

How to welcome everyone back

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► When I asked Mark Ciesielski to write this article, I was hoping for some solid advice on how to make classrooms and catechetical gatherings into places of genuine hospitality—especially for those who might not feel so welcome all the time. Read Mark's excellent description of creating "relational bank accounts" with the families we encounter. < NW



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A young woman, riding the train home from work, encountered five unruly children. Their father seemed detached and disinterested. She thought, "Why doesn't he do something? Can't he see that the kids are disturbing everyone around him?" Sensing her discomfort, the man looked at her and said, "I am really sorry the kids are noisy. We are just returning home from their mother's funeral." The young woman was immediately overwhelmed with compassion and understanding.

As catechists and teachers, haven't we all encountered such situations?

When we encounter a difficult child or a "drop off" parent, our challenge is to respond with the heart of Christ. Because of our limited ability to love, our starting point might begin with a prayer which opens us to God's limitless love: "Lord, help me to love with your heart all whom I meet today."

Building relational bank accounts

When we have established Christ's loving disposition as our own, it is important to begin building a relational bank account with parents and children. Just like a financial bank account or investment, the more deposits that are made, the more returns on the investment. God's love actively initiates love. Take these initiating steps:

- 1] At your first meeting, explain to parents that you would like to work with them to help their children grow more deeply in their faith.
- 2] Invite them to complete a brief survey which would help you get to know the children better. The survey identifies such things as their children's strengths and weaknesses, activities which they enjoy, difficult areas, physical or emotional limitations, and successful discipline methods.
- 3] Ask them to write about their hopes for their child's growth in faith.
- 4] Ask them to identify specific learning difficulties, and how they handle them. Learn all that you can about these special needs.

During the course of the year, continue to initiate God's love:

- 1] Offer periodic group activities with parents that foster a sense of welcoming as well as a sense of community.
- 2] Ask parents to share stories of those persons who have helped them in their faith journey. This sharing will help affirm parents' confidence as primary catechists, build bridges with other parents, and set the table for parents' personal investment in a collaborative effort with you.
- 3] Listen to their hopes as well. It may challenge the parish or school to offer occasional parent classes in such topics as family prayer, stewardship, setting media standards, or communicating God's gift of human sexuality.
- 4] Ask parents to share with one another how they apply Christian principles of charity and justice to guide their daily decisions.

Another way to build bridges with parents is to affirm their children.

- 1] With younger children, send brief notes home acknowledging a thoughtful act such as helping another child pick up supplies or using good manners.
- 2] With older children or youth, affirm them verbally in front of their parents. Use specific rather than general comments in order to reinforce positive behaviors.

A healthy relational bank account will help you talk with parents if you have concerns in the future. The account will help you and the parents focus on resolving the concern and not on fixing a "problem child."

Responding to the uniqueness of each child

Jesus' approach with children was "let the children come to me." Whether

the children we encounter come to us from a difficult home or have physical, emotional, or mental special needs, we must see them the way God sees them. This means seeing children as gifts rather than labeling them as problems.

We can begin by recognizing their emotional or sensory strengths and weaknesses. At the same time we can help them to appreciate themselves as they are. The beginning of the year is a good time to start a session with a five to ten minute "getting to know each other" activity.

- 1] Invite the learners to name or draw some things that are easy and some things that are hard for them to do. This conversation starter helps them to appreciate one other's uniqueness.
- 2] Play the game "I spy" with the senses by introducing them to a variety of sounds, odors, touch, tastes, sights. Reflect with them which of the senses seemed easier or harder to use in playing the game.
- 3] Show pictures or photos portraying various feelings: happiness, sadness, anger, hurt. Ask which feeling they identify with most. Talk about some ways that Jesus handled these feelings.

For older children, it is important to help them identify their emotional strengths and weaknesses as well as develop appropriate coping skills. Ask them how they feel on a scale of one to ten. One means feeling lousy and ten means feeling great. Invite them to record their feelings in a journal or to share them aloud. Discuss appropriate coping skills.

Selling relationships

There is a comic strip where a car salesman has labored to match the client's needs to a certain car. He concludes, "I'm not selling cars, I'm selling relationships." Jesus always responded to people with special needs with love and

How to play "I Spy"

The teacher selects a specific sense (e.g. sight) and asks the children to identify a certain colored object in the room to match what the teacher is thinking: "I spy something red." The children take turns until someone guesses correctly the corresponding red object to the one the teacher is thinking of. The teacher can repeat this with another color or with a variety of sounds, odors, touch, or tastes. Reflect with them which of their senses seemed easier or harder to use in playing the game.

respect. As a catechist or teacher, when we assume the heart of Jesus, build relational bank accounts, and work to learn the uniqueness of each learner, we can transform the most difficult encounters or persons who seem different. **RTJ**



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Resources

Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities, BARBARA J. NEWMAN, Faith Alive Christian Resources, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001. (Parent Interview Guide, pp. 20-21)

The Inclusive Early Childhood Classroom: Easy Ways to Adapt Learning Centers for All Children, PATTI GOULD AND JOYCE SULLIVAN, Gryphon House, Beltsville, Maryland, 1999.