



The most precious lesson in life...

When my daughter entered first grade we wanted her to begin her faith education in a structured way. Until this point our older children received their religious education by attending catholic school. My daughter is in a learning support class in public school and that meant her religious education would need to take place outside of school in CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine), or PREP (Parish Religious Education Program) as some parishes call it.

When I first inquired about registering her for class, I was conflicted as to what the program would look like for her. She lives with an intellectual disability and because she is not mainstreamed in school I was concerned about her challenges in a learning environment designed for 'typical' children: Would I need to attend with her? What additional supports would she need? Would the teacher (often not a trained educator) be comfortable having her as a student? How well would she acclimate to the new environment (as sometimes new things are hard for her to adjust to)? Would the children welcome and embrace her as a classmate? Etc.

At first the Director of Religious Education (DRE) of my church gave me a book intended for preschoolers and suggested I begin to catechize (instruct in the principles of Christian religion) my daughter at home.

But, several things spurred me on to seek out inclusion into the parish program for my daughter...I felt that she deserved the opportunity to have the same experience as other children. I felt that (if supported) she could participate in a class with other children for her religious education, as she tends to learn well from watching other children and for the most part is capable of conforming to the behavioral practices necessary in a typical classroom setting for the short period of time it was expected. [This last criterion might be challenging for your child, but please remember that all children are deserving of receiving catechesis, and home catechesis or a specialized learning program could be available to you.] Lastly, participating would provide a natural opportunity to exercise social skills and participate as a member of our parish community in a new way—after all, the experience of community and belonging is part of the formation in the faith. The prospect of her forming a natural friendship with another student was also on my mind...that would be a wonderful gift.

Frankly, at the time I was coordinating her educational goals with school, supporting her personal care needs, and taking her to multiple evening therapeutic activities...I really didn't have the energy (or skill) to teach her religious education as well! How much more could she learn in a whole and developed

program—and be more receptive to the information—from someone besides "mom". I believe in a team approach, and I felt confident in my faith community that they could join the team!

I always perceived my daughter as a gift—as all children are—but it was around this same time that I was coming to realize that she was not merely our gift, but a gift to everyone. We have witnessed her great capacity for perseverance, determination, joy, and humor. I knew the children would benefit from knowing her as well. And, as someone outside our family once told me, "You can't know her and not love her." I needed (and continue to need) to be brave enough to share her gift of self.

I persisted to register her for the class and the program was open to our decision. She was in a small class (this was an essential element for her), her teacher was open, friendly and committed to sharing her faith with the children. My daughter (with a little TLC) was able to participate to the best of her ability. As she progressed through the school year, the teacher commented on her progress report, "it is a pleasure having <her> in class." This helped me be sure that I had made the right choice.

The children notice she is different. I'm not removed from that reality. But the adults lead the way. If she is respected and cherished by the staff, the children will recognize that and follow suit. For the most part they are sweet, accepting and try to help her with writing and reading (things she is not yet able to do well).

This past year my daughter received instruction for her first sacrament. I knew things would need to look a bit different for her to understand and be able to participate fully in the experience of reconciliation. Outside of her classroom I sought assistance from the Director of the Office for Persons with Disabilities & the Deaf Apostolate of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. She lent me supplemental materials to use with my daughter and made me aware of special sacrament kits made by a catholic publishing company especially for children with disabilities. I approached my parish about purchasing the kit and they not only purchased the one for Reconciliation, but for First Communion and Confirmation as well. This kit made all the difference in the world for her. Utilizing pictures, manipulatives, and simple language it helped make concepts more concrete and understandable for her. Even more rewarding, her teacher commented on how the materials were impactful not only for my daughter, but for all the children.

Was it scary putting her in class and trusting others to be able to understand her, be caring, help her feel a part of class? Yes. The first year I sat in the school just in case she would need something during class. I ended up being a hall monitor and liked that I could help out a program that was helping me. This past year I actually drop her off at class and go home. Is it difficult every time to "let go"? Yes. But I feel it is important to help my daughter grow confidence, even at this young age, that she can be independent in this small way. It is good practice for me too...to trust her and the "team" around her.

My philosophy is this: if my child with a disability is not safe, valued and loved as a wonderful creation of God in a religious education environment: where can I count on her being safe, valued, and loved?

The staff of the entire program is helping me to be a better mom and her to be a better little person every week. Her presence gives the other children the opportunity to acquire and practice what Christians believe are the some of the fruits of the Spirit: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. And perhaps they learn the most precious lesson in life: that all life should be cherished and that each person (no matter what their abilities and gifts) have value, are capable of love and being loved, and are deserving of receiving AND giving to their communities.

