

Fall Professional Day: Understanding Difficult Behaviors in the Religious Education Setting

Presented by Daniel Thrash and Kristen Lum

On a beautiful fall Thursday in September, when even the best of us would be challenged to sit quietly and pay attention to a lecture because of nature's pull to be outdoors, many Archdiocesan parish catechetical leaders gathered at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary. Daniel Thrash engaged participants as he led them to a better understanding of challenging behaviors in the religious education classroom. Daniel has a background in counseling and behavior with thirty-one years of experience working with persons of all ages in a variety of settings. Kristen Lum, Daniel's co-worker, has been a classroom teacher and holds a background in special education and behavior.

Daniel opened his discussion by noting that there is a common thread spanning all spectrum disorders -- behavior. Every behavior communicates something about the disorder and how it affects the student and those around him/her. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often misread facial expressions, are not good at conversation, and rarely make eye contact. They may need lots of tactile sensory activity in order to sit quietly in the classroom. They are good at multitasking. The discipline they need involves taking a behavior that already exists and shaping it into a strength or more acceptable form of behavior.

That being said, both Daniel and Kristen noted how important it is to understand the behavior itself, why the person is displaying this behavior, what the trigger might be, and what can be changed to help this students. One key ingredient in this process of understanding a behavior is parental/family involvement. Parents can assist the catechist to be consistent with the children in implementing consequences or rewards. Also key is encouraging others in the class to accept this child as he/she is.

The catechist may need to learn more about spectrum disorders in order to be able to clearly convey information, give simpler and fewer directives at a time, or know what sensory stimulation might be

appropriate for one child over another. These will help a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder to better understand what is being taught.

Managing a preset classroom environment can be more of a challenge. A little thought and effort, and perhaps a few old sheets or tablecloths, can “hide” those things that might be a trigger for a child with ASD.

Class rules or social contracts with very clear directives, consequences, and opportunities for praising good behavior will promote an effective learning environment. This may involve the continual redirecting of inappropriate behavior into that which is more appropriate. Redirecting should include reinforcement or praise of efforts made toward managing poor behavior.

Understanding how behaviors impede and interfere with the quality of life of the student will give the catechist clues as to how to include this student in a support or social circle. With patience and nurturing, this student can become independent and productive within a group setting or when working on his/her own, and eventually develop relationships with others in the classroom.

This proved to be an informative and affirming morning. Many questions and concerns were raised and addressed. Our thanks go to Daniel and Kristen for making a vast sea of generalities on spectrum behaviors seem smaller by offering concrete methods for teaching children with ASD.

-- Kathy Thomas, DRE, (St. Joseph, Downingtown)

* Daniel Thrash will be presenting a workshop at the Catechetical Forum on March 6, 2010.