

BEST PRACTICES FOR CATECHIZING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH ADHD

By Madonna Wojtaszek-Healy, Ph.D.

1. BE POSITIVE.

Successful relationships begin with a positive attitude. Even if you have heard of (or experienced) questionable behavior in the youngster you have been assigned to catechize, a fresh start is absolutely necessary. Offer unconditional positive regard and expect to get better behavior in the future. While I can't guarantee total cooperation from the individual with ADHD if you are kind to him/her, I can predict that he/she will not cooperate with you if you come in already holding negative judgments with a resolve to control that child. Every day must be a new day, where yesterday's mistakes are forgiven and good is wished for the individual in your care.

Think about what you hope to teach besides the doctrines and practices of our faith. We also should hope to model compassion and acceptance of all God's children. Your behavior toward the participant with ADHD can be an example of loving acceptance of all of the different kinds of people God created. Praise the positive and discipline with love. You are the face of Christ to your catechetical group. Imitate Him. Elicit your group's cooperation in creating and embracing rules for treatment of others while in your sessions, and hold yourself to the same expectations. Model apologies if you make relational mistakes too.

Befriend the child's parents. Every parent enjoys hearing something positive about her own child. Find the positive and share it. Especially for parents with a child with ADHD, this is longed for and much appreciated. I'd compare it to giving water to someone dying of thirst!

2. BE CALM.

Behavioral modification can be helpful as a tool to get the behavior we want and eliminate negative behavior. It gives us a calm, rational approach to getting cooperation, especially from people who sometimes have a hard time with self-control or completing required learning tasks. Raising one's voice or angrily making threats to remove someone from one's session do not help the youngster redirect his/her behavior. You do not want to give undue attention (even negative) to someone who is not behaving properly, as any attention stimulates someone with ADHD to further provoke a response from you.

What is behavioral modification? The adult in charge looks for good behavior and reinforces it. A "**reinforcer**" is anything that encourages someone to repeat a desired behavior. It can be praise, a pat on the back or things like stickers, pencils or candy. Keep in mind that different things reinforce different individuals. At the first session you could pass out "getting to know you" sheets, where students tell you what their favorite thing is. Use this information to choose

reinforcers. You may need to **change reinforcers** occasionally, as the child with ADHD needs a change in routine to keep his interest.

When someone has problematic behaviors that disturb the functioning of the catechetical group, it is wise to **choose only one or two behaviors at a time** to work on. Otherwise, the person with ADHD gets overwhelmed. You can use **behavioral charting** to track and reward good behavior. Over the hour or so of your session, place a mark in the 15-minute block of time that the youngster successfully demonstrates the positive behavior. **Again, be positive. State what you want to see, not what you don't:** "waits his turn," "raises her hand before talking," "cleans up space before socializing," etc. Charts can be used, with the parents' cooperation, in a token economy. A youngster can earn privileges or prizes at home when they cooperate with you.

Praise effectively. When someone does something good, tell them exactly what they did that you like. "When you picked up the papers that fell off Sarah's table, I was proud of you for acting helpful," is more effective than "Thanks." This is how we coach someone to continue good behavior. **Encourage the group to reinforce each other.** Getting positive feedback from one's peers is a powerful reinforcement for acting socially appropriate. Encourage your group to praise each other when appropriate. Everyone benefits from affirmation.

Use non-verbal cues. If you don't want to keep interrupting your session to correct or encourage behavior, establish non-verbal cues to get the child's attention without drawing others' attention to him. This also saves the youngster from embarrassment. A gentle touch on the hand means, "Stop tapping the pencil." A touch on the shoulder means, "It looks as if you're not with us." Thumbs up or a pat on the back have fairly universal meaning.

What if someone does act inappropriately? Then try Phelan's "1-2-3 Magic" approach.

Without any emotion, tell the child engaged in negative behavior, "That's 1." This gives the youngster a warning that he is doing something he should not be doing. No other explanation should be necessary at this point. If he continues the behavior, you calmly say, "That's 2." If the behavior persists, you say, "That's 3. Take a break." No yelling or further explanation is allowed at this point. The youngster goes to a pre-determined place in the room where he can't interact with the others; the goal is to think about the behavior and get control of himself. He comes back when he is ready to cooperate. Remember, you have already established rules for how one behaves in your catechetical group (see BE POSITIVE above). Any discussion comes at the end of the session, if still needed, just between you and the youngster who has not cooperated. Phelan warns that this only works if you speak without emotion and limit your words to the countdown. Obviously, if the behavior is dangerous and someone might get hurt, there's no. It's an immediate "3" with a consequence.

