Meeting Special Learning Needs with Alive in Christ and Allelu!

by Joseph D. White, Ph.D.
Introduction

What do we mean when we say, “special learning needs”? Each of us has areas of talent, gift, or strength, and areas of need—things we’re not as good at or need some extra help with. Some areas of need are more visible or obvious in certain situations. Special learning needs are issues that become most visible in a learning environment and potentially pose obstacles to participating in activities or mastering the material. They may include attention issues such as ADHD, learning disabilities or other cognitive differences, emotional or behavioral problems, and physical disabilities.

As disciples of Jesus, we show special care and concern for those among us who are most vulnerable. This includes individuals with special needs. In the National Directory for Catechesis, the bishops of the United States address the importance of catechesis for persons with special needs, stating, “Catechesis for persons with disabilities is most effective when it is carried out within the general pastoral care of the community... The whole community of faith needs to be aware of the presence of persons with special needs within it and be involved in their catechesis” (NDC, 49).

There are a few important reasons for this:

- Smaller parishes may only have a few children who would fit into a special program or class. Segregating those children deprives them somewhat of the experience of community that is such an important part of our Catholic faith.

- The whole community benefits from the presence of persons with special needs and from inclusive practices. Every person brings both gifts and areas of need. We miss the gifts of persons with special needs when we fail to include them in our groups.

- Unless a child poses a safety risk to self or others, he or she can usually be included in the group activities in some way with some accommodations and modifications.

The U.S. Bishops state, “Persons with disabilities should be integrated into ordinary catechetical programs as much as possible... They should not be segregated for specialized catechesis unless their disabilities make it impossible for them to participate in the basic catechetical program” (NDC, 49).
Including Children with Special Needs

So how do we accommodate for the special needs in our groups? This can feel like a daunting task to many catechists, especially if we do not have any experience with the particular needs the child brings. Sometimes catechists, teachers, and DREs seek a one-size-fits-all approach to special needs, seeking a resource or program that will meet all the special needs of children in their group. In reality, this is not feasible, because every child is unique, and comes with a different combination of gifts and strengths. This includes those with special needs. There is no approach that works with all children with autism, all children with ADHD, or everyone with a reading disability.

However, there are skills that can be learned and applied by catechists and DREs that will help us adapt material and methods as necessary to meet the needs of all the children in our groups. The General Directory states, “No methodology, no matter how well tested, can dispense with the person of the catechist in every phase of the catechetical process.” (GDC, 156). This is especially true when it comes to accommodating for learning differences and needs.

A Few Steps for Getting Started

- Welcome individuals with special needs before you even encounter them. Make it clear on registration forms and introductory letters and emails that your program or class is committed to making reasonable accommodations for learners with special needs. Ask parents to let you know if there are needs you should be aware of.

- Get to know the family and child. Find out the child’s interests and strengths as well as his or her needs. Ask the parent what has been helpful in other settings, such as home or school. Does the child have an individualized education plan at school? If so, are there any strategies from that plan that might also be used in the catechetical setting?

- Work toward building a positive climate or “responsive classroom.” This means making your class one in which:

- Gifts and talents are appreciated
- Positive feedback is given
- The best is expected and encouraged
- The catechist facilitates collaboration between learners (“In our class, we help each other.”)

- Learn basic approaches, or best practices, for accommodating various needs. One excellent resource is the National Catholic Partnership on Disability (www.ncpd.org). This website includes resources as well as online videos on welcoming persons with special needs in the parish. A wealth of information is also available on other websites devoted to special education.
Practical Ways to Adapt the Lesson Content in Allelu! and Alive in Christ

We don’t all learn in the same way. Some of us are primarily auditory learners. Others learn best through pictures and other visual aids. Still others learn best through movement, doing, and creating. We naturally accommodate for many different learning needs when we make sure to include learning activities that appeal to multiple senses.

Vary the lesson presentation.

