

TOOLKIT FOR CATECHIZING

LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES

Every parish should seek out its parishioners with cognitive, emotional, and physical disabilities, support them with love and concern, and ensure that they have ready access to a catechetical program suited to their needs and abilities.

- National Directory of Catechesis 61: B, 1, 2nd paragraph

Tips on Language

- Speaking of Disability: Pastoral Guidelines on Language:
https://www.ncpd.org/resources_and_toolkits/speaking-disability-pastoral-guidelines-language-1
- Etiquette and Hospitality: https://www.ncpd.org/files/resources_toolkits/Etiquette_and_Hospitality.pdf

Catechesis Models

Integration in Parish Program	Integration with Accommodations	Small Group Instruction	Individual Instruction	Instruction in the Home
The child receives catechesis in a typical classroom with their peers. No specialized supports are needed.	The child receives catechesis in a typical classroom with their peers and receives a level of support that works best for him/her.	A group of children works with a catechist. This may take place in a separate location or within the same classroom as peers.	The child works one-on-one with a catechist. This may take place in a separate location or within the same classroom as peers.	The child works at home with parents and family.

*At times, it may be appropriate to combine catechesis models to best meet a child's needs.

Physical Accessibility Considerations

- Ramp or elevator required to access spaces?
- Wide doorways
- Wide aisles
- Desk high enough to comfortably sit
- Consider accessibility of church, restrooms and event/meeting spaces

Accommodations for Learning

- Additional time
- Modified assignments
 - Shorten task/assignment
 - Provide alternate assignment
- Provide questions in advance
- Step-by-step directions/Task analysis
- Response alternatives
- Preferential seating
- Visual schedule
- Visual timer
- Buddy system - can be older youth to help redirect child
- Peer mentor
- Use diagrams, graphics and pictures to augment what you say in words

Accommodations for Focus and Memory

- Buddy system - can be older youth to help redirect child
- Peer mentor
- Preferential seating
- Flexible seating - i.e. yoga ball, bean bag chair, cushions
- Various Fidgets
- Simple language
- Additional time
- Multi-modal lessons
- Vary your tone and volume
- Ask learners to repeat directives
- Checklists
- Chunking
- Attention signal or phrase - Instructor says, "God is good," students respond "All the time."
 - "When I say go..."
- Ask for a favor

Two Main Functions of Behavior

To Get

- attention
- tangible
- sensory

To Escape

- avoid something undesirable
- internal discomfort (anxiety)
- sensory

Accommodations for Behavior

- Use proximity
- Planned ignoring
- Narrate progress
- Positively stated instructions
- Positive Reinforcement
- Create a break area inside classroom
- Provide a break outside of the classroom
- Offer choices
- Check-in/Check-out
- Offer incentives for behavior
 - This may require a behavior chart
- Buddy system - can be older youth to help redirect child
- Peer mentor
- Self-monitoring
- Post and review schedule

Suggested Language to Discuss Concerns with Parents

Parents have the right to NOT disclose if their child has a disability. Regardless of whether this information is shared, we are called to meet each child's needs.

- "I am observing (behavior). Have you observed this?"
- "How do you best support (child's name) with this at home?"
- "To your knowledge, is the school providing any specialized supports that we can also implement here?"
- "How can we work together to best support (child's name)?"

Tone matters! Ensure you are coming from a place of love and curiosity rather than seeking to "fix" a problem.

Mental Health Considerations

Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people ages 10-34

<https://www.nami.org/about-mental-illness/mental-health-by-the-numbers/>

- **Youth Mental Health First Aid**

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/population-focused-modules/youth/>

- ***Be Encouraged* - Catholic Support for Mental Health**

<https://archphila.org/support/>

- **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**

<https://988lifeline.org/>

- Call, text or chat 988
- Connects you to trained crisis counselors 24/7.
- Free confidential support for anyone thinking about suicide, struggling with substance use, experiencing a mental health crisis, or any other kind of emotional distress.

