



National Apostolate for
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*Promoting the Full Inclusion of People with Intellectual/ Developmental Disabilities in the
Life of the Catholic Church*

11 Hints for Modifying an Existing Religious Education Class Lesson for Students with IDD

By Mary Pat Carter with Marilyn E. Bishop

The hints for modifying traditional lesson plans are intended to serve as a guide for teachers who may be hesitant to trust their creative impulses. Begin with the premise that you can make this idea fun and meaningful for your class. Then, you will find success in your endeavors. When in doubt, pray: "Dear Jesus, help me to teach this class as you would teach this class."

1. How could I present this concept if the person I am teaching cannot read and/or write?

Hint #1 suggests that I look at every reading-writing activity (the most common activity in published curricula) and redesign it so that non-readers and non-writers can understand the ideas being presented. Sometimes this may mean you will need to put some children in a group and have the classroom aide or other volunteer read to the group. Other times you might use a video tape that presents the same concept in a more appealing way.

2. What adaptations to this project/activity can I make to allow a person with very poor fine motor skills to meaningfully participate?

For example, if the activity involves cutting and pasting, can I provide pre-cut materials to be pasted? Do I need oversized scissors, adapted scissors, extra-large glue sticks, peer partners for the activity? Could pictures be torn rather than cut?

Hint #2 addresses the challenges of students who have poor fine-motor skills. Students who cannot write, but have good verbal skills can respond to a concept by making an oral presentation to the class, or possibly recording their thoughts and ideas on tape or video to share with the class. Sometimes simply providing larger paper and bigger marking tools is all that is necessary.

3. What kind of experience can I create for the individual in order that he or she can personally relate to the concept/idea/theme?

For example, in the baptism theme of welcome, introduce the concept of welcome through a role play involving unwelcome and rejection.

Hint #3 deals with relevance and each class has its own flavor and personality. While one class may relate to a lesson on compassion through a clip from an evening news broadcast, yet another group of students would benefit from a trip to a shelter for homeless people. Students with intellectual/developmental disabilities learn most easily in true-to-life settings.

4. How can I represent this scripture story in language and visuals that will make sense to the person with IDD?

For example, to teach the story of the boy Jesus in the temple, tell the students that Jesus knew he had an important job: he was a teacher. So he went to the temple to teach but he did

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not tell his parents where he was going. So, at first his parents were worried, then, they were angry. After telling the story, ask the students to role play the story. Use an illustrated Bible to help connect the role- play with the scriptures.

Hint #4 requires the teacher to examine a scripture story looking for difficult vocabulary words that need to be simplified. It also asks the teacher to find pictures and/or objects that may simplify the meaning of the story. Having students dress as characters in a story can make it more real for the person with intellectual limitations.

5. If a student with intellectual /developmental disabilities is an auditory learner, how can I enhance a visual presentation by increasing the auditory input?

Accompany a visual with an audio-taped explanation or possibly use music that relates to the theme content.

Hint #5 encourages the teacher to add auditory input to a visual activity to help the person with intellectual/developmental disability who learns best through listening. In some cases it may mean associating a scripture story with a simple song with many repetitions in it. Sometimes only the chorus for a song may be appropriate.

6. If a text passage is to be read, what will make it meaningful to the visual learner?

Use pictures, concrete objects or things described in the story, clothing, or scenery to set the stage.

Hint #6 is another attempt to bring the scriptures alive for students. This can be done with flannel board stories, puppets, or inviting a story illustrator to class.

7. If a person with intellectual/developmental disability is a kinesthetic learner, what can be included for kinesthetic and sensory input?

Use fragrances, fabrics, or clay for alternative materials or walk in the classroom to different "locations" in the story.

Hint #7 asks the teacher to develop activities involving the senses as much as possible. An example of this would be to bring fragrant oils to class for the student to touch and smell when reading the scripture passage about the woman bathing Jesus' feet with oils and then drying them to show love and respect.

8. If your plan doesn't work, what are at least two other possible alternative activities?

Hint #8 encourages a "back up" plan. If an activity is going poorly, what are some alternative ideas that could be tried? While classes go well with a predictable pattern such as opening and closing with a quiet prayer time, trying something completely different may really get the student's attention.

9. Could this activity be done in a group with a meaningful role for the student who is academically challenged?

Hint #9 looks for ways to involve the student who has intellectual/developmental disabilities. Oftentimes this student can be given a meaningful role as part of a group activity even if his or her understanding of the overall project is limited. The student with cognitive limitations may not be able to take a scripture story and decide what the important events in the story are, but once the figures or scenery are drawn or outlined, they may be able to add color or glue figures into place.



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10. What can be done specifically to help the person with intellectual/developmental disabilities apply this lesson in their attempt to live out the gospel in their daily life?

Hint #10 attempts to get the teacher to consider simplifying homework assignments for the student with intellectual limitations. For example, if the class assignment is to spend 15 minutes a day in quiet prayer, the person with IDD may be asked to “say an extra little prayer each day this week.” If the lesson is to ask forgiveness, the person with IDD may be encouraged to say she is sorry when she hurt someone’s feelings in class or at home.

11. If the person has slow cognitive development, what are the expectations that I have for this person?

Modifying your expectations for learning achievement may save you and the student a great deal of frustration.

Hint #11 is concerned with keeping your expectations within the realm of reality. Remember that these concepts of faith will be presented in a variety of ways throughout the person’s life. If they don’t quite “get it” now, chances are that they will later, if religious education continues.