

Preparing for First Reconciliation when your child has special needs

When my husband and I first met Alex in our adoption process, we realized quickly that in addition to his physical disabilities, he also was quite developmentally delayed. He could talk a little (in another language)—but in a very limited way that most adults didn't understand. At our second getting-to-know-you meeting, we watched this tiny five-year-old boy pick up a Magnadoodle pen and delightedly dropping it over and over, watching it fall, watching us pull it back by its attached string. He had no interest in using it to draw. We looked at each other with some sadness—this was the behavior of a nine-month-old infant, not a five-year-old boy. Then we took a deep breath and met him “where he was.”

Today, Alex is doing much, much better on every level—it is amazing what individual attention can do! He has flourished and gained so much, and has blessedly retained the first gift he gave us: a 100 watt, winning smile. But three years down the road, even with all his gains, it is clear that Alex is indeed living with an intellectual disability.

So when he enrolled in second grade this year, we really wondered whether he would be able to participate in sacrament preparation for first Eucharist and reconciliation along with all the other second graders at our parish. Would he be able to participate in this aspect of the Church?

‘All you need is contrition’

While I was fairly comfortable that he understood that the bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Christ, Reconciliation made me more nervous. The idea of Alex completing a traditional examination of conscience, memorizing

an act of contrition, even having an extended conversation of confession without some assistance seemed iffy. I expressed these concerns to a friend of mine (a priest):

“Well...is he verbal? Can he say he’s sorry?”

“Oh, sure. He does when he does something wrong.”

“That was my other question. Does he understand right from wrong and does he feel sorrow when he does wrong? Because honestly, that’s all you need. You don’t even need to be very verbal, if you can express contrition in some other way. After all, even people who are very articulate don’t always express their sorrow with words—they cry. Everyone recognizes that as contrition.”

Other friends led me to the U.S. Bishops’ [Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities](#), and with that in hand, we talked to our parish’s Director of Religious Education, the class facilitator, and our pastor. Alex would need some adaptation, but he was in!

An Adaptive Reconciliation Program that works

Our parish uses a program called [Growing Up Catholic](#) to prepare 7-9 year old children and their parents (or grandparents) for first reconciliation and communion. It’s a great family-oriented program in which catechists “coach” the parents, the parents remain the “first formators” of their children, and everyone as a church family together learns about God, sin, and reconciliation. It’s a flexible format as my parish practices it, and allows the parents to choose exercises to do with their children.

But for Alex, it is still too advanced. He enjoyed being present for the upbeat atmosphere, the friendship, and the donuts (of course). The other participants were warm and welcoming, and deliberately included him as much as possible, which was great for Alex and all involved. But too often, Alex

responded to the presentations with an I-don't-get-it look...followed by acting out.

At this point, we continued to attend the parish preparation program, but thanks to Alex's godparents, we took over teaching him with the help of Loyola Press's [Adaptive Reconciliation Kit for Children with Autism or Special Needs](#). (We did this with the blessing of our parish team.) I have to admit I first saw this kit and thought, "Eh, okay."

But Alex saw the brightly colored box and thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread—and it grew on me as I saw how well it worked for him. The kit is a colorful and easy-to-manipulate set of exercises that teach a child with an intellectual disability how God loves us and God wants us to make good choices rather than bad choices (sins). We go to confession when we are sorry for our bad choices, and although we tell our bad choices to the priest, it is Jesus who forgives us. Because we love God, we will try not to make bad choices. It explains this through pictograms and some American Sign Language signs in a flip book, a couple of puzzles, a couple of "mini-posters," a big explanatory picture book, and Alex's favorite, the thick cardboard flash cards of kids acting out good choices and bad choices.

Some of the best touches in this kit include a very straightforward explanation of the process of the sacrament, summarized in a small spiral flipbook in very short sentences (or just words) with pictures: I go to Church. I walk in. I kneel. I pray. I think: what am I sorry about? The flipbook is useful for taking with you to confession, and honestly, you do not have to read to understand it (especially if you have learned to recognize some of the iconic symbols the kit uses). They teach the children to recognize and express sorrow by placing his or her right hand over his or her left breast, which is useful if you cannot speak well; the gesture is borrowed from the Confiteor ("through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault"), which makes it a

liturgically recognized symbol of contrition.

The flash cards show a variety of children making child-relevant good choices and bad choices (sharing/not sharing, being disrespectful/respectful, fighting/making peace, etc.). Alex loved—and still loves—going through the cards and calling out “Bad choice!” “Good choice!” But the most useful thing is that it creates a simple, kid-friendly examination of conscience. Alex isn’t quite at a place where he can do that examination on his own, but with a parent, he could work through those cards and bring the ones he wants to confess to the priest.

‘That wasn’t too bad!’

So, how did it actually go? We asked if we could do his first Reconciliation apart from the rest of his class, simply because we thought it would take more time (plus Alex’s wheelchair doesn’t fit in the confessional—sigh). So we met our pastor in his office by appointment, and I explained that Alex had a flipbook and some cards to help him make a confession. Alex was initially very excited, and then became nervous as we went into the church offices—but he was fine with my husband and I stepping outside the office. When they were done, our pastor came out of the office smiling, and I walked in to hear Alex saying, “Hey, that wasn’t too bad.” (Well, he’s very truthful!) We hugged him and I made sure to ask him what his penance was before he forgot what it was, as well as to help him say it. And then we went home and had a favorite dinner and cake to celebrate. And we will go again soon, to get him “used to it.”

I encourage all you who have children with developmental challenges that make receiving the sacraments challenging to remember that:

Catholics with disabilities have a right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial

community (Cf. canon 213). Ministers are not to refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times, who are properly disposed, and who are not prohibited by law from receiving them. (Cf. canon 843, sect. 1) (Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities, 1995)

Even if it feels like it, you are likely not the first in your parish to ask for adaptations due to a disability. Reach out, and talk to your pastor and pastoral staff about what is possible. All of God's children in need of grace do have access to the sacramental life of the Church.