

SPECIAL CATECHISMS FOR SPECIAL KIDS

Teaching autistic children about God

SAMPLE COPY

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Catechism for Kids

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To Kevin

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. (III John 1:4)

Kevin, this means that Mom is really happy that you know and love Jesus.

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THE STORY

When my son Kevin was born, I thought he was perfect.

“Ten fingers and ten toes,” the doctor proclaimed as he lifted my son so that I could see him for the first time. “He is beautiful.”

He *was* beautiful. He was beautiful in an almost eerie way. He was silent and still, staring up at the world with eyes that seemed to be contemplating great mysteries. His face glowed with an unearthly quality. People often commented that he looked like the pictures of the Christ child in Renaissance art—as if the only thing missing was the halo around his head.

It stuck in my mind, however, that something was wrong with this unusually beautiful and peaceful child. I had grown up as the oldest daughter in a family of nine children. I had seen my share of babies, and none of them appeared so uncommunicative and out-of-touch with the world around them. The impression only deepened when I brought my son for his first set of immunizations.

The nurse called in an assistant to hold his little hands and legs while the shots were administered. Everyone braced themselves for screams, but there was only silence. He looked up at the ceiling with his deep brown eyes and never blinked.

“What a good baby!” said the nurse.

I felt queasy.

My son’s pediatrician assured me that everything was fine. “He is a good baby, a quiet baby,” the doctor said. “You should be thankful.”

When my son turned two, I reflected that very little had changed. He had learned to sit and crawl and walk on schedule. Still, he stared at the world through strangely serene eyes. He looked up at the clouds and studied the shadows of his fingers against a wall. But he never uttered more than a word or two of understandable speech. Now he had developed strange gibberish that sounded like a Pentecostal tongues-speaking service. I took him back to the doctor.

“He is fine!” the pediatrician informed me impatiently. “Mothers will worry, but I am telling you, Mrs. Weerstra, you have a perfectly healthy son. Children learn at different rates. Give him time, and just try to relax!”

I put my fears aside for a time and convinced myself that it must indeed be as everyone said—Kevin was fine. Perhaps he was even unusually intelligent. Maybe that was why he

stared around him with such contemplation. Perhaps he would one day be a great scientist or a famous composer. Everyone said he was fine.

However, as he got older and still could not talk, I struggled more to believe that.

When my son was almost four years old, he finally received the diagnosis that, by then, I had already guessed: autism. I shrugged bitterly when I heard the news. “I’m glad you finally caught up,” I told the doctor scornfully, and I shoved the information papers that he held out back into his hands. “I’ve read it already. I’ve read it all. I couldn’t wait for you.”

I tried to be stoic about it, but at home watching my little son stare vacantly at shadows on the wall, I cried. Would I ever be able to communicate with him?

I have always been unconventional with education. As a child, I was bored in school with the endless repetition of trivia that I mostly already knew. I killed time in class by reading and memorizing. I hid books of poems inside my social studies book and committed them to memory. I read ahead in my literature books and memorized my favorite Bible chapters.

The reading and memorization had a downside, however. Adults often chuckled over my use of enormous words like ‘wondrous’ and

‘dilapidated.’ Classmates sometimes teased me that I spoke like an encyclopedia, but I had the last laugh whenever we faced down standardized testing in language arts. The words that befuddled so many of my classmates came quite naturally to me.

I had looked forward to reading to my children and hoped to foster in them also the love of words and the art of language.

Now I pulled my four-year-old son onto the couch next to me and offered him a simple storybook. “Do you want Mommy to read to you? Let’s read, Sweetie.” I opened the book. “Once upon a time ...”

He was not listening. He never seemed to hear me at all. He glanced at the pages and put his hand over my mouth, as if to stop me from speaking. Then he began to flip the pages quickly, entertaining himself with the swish of the paper and the breeze that it stirred up in his hair. Story-time was over.

I was sad that I could not read storybooks to my child, but another dilemma haunted me still more. Without an ability to understand stories, my son could make nothing at all of Sunday School. Every Sunday, I would drop him off with the other children, and every Sunday he would sit for a few minutes in his chair, staring at the wall, and then he would get up and wander aimlessly around the room while the teacher told Bible stories to the

other children. By the time he was six, he still knew not a single thing about God.

In time, with much work at school and at home, Kevin began to improve his vocabulary and to construct simple sentences. Still, his language comprehension was limited to short phrases composed of commonly-used words. He could make nothing at all of lengthy narrative, and he lacked the attention span to even try. He would sit earnestly in his chair at the beginning of Sunday School, but then his attention would be seized by the ceiling fan or the curtains swaying gently in the spring air, and he lost the gist of the story.

When he was nine, he was a happy, well-adjusted autistic child. He attended church and was loved and accepted by the congregation, but he still knew nothing about God. I threw myself into feverish attempts to teach him something. Eventually, I had tried everything that conventional education had for a child. Kevin could not understand the Westminster Shorter Catechism. He could not understand most of the Catechism for Young Children. He could not understand Bible stories. He was now twelve, and he was old enough to feel embarrassed about being put in classes with younger children and being given books with preschool-level cartoon pictures. It all made little difference anyway, because he understood none of it.

