

All Are Welcome

Meeting the Special Needs of Students

One of the ways we welcome children into the full life of the Church is through religious education. With the guidance of parents, religion teachers, and catechists, children learn about prayer, the Word of God, and the traditions and teachings of the Catholic Church. Many classrooms and religious education programs today will include one or more children in need of some accommodation due to a disability. It is important to extend welcome and hospitality to these children and their families. A warm and genuine welcome reflects the love of Jesus, who welcomed all, and lets the children and their family members know they are respected and loved.

Accommodating Needs

Think of the way many families prepare for Thanksgiving dinner. Plans are made to include family members of all ages and with different preferences, schedules, and needs. Younger children's places at the table may be set with sturdy plates rather than the heirloom china. There will be plenty of appropriate food choices for the vegetarians in the family, but turkey or ham will still be served.

In a similar way, the needs of special learners can be met with just a bit of planning. This doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming. Each chapter of this teacher guide offers a teaching tip to help you include children with disabilities in the chapter discussion, activities, and prayer. These tips focus more on individual needs than on categories of disabilities. This is done in order to give you, the teacher, a more functional understanding of how to best serve the students in your care.

Respecting Each Person

As Catholics, we affirm the dignity and worth of each person. Our students are first and foremost individuals made in the image and likeness of God. We show our respect for each person by speaking or referring to him or her by name, not by his or her disability. For example, we speak to or refer to Bob, not "the boy over there in the wheelchair." We speak to or refer to Mary, not "that girl with autism." We speak to or refer to Juan, not "the one with Down Syndrome."

Assessing the Needs

If you know that you will have a child with special needs in your class, make a special effort to meet with the family before the school year begins. Use questions such as those given below to learn about the student, his or her family members, his or her circle of support, and to help assess the student's needs.

- What does your child most enjoy doing? What are his or her interests and hobbies?
- At what skills or interests does your child excel? What are his or her gifts and talents?
- What people are important to your child? Why?
- Does your child have any pets? Any objects of special importance?
- What might your child find to be stressful?
- What might your child find to be rewarding or fulfilling?
- How does your child communicate best? Through conversation? Through writing? Through drawing?
- Does your child have any vision or hearing challenges?