

Taking Alex to RE

Any parent with a child with a disability knows that things that other parents take for granted as part of their child's normal pattern for growing up such as starting school, participating in sports and assembly and being accepted into the community, are things that we generally have to fight for, sometimes unsuccessfully. Community attitudes toward the disabled and different among us often throw up all kinds of barriers that mean the often exhausted parents do not persist with taking their child to participate in things because it is too hard. So when it came time for Alex, our now 8 year old son, to consider going to RE lessons after school at our local parish, I had not even given much thought to him being included although Simon his non-disabled brother, had been attending since he was six and was confirmed late last year.

How Alex came to join the RE class for the first time in 2005 is a story that I often share with people because it is reasonably unique in my experience of having a disabled child. The Sister who runs the parish classes approached me in the car park one day when I was collecting Simon and asked when Alex would be coming to class. I was surprised and said to her something along the lines of "but you know he has Autism." Her response was to say that disability should not keep any children from the chance to be part of the sacraments. To me it was the shock that someone actually **wanted** Alex there instead of me having to make the approach that made me decide it was worth giving it a go. Alex was in his second full year of school - he could read at the same level as his classmates and was beginning to write sentences about his experiences. His main problems were his very limited verbal language including a problem with answering questions and his poor social skills which meant that he found interacting with other children difficult.

In spite of these, we ploughed on. I normally work on Wednesdays when the class is held but I made arrangements to leave work early to take Alex and be with him when he started. His catechist was aware of his issues and there was also another mum there who was aware and willing to help so that I could eventually step back from the class. It did not take Alex long to bond with the catechist, he became very fond of her and keen to show her when he had done his work and receive her praise.

Some of the book work was right up his alley- word finders and code breaking. He was less keen on the craft and colouring in but would do it with encouragement. He also found sitting quietly listening to stories or talking about issues difficult but would do the most he could. As a reward, when he had finished a reasonable amount of work, he was allowed to do some Lego (one of his favourite activities) from a box that we left at RE.

Gradually, RE became part of our routine along with attending Mass regularly with his father on Sundays. I don't really know how much of what is taught has been absorbed by Alex but he has become accepted as part of the group and I think part of the parish. At the end of year party, I thanked Sister for including him and she said how much she felt she and the children had learnt from having him there. It made me think that this experience of mutual learning could be extended to the whole community if that same community made the small effort to really include and involve people of all abilities. It shouldn't be up to us parents to fight for our children's inclusion - rather the community could help immeasurably by inviting us in and supporting our efforts to get there.

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