

# Issues for Integration of Children With Disabilities Into the Religious Education Program

*Abby L.W. Crowley, EdD*

## **Background Information**

Integration of students with disabilities into regular education environments is a growing practice in our country. Over time, special and regular educators have learned that separate education is usually not in the best interest, either academically or socially, of special needs or typical students. In addition, federal law requires that children with disabilities be educated in the "least restrictive environment," or the most normal environment possible. Special needs students benefit from the role modeling and exposure to age appropriate behavior and higher lever content and concepts, while typical students benefit from opportunities to transmit knowledge and ideas to others which reinforces their learning. In addition, understanding and acceptance of individual differences is enhanced, as is social acceptance of individuals with disabilities. As one teacher said, "Even if it didn't work, which it does, we should still do it because it is the right thing to do."

## **Who are these children?**

Exceptionalities may range in severity from mild to moderate to severe, and generally fall into the following broad categories:

- **Mental Retardation:** A condition in which the individual has below-average intellectual functioning abilities, both in terms of IQ and adaptive skills.
- **Learning Disabilities:** A heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders seem to be related to central nervous system dysfunction, and are not a direct result of other disabling conditions.
- **Behavioral Disorders:** Extreme, chronic behavior that is unacceptable because of social or cultural expectations which interferes with the child's ability to learn, maintain interpersonal relationships or function.
- **Speech and Language Disorders:** Problems using speech and language for purposes of sending and receiving messages at an age appropriate level.
- **Sensory (Hearing and Visual) Impairments:** This area includes individuals who are hard of hearing, deaf, visually impaired or blind.
- **Physical Disabilities:** This area includes individuals with disabling conditions (both orthopedic and neurological) and chronic health problems.
- **Mental Illness:** Episodic or chronic disorders of the brain and its chemistry related to mood, personality or cognitive functioning.

## **How many are there?**

Government figures show that about 11 children and youth out of every 100 attending public schools have been identified as having a disabling condition for special education purposes (U.S. Department of Education, 1986), currently over 4 million students. This figure does not include those children with mild or moderate disabilities who are not receiving special education services. These figures point out that in a congregation such as ours, there are likely to be many families who have children who have special educational needs which would be manifested in

our R.E. classrooms. Some of them are in our classes right now, and we need to find effective ways of including them and providing them with a meaningful and successful experience. Some of them are not attending our Sunday School, however, because their parents have assumed that they could not be accommodated or have never even considered the possibility of participating in our church with their children. We need to find ways of reaching out to these families, and letting them know what is available to them.

### **What can we do?**

It seems as though a three-pronged approach including teacher training, family outreach and development of a policy for planning on a case by case basis is needed. These strategies may include the following:

- **Teacher Training:** Inclusion of a brief overview of issues related to disabilities in the fall teacher training agenda each year; availability of information regarding disabilities and ongoing support to teachers working with students with disabilities; and possible inclusion of disability awareness unit or units throughout our R.E. curriculum.
- **Family Outreach:** Inclusion of information regarding our willingness to consider working with students with disabilities in all R.E. related literature and presentations.
- **Policy:** Development of a written procedure for assessing and planning for inclusion of children with disabilities [*by using an inclusive registration process*] on a case by case basis. This policy would include children referred by their R.E. teachers as being in need of some degree of program modification or support. It would also require development of a process for parents to work with us to consider if and how their children with disabilities can be included.

After training and policy development are accomplished, it would seem prudent to start small, finding out from teachers if there are currently enrolled children with whom they need help, and enrolling a small handful of others whose parents make inquiries (one family has already done so).

As a church whose members believe in the worth and dignity of all individuals, we have an interest in and an obligation to meet this challenge. We will all be enriched by the process and the results.

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