- **Crisis Hotlines:**

- Bucks County
 - Bucks County Mental Health 24-hour Crisis: 1-800-499-7455
 - Upper Bucks Crisis: 215-257-6551
 - Central Bucks Crisis: 215-345-2273
 - Lower Bucks Crisis: 215-785-9765
- Chester County
 - Chester County Mental Health 24-hour Crisis: 610-280-3270
- Delaware County
 - Delaware County Crisis Connections Team (DCCCT) 24-hour Crisis: 1-855-889-7827
- Montgomery County
 - Montgomery County Mental Health 24-hour Crisis: (855) 634-HOPE (4673)
- Philadelphia County
 - For immediate help for children contact the Office of Behavioral Health Emergency/Information Line: 215-685-6440 (Help available 24/7)
 - For Emergencies for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities: 215-829-5709

Adaptive Catholic Curriculum Resources

- **Loyola Press Adaptive Finding God and Learning Kits:** Full curriculum designed to support faith formation for children with a wide range of special needs. The curriculum is adaptable to a variety of settings and situations and includes lesson plans and adaptive materials for each grade level and sacramental prep.
 - <https://www.loyolapress.com/faith-formation/diverse-learners/?uri=faith-formation/special-needs/adaptive-finding-god/>
- **University of Dayton Inclusive Catechesis Resources:** Uses limited vocabulary and simple images; both sacramental prep and supplemental books on a variety of topics available
 - https://udayton.edu/artssciences/ctr/ipi/inclusive_catechesis_resources/books.php
- ***Awakening Spiritual Dimensions: A Model of Catechesis and Prayer Services for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities*** by Fr. William Gillum, OFM Cap.
 - Program for persons with severe intellectual disabilities
 - <https://www.authorhouse.com/en/bookstore/bookdetails/806136-mcguire-memorial-awakening-spiritual-dimensions>
- **RCL-Benziger:** Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Program to Improve Catholic Religious Education for Children and Adults with Intellectual Developmental Disabilities
 - Level based Student Activity books are also available.
 - Autism Supplement (2014)
 - <https://www.rclbenziger.com/> or 1-877-275-4725
- **Our Sunday Visitor**
 - *My First Eucharist / Sacrament of Reconciliation* videos and teacher's guides created by the National Catholic Office for the Deaf provides a signed and closed captioned sacrament preparation to assist in preparing Deaf children to receive the sacraments.
 - Also available on <https://www.ncod.org/>
 - *Strengthened in Faith: Confirmation:* Three DVD's that contain 12 video lessons in American Sign Language, captioned and voiced in English and a teacher manual. Produced by the National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD) for individuals who are Deaf and very effective for any visual learners.
 - Voice and caption in Spanish version available.
 - Contact: www.osv.com or call 1-800-348-2440, ext. 2173 or contact NCOD by Email: info@ncod.org or Phone: 301-577-1684

Church Documents

- USCCB Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities (1995)
- Pastoral Statement of U.S. Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities (1978)*
- USCCB Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities (1998)

*As of 2026, this document is being revised

Additional Resources

- Office for Persons with Disabilities & the Deaf Apostolate:
<https://opdarchphilly.org>
- National Catholic Partnership on Disability:
 - Offers courses including: *Tips and Tools on Disability* (available in Spanish)
 - *Sacraments for All, Faith Formation for All*
 - Discount available for members of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia<https://www.ncpd.org>
- National Catholic Office for the Deaf:
<https://www.ncod.org/>
- Xavier Society for the Blind: produces braille, large print, and audio formats of religious books and periodicals
<https://xaviersocietyfortheblind.org/>
- PBIS World: comprehensive, free resource designed to support educators in implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
<https://www.pbisworld.com/>
- *The Adaptive Teacher* by John E. Barone and Charleen Katra
- *Handbook for Adaptive Catechesis Serving Those with Special Needs* by Michele Chronister
- *Praying for Your Special Need Child* by David Rizzo and Mercedes Rizzo

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia
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