

Criteria for Creating Meaningful Faith Formation Opportunities for Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders

1. Create faith routines that engage the child, relationally, experientially and affectively:

A. Relational- because children with autism experience specific difficulties socially relating to others, any and all *relating* is potentially sacramental and catechetical. For persons with autism this means that any positive developmental shift in the child's ability to relate to another person is a moment of grace if someone notices, accepts and celebrates the child's self-expression (see "The Sacramental Principle" handout). When a child with autism specifically demonstrates one of the following, it is a particular cause for celebration!

- *Social Interaction:* requesting a social routine, requesting comfort, giving praise, greeting and bidding good-bye, calling (a person's name to get their attention), requesting permission, showing off
- *Joint Attention:* Commenting, requesting information, providing information.

Remember that the above communicative acts may be communicated verbally or nonverbally.

B. Experiential- depending upon the developmental level of the child create opportunities that primarily involve "seeing and doing". These may gradually include "listening and talking" but it is recommend that one start with the child's relative area of strengths. Always confer with the parents.

C. Affective- partner is emotional attuned to child, opportunity to name emotion, to assign positive and negative value to emotion within the context of the situation; routine is motivating, positive and meaningful; where over time religious emotions such as awe, joy, trust, gratitude, sorrow are evoked, named and meaningful

2. Create faith routines that reflect core catechetical and ministerial themes of Welfare, Word, Witness and Worship. Consider routines that may have a direct correlation to the liturgy of the Mass. For example, a home routine might comprise the child helping the parent bring the dinner food to the table. Over time the child may recognize the liturgical connection of the home dinner routine with the preparation of the gifts and the altar during the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

3. Create individualized routines that are appropriate for the child's developmental level and learning style. Position the child for success by ensuring that the appropriate interpersonal and learning supports are in place (*see Emotional Regulation Supports handout*).