

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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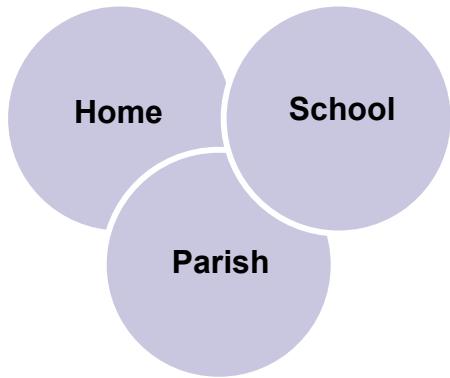
Grace for All: Sacraments and Children with Special Needs in Our Catholic Schools

by Anne Jamieson, D. Min, Director, Catechesis Office, Diocese of Hamilton,
with contributions from Terri Durham, Erin Durham and Joanne DeSantis, HCDSB.

The shared responsibility of parents, parishes and schools for the faith education of children takes on a particular importance when dealing with children with special needs and their families.

This monograph is designed to help the educational community support children with special needs in a particular way at the time of preparation for and celebration of Sacraments.

Many children with special educational needs may have challenges in terms of the preparation for and the



celebration of Sacraments. Publicly funded Catholic schools routinely welcome and program for all children. In general, school facilities are equipped with and school staff have appropriate expertise available to assist children with special needs, and

schools are both accustomed and adept at providing support for these children to support their learning, and to maximize their participation within all aspects of the school community. Parishes typically do not have the same trained staff or access to resources and are likely far less familiar with working with children with special needs. Indeed, because of privacy legislation, parishes may not even be aware of the needs of particular children.

Therefore, schools can play an essential role in assisting parishes to meet the needs of these children. The Catholic school can 'lean in' to share expertise and resources that support these children. This monograph is designed to help schools think about questions that may arise and suggest areas of collaboration in terms of sacramental preparation.

What constitutes sacramental preparation?

- Takes place on two levels: initial and immediate
- Home, school and parish do not work in isolation.
- Cooperation and collaboration between all partners at both the initial and immediate levels leads to the best results.

How is the school involved in Sacramental Preparation?

Preparation for the reception of sacraments takes place on two levels, initial preparation, which involves an ongoing education in the sacramental life of the Church, and immediate preparation, which involves catechetical and practical preparation in the weeks and months leading up to the reception of a particular sacrament. The former, in Ontario, is primarily the responsibility of Catholic schools. The latter, immediate preparation, is parish-based and is usually coordinated by the parish priest and parish catechists. This does not mean that home, school and parish work in isolation. In the best case scenario, cooperation between home, school and parish under the direction of the priest and local bishop, leads to the best results.

Religious Education: Elementary Curriculum Policy Document Grades 1-8 Policy Document
pg. 34

Initial Formation

- Primarily occurs in the home and school
- Parents (caregivers) are first educators
- Ongoing experiences of a Catholic way of living through Prayer and Liturgical Celebrations
- Teaching of the approved Religious Education program, *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ* meets the Religious Education Curriculum expectations

Immediate Formation

- Primarily led by the Parish
- Close in time to celebration of the Sacrament
- Catechesis focused specifically on celebration of that Sacrament
- Often includes preparation for the caregivers and children together
- Builds on the initial formation already received

What Do Our Documents Tell Us About Reception of the Sacraments for Those with Special Needs?

- Canon Law is clear that all the baptized have the right to assistance from their pastors especially regarding preparing for Sacraments. (*Canon 213*)
- Pastors have a special responsibility in the case of persons with special needs:

*"Attentive to the norms established by the diocesan bishop, a pastor is to take care in a special way... that catechetical instruction is given also to those who are physically or mentally impeded, insofar as their condition permits." (*Canon 777 §4*)*

- The *General Directory for Catechesis* makes this affirmation:

"Every Christian community considers those who suffer handicaps, physical or mental, as well as other forms of disability — especially children — as persons particularly beloved of the Lord." (189)

 Church documents use words such as 'handicap', 'limited', and 'impeded.'. The Catholic education community recognizes that language changes as cultural understanding deepens.

