



National Apostolate for  
Inclusion Ministry

*Promoting the Full Participation of People with Intellectual/ Developmental Disabilities (IDD) in the Life of the Catholic Church*

## **Role of the Special Needs Aide in a Religion Class**

---

*By Brigid O'Donnell*

Your role is to be present in the class to be sure your individual understands and participates as much as possible. You work in collaboration with the catechist.

While each child or youth with special needs is different, these suggestions should apply to everyone. Consult with parents and public school teachers for more specific suggestions about the disabilities of your child or youth.

- 1. The most important thing is to establish a relationship with the child's parents.**
  - a. Talk with them before and after the session.
  - b. Call them in between.
  - c. Let them know what you did in the session.
  - d. Ask them for specific suggestions about their child.
  - e. Ask if you can contact the child's special education teacher in public school because the teacher will have many more ideas about what you can do in your faith formation program.
  
- 2. Communicate with the catechist and assistant in your room. Be sure you know what they will be covering each week. You need to prepare for your student.**
  - a. You are responsible to help the child you are working with.
  - b. You may need to adapt some things if he or she cannot read or write.
  - c. Remember that a school-like situation is often challenging for your child or youth. Try to cut down or eliminate those things your individual finds difficult.
  - d. The important thing in faith formation is learning about God, Jesus, and Faith. *Religious education is not the place for learning to read or write or speak in class.*
  - e. You can help others in the group as well if you have the time to do so.
  
- 3. Talk with your child or youth about what will be most helpful to him or her.**
  - a. If your individual is verbal, be sure to tell him or her that you are there to make the faith formation program the best it can be for him or her. He or she may be able to tell you what they need from you.
  - b. If your individual is not verbal, still talk with him or her and watch for facial and bodily clues for what is working.
  - c. Have realistic expectations: not too high, but not too low.
  
- 4. Integrate your child/youth as much as possible.**



**National Apostolate for  
Inclusion Ministry**

**Brigid O'Donnell** has been ministering in various ways with persons with disabilities since 1970.

She is currently the Pastoral Associate at St. Matthias Parish in Milwaukee WI.

She is an adjunct faculty member at Cardinal Stritch University, Sacred Heart School of Theology and St. Francis Seminary Certificate Division.

Page 2—*Role of the Special Needs Aide in a Religion Class* by Brigid O'Donnell

P.O. Box 218  
Riverdale, MD 20738  
Phone: 800.736.1280  
Email: [qnafim@aol.com](mailto:qnafim@aol.com)

[www.nafim.org](http://www.nafim.org)

- a. Help your individual talk with and/or be with other participants when there is free time.
  - b. You may need to help your individual in discussions and other group activities.
  - c. You need not always stand or sit next to your individual unless necessary.
- 5. Find ways to praise your child/youth.**
- a. Ask if parents or teachers use any kind of reinforcement or reward system. Use the same thing in your group.
  - b. Give lots of positive verbal and facial rewards.
  - c. Let the individual know how much you enjoy being there with him or her.
- 6. Talk with the director of the religious education program.**
- a. Let the catechist or DRE know if you are having any difficulties.
  - b. Having difficulties doesn't mean you are failing, just that you haven't found the right things to do with your child/youth.
  - c. Ask for help locating pictures or texts that will help your child/youth.
- 7. Learn from your child/youth.**
- a. Good special needs assistants will learn from their participants if they are open to seeing God work in their lives.
  - b. What is it you will learn from the individual you are called to teach this year?