Tips for having a successful religious education experience

First and foremost: Make yourself known to your parish and the person in charge of religious education. They might not know you are out there. **They want and are there to serve you.**

Each church's religious education framework may look different. Some may have specialized classrooms for children with disabilities, others are able to include the children in the classroom, and still others may use parent and other volunteers to assist children with disabilities in the classroom.

When it comes to your child's participation in their religious education program, be the best advocate you can for your child. As in all things with our children—communication is key:

- If the registration form asks for it (even if it doesn't!), provide the program with any relevant information for your child. They can much better serve your child if they are aware of your child's need.

-Sometimes families feel a stigma, or shame, about a child's

disability. This may prevent you from being forthcoming about a child's challenges. It can be difficult to overcome, especially if you or your child has been discriminated against or ridiculed for their disability. The religious ed. staff are largely volunteers who's ministry it is to serve the children and families in their community. They want to help! Having an awareness of your child's need will foster acceptance, understanding, and equip that person to serve your child best.

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-It is your right to NOT disclose anything. If you are not comfortable, don't share. But know that in some circumstances you may be limiting the encounters your child has with others if they are not aware of their circumstances. Further, misunderstandings tend to create hurt feelings that may then lead you to not participate fully in the program or leave the program when lack of accommodations cause negative experiences.

- In order to modify the program to meet the needs of your child, program staff may request a copy of your child's IEP. These documents can be lengthy and difficult to interpret if they are not trained educators: I found it more helpful to provide more "well-rounded" information about my daughter—a list or letter from you about his/her likes, dislikes, strengths and challenges—so that they can get to know your child easier, make them feel comfortable, and meet his/her learning needs as best they can.

-For example, maybe your child looks down at the floor or begins chewing on something if they are uncomfortable—that's important for their teacher to know and respond to.

-Might your child get upset if they have a substitute teacher? If so, let the teacher know that so that s/he or the program administrator can alert you if your child needs a substitute at any given time.

-These kinds of details are often missing in an IEP, but can be key for your child to succeed in a new environment.

- Meet with the teacher before the first class to introduce your child and show him/her the classroom environment. This also gives you and the teacher an opportunity to ask questions.
- Check in with the teacher (and or/program administrator) regularly to be sure things are going well.
- Help problem solve. Again, use your resources (disabilities representative, your child's school-teacher, etc.)

-Sometimes "problems" have a simple solution: One teacher shared with me that she was having difficulty with a child playing with items in the desk he sat at. They simply put 4 desks together with the backs facing the children so that they couldn't access the insides: simple and effective.

- If your child struggles with communication, provide the child and staff with other ways to communicate. If your child uses a communication device at school, use it for their religious ed. as well. Customize a single page of pictures your child is familiar with, that they can point to aid their communication: I would like a turn. I have something to say. I need to use the restroom. Could you call my mom? It's too loud in here for me. Etc.

If your parish doesn't have a program for you...

You may encounter some resistance at first if the program staff does not have a lot of experience with your child's disability or disabilities in general. Some may admit to not having a program suitable for your child. Ideally every place of worship that provides religious education should be able to accommodate each and every member of its community (see the last bullet point below).

However, if the circumstance is that the church does not have a program to educate your child, perhaps a neighboring one does have a program in which your child can participate. Again, pull in "the team". Each church may not be currently capable of meeting the needs of every disability, but parents can help them work toward that goal and expect them to pool resources and work as neighbors to meet the needs of their communities. If a child from one community is being educated in another, that community should respond by contributing to that program in some real way: providing volunteers, sharing physical resources, educating the home community of that student in how to develop a similar program, etc.

One DRE I spoke to asked me "But won't parents be upset if we don't have a program for them, and we suggest attending a neighboring church's program?" My response: "Maybe some families will. But in my experience, I believe families will be happy to know that they have that option and your trying to serve them as best you can." So—if your church doesn't have a good option for you...

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- Ask the program administrator to inquire at other places.
- Persist. Some may think that by suggesting you prepare your child may be the easier path for you: Tell them how important it is for you that your child learn about the faith with their peers and be a part of their community.
- Inquire if your church has an advocate or representative for Persons with Disabilities who can assist you.
- Locate the national or local office or committee that addresses these needs and ask as to how they can assist. These offices have resources to help your church learn to be a welcoming environment equipped with the tools to serve those with disabilities. The information is there—it just needs to get it to the right person. Your role may be that bridge.

In every case, suggest (kindly) that they consider how they are serving those with disabilities in their community. Offer to consult about developing a program that would serve your child.

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