Because Allelu! is an activity-based program, each lesson naturally accommodates for various learning needs. Still, it is important to note areas in which some children’s skills may differ from others. For example, differences in motor skills might necessitate adapting an activity that includes elements, such as cutting with scissors, which would use fine motor skills. In the Allelu! program, adaptations for special needs are noted in the activity directions of the Catechist/Teacher Guide.

Alive in Christ also already includes adaptations for various learning needs. You will find these noted in your Catechist/Teacher Edition in boxes titled Reaching all Learners. In addition, when optional activities are provided (called Lesson Extensions in Allelu!), select those activities that will include the children in your group with special learning needs. You might even wish to substitute one of the regular chapter activities with an optional activity (from the Catechist/Teacher Edition or the online lesson planner) or a lesson extension that better accommodates your unique group of learners.
**Act it out.**

One important and fun way to vary the presentation of the lesson is to act out the Bible story, using costumes and props, or to make the story interactive in other ways. *Allelu!* includes magnetic figures that can also be used for many stories in *Alive in Christ*. Using these figures, catechists can tell the stories on a magnetic board, with children sitting in a circle. Hand the magnetic figures to the children in the group. Ask them to listen for the character’s name as you read the story, and then come up to place the character into the scene.

**Use music.**

Music is a great way to learn and master new information, especially for children with special needs, who might be more challenged by trying to memorize facts or concepts. The *Allelu!* program has a song for each lesson that captures the main idea for the lesson, and catechists may make copies of the CD for every child in their group. Similarly, in the *Alive in Christ* program, there are resources such as the *Songs of Scripture* CDs specifically created for various age levels, as well as lesson-specific songs that can be downloaded from the website.
**Play games.**

Use Chapter and/or Unit Reviews in *Alive in Christ* as group games so that children may work together on teams. Play Tic-Tac-Toe or Jeopardy™ with the questions. Play Wheel of Fortune™ with vocabulary words and/or definitions. The “game board,” which you will draw on your classroom white board or chalkboard, will serve as a tool for visual learners.

**Consider the use of an “educational assistant.”**

Some students may not be easily accommodated within a group setting if their behavior or learning needs make it very challenging for them to participate even in multisensory group activities. For these students, consider the use of an educational assistant. This is an adult who serves as an assistant to the catechist, often sitting near the child with special needs to help him or her with group activities. The assistant can take the child to another, quieter area of the room when the child becomes overwhelmed or his or her behaviors become disruptive. Having some alternative activities that the child enjoys would be helpful for getting the child back on track and transitioned back to the group later.
Joseph D. White, Ph.D.
Dr. Joseph White was part of the team of experts that developed *Alive in Christ*. He is a clinical child psychologist and National Catechetical Consultant for Our Sunday Visitor. He has taught courses in Catechetics and Pastoral Guidance and has worked as a parish catechetical leader. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on catechesis and ministry, including co-authoring of the *Allelu!* early childhood series.

**Additional Resources**

National Catholic Partnership on Disability: [www.ncpd.org](http://www.ncpd.org)

*The Way God Teaches: Keeping Kids’ Attention* by Joseph D. White, Ph.D. (Includes a checklist of adaptations for children with ADHD and other attention problems.)

*Catechists for All Children* by Ana Arista White and Joseph D. White, Ph.D. (A guide for meeting special needs of various types in the catechetical setting.)

*Allelu! Magnetic Figures*, available from Our Sunday Visitor. [www.allelu.com](http://www.allelu.com)

Video about catechizing children with special needs, from the *Allelu!* website: [http://allelu.com/activities-resources/special-needs.html](http://allelu.com/activities-resources/special-needs.html)

*My Mass Kit*, available from Our Sunday Visitor.

*Catechist’s Companion Multisensory Methods in Catechesis*, from Our Sunday Visitor.
Call 800.348.2440 ext. 2173
to learn more about how
Our Sunday Visitor's
Allelu! Early Childhood and
Alive in Christ Religion
Curricula address special
needs and reach all learners!

aliveinchrist.osv.com
allelu.com