope with educational endeavors and the basic skills to care for themselves, your goal is to enrich their lives by introducing them to the God who loves them and developing a relationship with that God within a community of loving, believing and caring people.

Before beginning your design, contact the Joliet Diocesan Consultant for Students with Special Needs at the Religious Education Office in Joliet. Arrange for your Core Group to visit successful programs within the dioceses of Joliet, Rockford, Chicago, Peoria, Springfield, and that operate within Protestant churches, Jewish communities, etc. that are nearby your parish. Talk to the program director, take notes, collect information, registration forms, letters to parents, lesson plans, whatever they will give you.

Finally, use the references within this manual to research possible designs. A few possibilities you might consider:

**Mainstream Students Into Regular Religious Education Classes.** If the child attends some or many of the regular education classes in his/her public school, this is a good choice. You will need to carefully choose the catechist and, depending upon the disability, assign an aide to the child. Even if the child cannot verbally communicate or actively participate in class, they learn by absorbing the attitude, conversation and activities of the other children. The aide becomes the child's communicator. The catechist must be a person who will teach his/her class to the majority of students and is not intimidated by the presence of an aide and does not feel he/she must teach directly to the student with disabilities. The greatest advantage to this type of program is that the

student becomes part of the student community and is accepted by the other students and is accepting of the other student's personalities, level of learning, and experiences. The disadvantage is that there is no guarantee that the child with disabilities is learning at the same level as the other students. Care must be taken that the class is accepting of the child and the child is comfortable with the other students. This approach uses the same catechetical materials chosen for the rest of the class and follows the class schedule of lessons.

**One on One.** Rather than including the student with disabilities in a regular religious education program, the child is taught by a single adult. The program is tailor made to fit the child's age, abilities, faith development and needs. The child does not participate with other students and is usually given a space and time all their own. The advantage to this type of program is that the student has a greater chance of attaining a level of learning and feels less threatened than when placed in a regular religious education class. The disadvantage is that this sort of class does not prepare the child for participation in the larger parish community and does not increase the child's liturgical or community experiences. Catechetical materials can be chosen from many different sources. Some programs use Vacation Bible school materials (7 -14 lessons), a catechetical series at the student's learning age (20 25 lessons), a sacramental preparation series (8 - 10 lessons), or liturgical based materials (Pflaum Press 1 each Sunday during the school year to 52 lessons).

**R.E.A.C.H.** Most R.E.A.C.H. programs (Religious Education Apostolate for the Christian Handicapped) provide one on one with an adult catechist and time together for a liturgical and community experience with other students in the program. The advantage is that students receive optimum learning that is tailor made for them and an experience of liturgy and community building. The disadvantage is that it is an exclusive community of only students with disabilities and does not prepare them for participation in the broader church community.

**SPRED** The Chicago based program "SPRED" program is similar to REACH and offers excellent training for facilitators, leaders, and organizers while providing continuing support and enrichment opportunities for adults as well as students. The program provides appropriate catechesis for children and adults with developmental disabilities through a partnership of adult helpers and their developmentally disabled friends. A Christian community is formed which uses symbolic catechesis and example to interpret life situations building a faith community based on the Word and liturgical celebration.

### **Finding and Training Volunteers**

Once you have designed the program that will fit your parish budget and fill the needs of your students, you will need to recruit volunteers to work with the students. It is not so important that the volunteer have a background of working with persons with disabilities, than that person have an empathy level for the individual while at the same time have the ability to lead/control/command that person's behavior and attention span. A shy retiring person who is intimidated by another's behavior is not a wise choice. If the child's disability requires someone who is able to lift, move, or physically care for the

child, the person must be able to accomplish this. Volunteers can be recruited through the parish bulletin, pulpit announcements, from the ranks of catechists, or from parents of other students with disabilities. Remember to also check your parish data base to find professionals in the field who if unable to help as a volunteer, might agree to be a resource person or help with training volunteers.

Chicago based SPRED offers an excellent training program. Catechists are first led through the development and rationale of the program and then led through a sample catechist preparation session and student session. Catechists are then given a session to plan and lead by themselves that is critiqued by trainers and the other catechists. (The SPRED program meets every week, the first week with catechists and leaders only and the next week with students, catechists and leaders.) SPRED has three parts to every session. (1) Activity time. Each student works quietly with their helper catechists on an individual project of some sort. These projects are Montessori based and can consist of painting, clay, water play, sand/rice, manipulation of puzzles, preparation of food, cleaning silver pieces, etc. (2) Liturgical celebration. The participants are invited one at a time into a quiet room set with liturgical symbols. The participants listen to a gospel reading and respond to it. (3) Time together ends with agape, a sharing of food.

Catechists should be required to attend the Diocesan Catechist Training session and a special session that focuses on working with students and families with disabilities. This training session should include (1) explanation of disabilities (2) strategies of helping students with disabilities to learn/participate in religious education and (3) where to go and who to talk to when difficulties arise.

## **CHOOSING MATERIALS**

Using a profile of your students, including parental suggestions, choose several programs that will meet your needs and then present them to your Core team.

**Silver Burdett Ginn.** *Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Program to improve Catholic Religious Education for children and adults with Mental Retardation.*

Developed by Grace Harding of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. A comprehensive religion curriculum of 220 lesson plans for students with mild or moderate mental retardation. Includes basic catechesis, lessons on the liturgical year, prayer services and a handbook for parents by parents. Can be used to adapt lessons from any religion program. Comes in a hefty, six-pound loose-leaf color-tabbed binder to which you can add your own resources. \$65.00.

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**Brown-ROA** *Celebrate the Sunday Readings.* Cycle B. 2620. \$26.20

**Brown-ROA** *Seasons of Faith.* Prereader to Adult workbooks \$9.95 & \$11.30. Home Resource Book \$11.30. (Advent 1999-2000). *Children's Catechumenate.* Primary, Intermediate and Upper Student Workbooks \$8.80.