- The Ontario Religious Education Curriculum Policy Document, Grades 1-8, (2012) states:

"Catholic schools can participate with the local parish or parishes by...working in cooperation with the parish to prepare students with special needs for the sacraments." (pg. 35)

- *Renewing the Promise, A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education* (2018) informs us:

"The school can play a significant role in facilitating meaningful relationships between the parish and home. This is an important partnership because it helps parishes to connect with families, not only for sacramental preparation, but more importantly, for Sunday worship. Through the school there are also other opportunities to draw parents and family into the life of the parish." (pg. 9)

How does a School Support a Child with Special Needs in their Faith Formation?

Who is Involved?

- Generally, there is already an educational team formed for the support of the learning for the child with special needs.
- Each year the team will embark on supports for faith education, including assistance with sacramental prep as appropriate.
- The team may choose to address the child's specific needs in an IEP or through the regular instruction that is part of the Catholic school experience.
- Team members may vary depending on the child's needs. Team members and their roles could include, but are not limited to:
 - Classroom teachers address the daily religious education program, may help with ongoing sacramental preparation, and may liaise with the church regarding needs of students.
 - Special Education Resource teachers help provide concrete tools and strategies (social stories, visual supports, may liaise with the church re: needs), help design appropriate modifications to the religious education program to meet the needs of the student, may document the parents 'desires for sacramental prep of their child on the IEP engine.
 - Educational Assistants may practice with student ahead of a rite, may review visual supports, assist in program delivery.
 - Principals communicate needs of school community to parish on an ongoing basis, may participate in communication with parents re: their desire for sacramental prep for their child, may facilitate meetings between school, home and church early in the sacramental year.
 - Professional staff may help with any communication tools/strategies or setting up communication devices to include liturgical responses.

What supports might be considered?

- Look for the DI Icon in the *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ Teacher's Resource* which suggests Differentiated Instruction strategies
- Be aware if there are upcoming sacraments that the child may receive in future years. Collaborate with other team members to determine if there are specific things that may be introduced about the sacrament during your year (e.g. kindergarten teacher having a Eucharist play set available)



It is important to note here that the Canon Law recognizes that local bishops may establish particular norms in their own diocese. It may be helpful to check what policies are in place in your own diocese.”

When do conversations about Sacramental Preparation begin?

- Schools can be particularly helpful to parents by raising the issue of the celebration of Sacraments early on.
- Discussion with the parent and school team for sacramental preparation can be revisited each time there is an IEP review, as early and as often as needed, based on the needs of the student.
- Not all students who have an IEP will require additional considerations for sacramental preparation that vary from their classmates. For those that do, there are several places in the IEP that can capture elements of initial and immediate sacramental preparation.

These include:

- Subject Area: Religious Education and Family Life can incorporate specific modifications to reflect sacramental preparation during a sacramental year.
- Alternative Subject Area: An alternative subject area may be assigned to an IEP to reflect specific goals and strategies for both ongoing and immediate sacramental preparation.
- Transition plans: When families are transitioning into the Catholic school system, when students

are transitioning to other schools within boards or from elementary to high school, considerations for sacramental preparation can be captured in transition plans. This ensures that receiving schools are aware of student sacramental needs.

- Parent Consultation: Conversations and sharing information with parents regarding sacramental preparation, assigning specific roles for partners involved, and documenting parental desire for their children to receive Sacraments, may be captured in the Parent Consultation log.

 **The love of the Father for the weakest of his children and the continuous presence of Jesus and His Spirit give assurance that every person, however limited, is capable of growth in holiness. (GDC, 189)**

Student Needs to Consider Concerning Celebration of the Sacraments

Practical considerations of student needs may include, but are not limited to the following:

Physical/Mobility Needs

- Does the student require ramps or assistance in walking up the aisle to receive the Sacrament?
- Does the student require specific feeding considerations for receiving Eucharist (e.g. receiving a small fraction of a host, receiving through a feeding tube, etc.)?
- Does the student require sitting at the front or back of the group? Does the student require sitting at the end of an aisle?

