

Meeting Special Needs in the Early Childhood Setting

As catechists, we should always send the message that all are welcome in the community of God's people. In the early childhood setting, we encounter children who are at a variety of developmental levels. Some may be ahead of the group in one or more abilities, while others may have particular challenges in certain developmental areas, including intellectual/cognitive skills, speech and language, social skills, or motor development. The following are a few suggestions for ensuring that all children can understand and participate in our early childhood sessions.

Children with intellectual/cognitive or speech and language needs may have trouble understanding directions, following the lessons, or communicating their responses or needs to others. Be sure to use activities that incorporate multiple senses, including visuals, music, and movement. When teaching a lesson that involves verbal stories, keep the child who has language needs close to you to maximize understanding and minimize distractions. Check for understanding after giving instructions. You may sometimes need to rephrase directions or demonstrate an activity, and then guide the child in getting started.

Some children may exhibit social skills delays or needs. They may have some difficulty interacting with others, taking turns, sharing, or engaging and interacting with other children. Children with these needs may benefit from a little "coaching" from the catechist, especially during times in which children are expected to interact or work together. It may be helpful to walk the child with social delays to an activity with other children and help him or her join the group and get started. You may also wish to "check in" periodically to see if things are going well and talk the child through an interaction if necessary.

Children with fine motor skills delays may have difficulty with activities such as cutting, gluing, drawing, painting, or writing. Providing some additional assistance with these activities or allowing children to work together on projects that involve fine motor skills may help to ease any frustration.

Children with particularly serious developmental delays, such as those with disabilities such as Down's Syndrome or autism, should be included in the larger classroom setting to the extent possible, for a number of reasons. First, as the Body of Christ we must be an inclusive community that cares for the needs of its members. The preschool setting is often the first experience of the parish for many children, and as such, it should be a faithful sign of what God has called us to be as a Christian community. Second, as the U.S. Bishops state in the National Directory for Catechesis, the "entire Christian community benefits from the presence of persons with special needs," because the unique gifts they bring — the opportunities they give for service to others and the talents and special qualities they possess — are blessings to everyone present. It may be helpful for children with complex needs to have an older child or additional catechist serve as a one-to-one assistant throughout the session.

May God richly bless you as you welcome all of God's children.

