Parents + Catechists = Win

For years, a role I've treasured and loved is that of catechist. Maybe it's because there's a teacher within me and I have training. Maybe it's because I love learning, especially about my faith. Maybe it's because I have felt like I don't know enough – and can't possibly ever learn it all! – ever since I became Catholic.

Whatever the reason, it didn't take long (minutes, actually) for a DRE to find me and convince me that a class of third graders was who I needed to spend my evenings with once a week. Over the years, I've had fifth graders, too, and a half-dozen or so classes of Confirmation students (usually eighth graders).

I wasn't raised Catholic, so it took me a while to realize that there are some fundamental differences between what Catholics do for religious education and the Sunday School experiences of my youth.

One of the biggest hurdles I've observed is this: **Many parents don't feel like they know enough or can handle teaching the Catholic faith to their kids.**

Whether this is true or not – that parents do or do not know enough – the fact remains that most of the parents I've worked with feel this way. This is their reality.

My advice to catechists and DREs is to communicate, invite, and engage. In fact, I'd give (and have given) the same advice to parents.

So often, as a catechist, I'm lauded as "knowing more" than others. But here's the thing, I've never studied theology. My two college degrees are in agriculture education and marketing communications. I'm an inveterate reader, yes, but I'm very much a student.

That’s a key point: **You don’t have to be an expert to get in front of and walk beside others as they learn about their faith.**

Here are three tips for catechists and parish staff members to help parents and hopefully encourage them to join in.

1. Communicate with them. Again and again and AGAIN.

When I’m at my best as a catechist, I send at least one and sometimes two emails to parents of my students. I let them know the topics we’re covering, the “trivia” (it’s not homework, it’s a hunt for the answers…and THEY, the kids, are the ones doing the hunting), and other items of note.

Sometimes I mention the liturgical season, tie into the Mass readings, tap into popular events that have happened.

I also don’t hesitate to call or reach out directly to a parent when I feel like something might be up with a student. There was a student not so long ago who just had a distant look in my class; I caught Mom afterward and found out some critical facts about their home life that really transformed how I dealt with him.

Parents are busy. I get that. (I’m living it myself!) But they’re bringing their kids for a reason, and I can’t help but think that, if I help them along, they’ll get excited and have more resources to do their own catechisting too!

2. Invite them in.

In the decade plus that I’ve been doing parish work and volunteering, I’ve noticed something: you can have Bible studies and committee meetings all day long, with or without food, and you may or may not have people show up.

Offer religious education for kids and suddenly people are crawling out of the woodwork.

There’s room to be cynical about this. But I’d like to see this as a sign of hope.

Parents KNOW that this is important. They KNOW that this is critical. They KNOW that it’s something they should do.

They just. don’t. know. how.

So why not invite them in?

When I was a fifth grade catechist, I felt like I was probably teaching at about the level most adults want. It’s low-impact, mentally, and yet when the kids get going with questions, it can really get them stimulated and thinking.

Most recently, I’ve been involved with our Confirmation classes. A few weeks ago, as I was exhorting our class to ask questions and not just accept “Because I’m Catholic,” I had a student raise his hand.

“I really don’t know why we don’t eat meat on Fridays of Lent,” he said. “So I’m asking. Why can’t we?”

It wasn’t our topic, but it was critical. It made me pause to wonder if my own kids know. (Yes, really.)

Another way to invite them in is to share great resources with them. *Take Out* is one such resource (I’d say that even if I didn’t work for the publisher). When you communicate, share the cool things you find, the fun facts you learn, the questions you field in class.

3. Engage them in their faith.

“Engage” has become a a buzzword in marketing, but don’t let that make you cynical. People want to be welcomed, and they want to connect.

What better connection point than their children? And what better topic than their faith?

A lot of the parents I've worked with over the years are insecure about their faith knowledge. After all, they haven't studied theology any more than I have. Many of them are busy with work and family life. It's important to bring their kids to the parish classes, and they may even think this checks the box and makes it all good.

Maybe their own catechesis was nonexistent. Maybe they've forgotten what they learned in school. Maybe they didn't care until recently.

The fact is, parents need encouraged. They need to know what tools they already have.

You may think you're there to teach kids, and you are. But really, you're there just as much for the parents.

Help them realize their role, and help equip them in whatever small way you can.

And above all, don't forget to pray for them!

Do you have a link or resource to share? Send it to us at takeout@osv.com so we can share it in a future issue!