Sensory Needs

- Does the student need to experience the sensory elements of the sacrament ahead of time — e.g. rubbing oil onto the back of the hand or forehead or tasting unconsecrated hosts?
- Does the student require sensory items to help support them through the Mass (e.g. weighted lap item, headphones, fidget item)?

Priming Needs

- Can social stories provide explanation for the rite that may reduce anxiety and improve participation?
- Can visual supports help augment the child's understanding and participation?
- Would the student benefit from visiting the church ahead of time? Would meeting the pastor there, in the setting where the celebration will take place, help reduce anxiety of the child and the parent?
- Does the child make vocalizations? Have the priest/bishop been made aware?
- Would the child benefit from receiving the Sacrament in an alternate celebration? For example:
 - A child to be confirmed may receive the Sacrament ahead of time with just their family and sponsor and then be encouraged to stay with the group as long as they are able. This may reduce the anxiety of both parent and child and allows the family to make the decision to leave if it becomes too difficult to stay without the worry of having missed the Sacrament.
 - A child and parent may feel more comfortable with the child receiving first Eucharist at a Sunday Mass that the family most often attends, rather than at a separate celebration that has been arranged for a larger group from the school.
 - Note: these are important conversations for families to have with their parish priest in order to determine the best way forward — there are liturgical and theological questions here along with questions of diocesan norms that must be respected.

Language Needs and Assistive devices

- Are there devices such as iPads or symbol boards used at school to assist the child in communication? Could such a device be programmed to include language that assists a child in participating in the Sacrament more fully?

Further Questions for Consideration

What if an older child has missed celebrating a Sacrament at the expected age?

- Remember that a child may not have received a Sacrament for a variety of reasons including:
 - Parents felt the child was not ready
 - The child refused
 - Parents did not seek the Sacrament
- Ensure parents are aware that there are supports available if they are interested.

 Ultimately, as disciples of Christ, we all have an important role in proclaiming the Good News. The Lord instructs us, “Let the children come to me!” (Matthew 19:14).

Are these considerations only for students in Elementary School?

- There is an opportunity for the transition to a Catholic Secondary School to share information about initial and immediate formation that has taken place.

What can a school do to assist parishes and parents?

While privacy legislation must be considered, schools may alert parishes that there may be students in a particular cohort who are likely to need accommodation or particular attention to meet their needs. At the same time, schools can alert parents to

approach their parish early on to discuss their child’s needs — letting them know that unless they disclose their child’s needs, or consent to the school disclosing the needs, that the school would not normally disclose specific and identifying information about any child. **Reassuring and encouraging parents to have these discussions at the parish level is an important contribution of the school community.**

Schools can also work with parishes to develop and suggest strategies that may best meet the needs of a child with special needs. They may also be able to help with concrete resources, such as assistive devices and social stories.

Ultimately, as disciples of Christ, we all have an important role in proclaiming the Good News. The Lord instructs us, “Let the children come to me!” (Matthew 19:14). Hopefully, this resource helps facilitate local conversations between home, school and parish that bring children with special needs to the Sacraments — to these beautiful encounters with the love, mercy and grace of Almighty God.

 Celebrations are an expression of the ultimate purpose of humanity. We are made for communion and celebration, for the joy and blossoming of every person. The Bible talks of the end of time as a wedding feast between humankind and God where there is ecstasy, joy and celebration in God. – Jean Vanier, *Our Journey Home* (pg. 200)

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Ontario Institute for Catholic Education
44 Hunt Street, Suite 2F
Hamilton, Ontario, L8R 3R1
Tel: 905-523-2469
E-mail: office@iceont.ca

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