Various psychologists point to research that shows that **people with ADHD get flooded by' emotions quickly**, and this interferes with their being able to modify their behavior, even if they wanted to. The adult who can control her emotions has the responsibility to do so. This not only

helps the youngsters with ADHD to redirect their behavior, but also makes for a more pleasant experience for the others in your group. You also model staying in control of one's emotions for the youngster with ADHD, who typically struggles with this aspect of life. Give consequences instead of punishments, again controlling your own emotion and being matter-of-fact about it.

How do you handle the youngster who monopolizes discussions by **blurting out answers** without raising her hand? Talk to her about this when the others are not present. Give her post-it notes to write things down before she forgets them, which she knows will happen if she waits too long. Make sure you give her an opportunity to share the thought with you after the session if time doesn't permit you to let her share it while the others are still present.

3. KEEP IT ORGANIZED.

It is a well-known fact that organization is an aspect of executive function, and executive function is the area of life that is difficult for people with ADHD. Martin Kutscher, a pediatrician who specializes in ADHD, suggests that you "**lend the youngster with ADHD your brain**" to help them remember what they need to do and to have the materials ready for them to do them. You will both be frustrated if you believe that she is capable of doing this for herself. Yes, it's extra work, but "offer it up" for everyone's sake and help out by writing down instructions and having extra writing instruments or art supplies for them to borrow. Send e-mail with attachments to parents when there are permission slips, newsletters or calendars that otherwise might not make it home.

4. KEEP IT INTERESTING.

No one likes to be bored. **People with ADHD get bored faster than the rest of us**, and they often create their own diversions from boredom that you will not like. These are things you can do to help make your catechetical session more interesting for everyone. Even if you have a textbook that you use to cover doctrine, **do not let your group read "round robin"** as part of your session (even if they ask to)! Research shows that this an ineffective way to learn. Kids simply don't listen to other kids read aloud, especially if someone is not a particularly good reader. If there is reading aloud to be done, it has to be done by a competent adult. Reading should be broken into short sections with your group having discussions between points.

Use music and movement, especially with very young children, as movement is good for helping youngsters with ADHD focus and calm themselves. Little ones love gestures with songs.

Find stories, fiction or non-fiction, that illustrate people making good choices in life or having to fix relationships when poor choices have been made. This can be especially effective for inspiring them to understand and seek social justice. Appropriate videos might also strengthen a session's theme.

Move around your space, making sure to spend some time near each child in your group. Lingering near the one(s) with ADHD may help keep them on track. You may need to keep them closer to you during the session.

Use humor, but never sarcasm. If you can **tell a story about a time you made a mistake** as a child and learned from it, your group will take you more seriously. Trying to appear as a “perfect” adult makes you less approachable in discussions about sin and forgiveness.

Use the “Premack” Principle. Do the things that youngsters consider more onerous first, and then do the fun things as a reward afterwards. Listening to doctrine should be followed by a craft or activity, and not vice-versa. Snacks, when given, should come last.

Encourage your group to share their experiences, even if it does take up precious time in the session. Faith comes from experiences more than the words we hear. Real connections between what we hear in Scripture and learn from Church leaders happen when we appraise our own lives. **Allow them to ask questions**, and ask an expert for help in answering them if you can’t do it on your own. Asking questions means that your group is engaging with their learning tasks. What they think they need to know is just as important as covering everything in the book.

Most importantly, **demonstrate a loving, faith-filled presence to your group.** Sincerity breeds interest too. Recognizing that everyone in your group is a child of God entrusted to you will help your group grow in that understanding of themselves and their peers as well.

I acknowledge Martin Kutscher, M.D., whose rules, “Keep it positive,” “Keep it calm,” and “Keep it organized,” I borrowed. His very practical advice for parents of children with ADHD is found in his book:

Kutscher, Martin L. (2008) ADHD: Living Without Brakes. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

I also acknowledge Thomas Phelan, Ph.D. for his “1-2-3 Magic” method of discipline. His book is:

Phelan, Thomas W. (2003) 1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12. Glen Ellyn, IL: Parent Magic, Inc.