

# Creating the Environment

## For Catechesis

The environment for the religion session has several aspects. Setting the environment is accomplished by the physical environment you create, and even more by the atmosphere and tone that you set for this special time. Let's take a look at some simple ways you can affect the children's attitude and experience of your time together.

### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

If you teach religion in your own home room you have greater control over the physical environment. However, if you hold sessions in a school classroom, you may have to move desks or chairs or create a major or impractical disruption in the layout of the classroom. Here are some small things you can do to communicate that coming together to learn more about our faith is special.

- **The Prayer Center.** The prayer center should be a focal point of your room. Try to keep it in a spot where all can see it. The prayer table should be covered with a cloth in the appropriate liturgical color for the season. The most prominent object on the table should be a crucifix, the central symbol of Christian faith. A Bible should be enthroned on the table and opened to a seasonal reading, or perhaps to a reading that is prominent in the current chapter of the religion text. A candle next to the Bible to be lit during reading of the Scriptures is appropriate. The candle can be real or electric, as your fire regulations allow. Other objects that might be placed on the table could be simple seasonal symbols—a bare branch or small Advent wreath during December, fresh lilies during the Easter season, a small



dish of ashes during Lent. Especially in middle and upper grades, children can be invited to assist in the maintenance of the prayer table. Gather the children in the prayer center for prayer for significant prayer experiences.

- **Lighting.** If you are able to dim the lights in your classroom, consider doing so during prayer times, especially if the prayer is a more reflective one such as a guided meditation. Some catechists also report that dimming the lights is an effective device when telling certain Bible stories or when children are engaged in group reflection.
- **Use Visual Devices.** Create poster board displays related to chapter or unit themes. Propping thematic posters and photos on easels as you begin your religion session speaks to visual learners



## SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Even more important than the physical environment is the social one you create. This is the time, above all others, when you wish to create a welcoming and nurturing environment. By creating a positive social environment you establish an atmosphere in which you can build good relationships with and among your learners. Usually, children have experienced all the bustle of entering the room, coming from dinner or sports practice, and you've taken attendance, and done all the other start-up things that mark the beginning of your time together.

Use some transition devices to set the tone. Welcome the children at the door. Invite students to sit quietly and center themselves before beginning the class with prayer. Some catechists use a journaling device with older students as a transition. Others invite students to glance ahead through the day's lesson and compose a question about the content. As you begin your session, here are a few more helpful hints.

- **Show interest.** Make the beginning of the religion class a time to greet the children warmly and take a few moments to ask about their afternoon and evening and allow them to share their experiences. This honoring of their experience is a big factor in faith formation.
- **Honor diversity.** Your group may have ethnic diversity. From time to time, invite students to share with the class religious traditions from their own cultures.

Incorporate these traditions into prayer experiences whenever you can.

- **Adapt to the unexpected.**

Occasionally, news events or even parish or local school situations need to take precedence over the lesson plan. A natural disaster or the serious illness of a classmate or relative can be a time to demonstrate that religion speaks to all of life. Be attuned to the issues that may be distracting your students and help them to see the connections between life and faith.

Each year you play a vital role in the faith development of the children you serve. The content you present is a big piece of that influence. But the climate for learning about Catholic faith that you create is equally important. You can't make faith happen, but the positive climate you establish provides the fertile soil in which the seeds of faith can grow.

### For Reflection

- What natural impediments exist in your classroom space that must be overcome to establish an appropriate climate for faith formation? What solutions do you see?
- What can you do to communicate by your manner and attitude that the young people you serve are loved by God?

