*A Feast for All*

*Vol. II, No. 2 Summer 1998*

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[*ECHOES*](http://www.cctheo.org/ECHOES.html) **Serving Children with Disabilities**

In a reflection on the healing of the paralytic Mary Jane Owen from the National Catholic Center for Persons with Disabilities asked, "Why was it that the paralytic couldn't be carried through the door? How was it blocked? And why?" We may ask ourselves these same questions with regard to the children with disabilities in our parishes. Do we inadvertently block the door to our atria due to ignorance, discomfort, or fear? The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is extraordinarily appropriate and adaptable for children with disabilities, both because of its essential curriculum and its methodology. With the support of parents and parish and information, we can make places at the table for all God's children.

**Celebrating Diversity and the Gift of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd**

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     "How could I possibly include children with disabilities in my religious education class? Some of them don't even know how to read." Such inquiries usually arise from discomfort many of us feel when dealing with differences which are unfamiliar and therefore frightening. And yet, we are aware that our Creator lovingly includes great variations within the family of God. Why do we feel that differences in the ways others sense, know and move through our world mean "they" don't fit into "our" environments and programs?

This segregating over-emphasis on "special needs" can fade into obscurity when each child is viewed as unique and special. In atria around the world, a whole range of youngsters are welcomed and given the opportunity to experience the openness and acceptance which is the hallmark of the approach of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. And within these accepting atria of personally generated and thoughtful activity, each child, whether disabled or not, finds the freedom to explore their own particular path toward understaning and faith at an ever depening level. Whatever sensory, cognitive or physical challenges are a part of any particualr youngsters' image of the world, the "differences" can be united in faith. For the methodology itself was created out of a deep respect for the individual journeys of each of us.

In such a setting, the inclusion of a child with a disability may require little or no adaptation to the methods already used by those who assist in this catechetical process. This seemed so apparent upon my first view of the procedures employed. For I was struck by how beautifully its creativity lent itself to inclusion of diversity.

The experiential and experimental nature of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, as well as the "deschooling" approach described by Sofia Cavaletti, which pulls the atrium away from an academic atmosphere and toward a homelike open-ended environment, allow for diverse methods of conceptualizing to be used as the children move toward the profound truths which they will discover during their explorations. And the depicting of the stories of the parables in ways which encourage the use of alternative routes to the heart, mind and soul, allows meaningful participation for many who might otherwise be excluded from these spiritual wanderings. The basic premises which underlie this methodology encourage the child with a disability to personally witness the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her own way. Furthermore, the fidelity of the church tradition and the commitment always to offer the child what is the most essential and at the heart of Christian faith, means the process never demeans or diminishes what is being experienced. The process does not encourage "busy-work" to keep some children occupied while their supposedly more able peers are encouraged in meaningful activities. All are united in an excursion of faith, as each child is engaged in their own significant work of faith.

The process of moving away from an academic, school-like setting is a particular importance when addressing the spiritual development of those children with differing cognitive styles. Even the most concrete minded child who carries the designation of "mental retardation" can sense the truth. And the Holy Spirit seems ever able to convert the complexity of faith into simple, loving terms. In fact, researchers tell us such individuals are particularly adept in sensing the authentic and the true.

I am reminded of a deaf, partially sighted child who was also mentally retarded. Her mother was striving to confirm her daughter's readiness to receive Holy Communion. The pastor was uncertain. And then the youngster signed the words, "I want to eat Jesus. I want Jesus under my heart."

To my mind that story confirms the capacity to "understand" theology in a way not cluttered by some of the current proposals made by some of our learned theologians. The insights of those children who are blind, or use crutches or wheelchairs or need hearing aids or think in more concrete ways add both substance and spice to the rich diversity of God's world. For in the end, we must remember we are all essential parts of the Body of Christ. There is no more profound lesson to be learned than recognition of the inherent value and dignity of each precious soul. For we are indeed created in God's image, charged to display some small facet of infinite love. And such a profound insight is being gained each day in the atria you are creating. May God continue to bless each of you in you endeavors.

*Mary Jane Owen has been executive director of the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities since 1992. The Office is committed to creating inclusion of people with disabilities of all ages within the various ministries of the Catholic Church.*

*She is a blind, partially hearing wheelchair user, a former academic and federal employee, who has been involved in creating new policies and definitions of disabilities since 1972, when she lost her sight. She is a Third Order Dominican.*

  **Serving Children with Disabilities**

**Beginning Steps**

1. CHOOSING TO SERVE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

A church that has already made a commitment to integrate its members with disabilities into the community can encourage this effort in the atrium by providing accessible entrances, atria with enough space to maneuver a wheelchair, volunteers to provide any extra support children or catechists with disabilities may need, and staff support for the catechists. Catechists in a church that has not made this choice may wish to bring to its attention the need to include its members with disabilities in its communal life.

As a catechical team meets to plan use of space, materials and personnel, it could make the conscious decision to try to integrate any children with disabilities in the community into the atria. If the team is willing, an announcement such as "The Atrium Program welcomes students with mental and physical challenges. For information contact Mary Smith at 111-1111," could be placed in the bulletin on a regular basis.

Often children with disabilities have been overlooked because parents have gotten used to looking for special resources for their children. Such an announcement will encourage them to explore whether their own parish can serve their child.

2. GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENT/EVALUATION

Catechists usually need some specific information to serve a child with disabilities well. Interview the child's parents and learn from them as much about the child as possible. Learn about the child's strengths and abilities as well as their particular needs. If possible, speak to the child's teacher about successful social and educational strategies already used at school. Then meet with the child and begin to develop a relationship with him/her.

In some cases the needs of the child and the structure of the program may be incompatible. Be sure to consider all possibilities: Can the child come for part of the time? Start later in the year? Start after some specific preparation? Be helped in a different atrium? Could materials be used with the child on an individual basis?

3. PLANNING

As you become aware of the child's particular needs begin to plan her introduction to the atrium. Will she need more space to maneuver? Will she need a special table? Will an extra assistant be required? Should her introduction to the atrium take place over a few weeks, after the group has started to meet, or right at the beginning of the year? Will any materials need to be adapted for her use? Which materials will be best to introduce to the child first? Will she need lessons with a group or individual lessons? Parents or other experienced catechist may be a good resource for these decisions.

4. INTRODUCING A CHILD TO THE GROUP

Before a child with disabilities joins an atrium the group may need to be prepared. The child's parent or catechist may explain the disability, any special considerations this may require of the children, and suggestions about relating to or helping the child with disabilities. Answer questions frankly. Part of our goal is for the children to experience community, and this means as much integration into the life of the group as possible.

5. BEGINNING

With any new child in an atrium the catechist's first goal is to help the child to begin to interact with the people and materials in the environment. This may be a more difficult task for some children with disabilities due to their limitations. But it is very important to build a group of activities with which the child is comfortable and confident. For Alex, an eight-year-old in a wheelchair with limited hand control, the first of these activities was misting the plants in the atrium and adjoining hallway. Repetition is also important. Anna, a child with brain damage in the 9-12 atrium, made a Salvation History chart every week for months. She then moved on to copying maxims. The paths in the brain established by repetition take longer to form if brain damage is present, so both instructions and activities need to be repeated many times.

Observe carefully, trouble shoot, get the required support, and communicate with parents until things are going smoothly. Don't give up. The fruit of this effort can be seen in all the children of the group.

**ADD/ADHD**

Responses to the Center's survey of catechists working with children with disabilities indicate that the most common experience is with children with the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder ADHD. Ms. Nimal Vaz writes, "Hyperactivity means simply that the child's activity is disproportionate to the stimulus by which it was caused." Symptoms include difficulty with making choices, disturbing group activities and/or the work of other children, difficulty with concentration, and the need to move the body frequently.

Diagnosis usually occurs at about age six or seven when these symptoms begin to seriously interfere with school work, although the symptoms may be observable long before this. Catechists often find that there are at least one or more children with these symptoms in a group of 15 to 20 children.

With only an hour or two per week it is not a realistic goal to change the general behavior of the child. We suggest here strategies to help the child with ADD or ADHD to manage himself during the atrium meeting.

* A minimum of two adults in the room is essential so that fewer lessons are disturbed when the child needs extra attention, and constant supervision is available. With a large group, or very needy child, a third adult may be necessary.
* To help the child to make choices greet him when he arrives and then ask him to choose between two suggestions you make. He may make another choice altogether and that is fine. Providing a limited choice helps him get started. Between works, do not let him wander around "looking for something to do." Ask him to sit down (near you, if possible) and look with his eyes until he makes a decision. After he tells you his choice he may go and begin that work.
* To help with concentration the child may need an individual work space a little further from the other children.
* Works that involve movement such as practical life, the Altar, the Leaven, or the Fettuccia allow the hyperactive child to channel his movement productively rather than suppress it. Clear (and perhaps repeated) demonstrations of these activities by the catechists help them know how to move appropriately.
* Talking into a tape recorder is helpful for children who find writing or copying prayers difficult.
* In the 9-12 atrium a work such as painting figures or coloring a time line allows the child to use his hands, reflect on a familiar materiel with a new activity, and listen to lessons in the room while settled at an appropriate task.
* Lessons are more effective if given individually or to the child in a small group. If group activities are constantly or severely disturbed by two of more children with ADD or ADHD it may be more fruitful to suspend whole group sessions or make them very short for a while.
* For older children, lessons that involve a lot of discussion and reading (like the typology), may be more successful if the child with ADD/ADHD has the choice of sitting with the group or working quietly nearby as he listens and even contriubutes to the reflection.

**Language Tips**

Our relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, motivates us to follow his way of nonviolent love. The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd strives always to nurture the child's relationship with God. Only from this firm foundation can we begin to follow the commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.

Jesus is introduced to young children (3-6) as one who:

* was a baby born to a humble family in Bethlehem
* used the power of the kingdom of God: a power of growth and life and love, rather than destruction of death or hatred
* laid down his life for the sheep, in order to feed them with himself
* shares the power of risen life in Baptism

In addition, the older children (6-12) know Jesus as the one who:

* taught nonviolence with parables and maxims (ex. The Good Samaritan)
* taught and modeled forgiveness, and mercy (Maxims form the Sermon on the Mount, the healing of soldiers' eat at the arrest of Jesus).
* is united and unites us all to people of all times (True Vine, Eucharistic Presence, Breaking of the Bread)
* invites us to join him in bringing forth the fullness of the Kingdom of God (Parousia), a time of universal peace and communion

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