In frustration, I sat down again to talk the matter over with my husband. “There is nothing for him,” I said. “I tried to start him on a first-grade Bible story book. He said it was for babies because of all the cartoon pictures. I don’t blame him, but I don’t know what to do. I made him sit still and listen for a few pages, but he didn’t understand it anyway.”

“Well,” my husband said, “maybe we should think of this another way. We know what doesn’t work. What *would* work? What could he understand? Is there something that we could put together for him that would help him learn?”

I began to think of the sort of thing that Kevin *could* understand. He needed short sentences—something in normal everyday English with no big words. He needed a book that looked like it was for older children, so that he would not be embarrassed to carry it around. He needed repetition, so that he heard something not once or twice, but every day until he could remember it. He needed a special catechism.

When I first began teaching my son the catechism, I wondered whether he would understand even this simplified version. Would he be able to remember it from one day to the next? And even more importantly, would he understand it or would he be merely repeating a meaningless

jumble of words?

The first two questions were quickly answered. Kevin seemed quite pleased at being more included in daily devotions. He loved learning to correctly answer his questions. Although his learning pace was slower than that of a normal child, he eventually mastered question after question. “God made everything ... God made me ... God made me for his glory,” he would lisp in his sweet but stammering voice. Still, I wondered whether he knew what he was saying.

One day, I visited his class for the annual parent-teacher meeting. Kevin’s teacher gave me all the usual information about his schoolwork and grades, and then she smiled at me oddly and asked, “And how are things for him at church?”

“At church?” I asked, surprised. “Fine, I guess.”

“He has become very interested in God lately,” she added, smiling more broadly now. “I have the most religious class in the school because of your son. He is always going around to the other children and telling them about Jesus.”

“He is?” I was stunned.

“Oh, yes. He tells them that God made everyone and everything, and that they should believe in God. It’s okay. I really don’t mind. It is sweet. He obviously really enjoys church.”

“He doesn’t disrupt the class with it, does

he?" I worried.

"Oh no," she said. "In fact, it is helpful sometimes. Whenever someone does something mean to another kid, Kevin goes over and says, 'I will pray for you.'"

"To the kid who is crying?"

"No, actually, he says it to the child who is misbehaving. And then he does it, too. Right then and there. He says, 'Jesus, please help my friend understand that what he did was wrong. Please change his heart and help him to obey your rules. Amen.' Kids aren't as mean to each other anymore because they know that Kevin will come over to pray for them."

My son was fourteen when he made his profession of faith. In two years, he had gone from barely even knowing the existence of God to being able to explain to others that Jesus had died for his sins. At the examination, Kevin sat in front of the elders with his still-beautiful eyes glowing and lisped the answers to every question that they put to him.

"When we take the Lord's Supper, what does the bread represent?"

"Jesus' body that was broken for us."

"And what does the wine represent?"

Kevin paused, and then a sly grin broke out across his face. "Pastor Tom, we do not use wine in

our church. We use grape juice.”

The elders laughed uproariously. “Yes, that’s right! We do! And what does the juice represent?”

“It represents Jesus’ blood that was poured out for us.”

“And why did Jesus die on the cross for your sins?”

“Because he loves me.”

THE METHOD

The catechism method is not an innovation. In fact, this method has been used to great effect with all sorts of children for centuries. In many churches even today, children are taught to repeat the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism or the Heidelberg Catechism as part of their Christian education. Children often learn to recite the catechism before they fully understand the meaning of the words. The comprehension develops in time as the same phrases are repeated again and again.

Special Catechisms for Special Kids employs the same concept with a slight modification. Autistic children are and probably will always be seriously impaired in language comprehension. Other children may eventually learn the meaning of this sentence:

God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

An autistic child, on the other hand, is unlikely to

ever fully comprehend it. It is simply too long, too complex, and the words are unfamiliar. The same concept of God, however, can be presented in a series of shorter sentences:

“Where is God?”

“Everywhere.”

“Can you see God?”

“No, but God can see me.”

“Can God see everything?”

“Yes.”

“Does God know everything?”

“Yes.”

“Can God do anything?”

“Yes.”

“How long does God live?”

“Forever and ever.”

The most important point is not whether an autistic child can say ‘infinite, eternal, and unchangeable,’ but rather whether the child understands in substance that God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, although the child might use simpler words to describe it.

How should I begin?

Choose a catechism from this book for your

child. Most people begin with the first one, because it is the simplest and most basic.

Once you have chosen a catechism, sit down with your child in the setting that is most relaxing for him or her. Some children do well sitting at a desk, while some can concentrate better when they are allowed to stand up or even play with a favorite toy. Ask your child the catechism questions and then assist in providing the answer. Repetition is the key to catechism learning. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Repeat every day, if possible, or at least three times a week. You can pass time in the car or waiting for an appointment by asking your child the catechism questions. Although it seems unlikely at first, most mild or moderately autistic children *can* learn these. Eventually, the child will not need your assistance to remember the answers to the questions.

Once your child becomes accustomed to learning catechism, the process generally moves more quickly, and you may not need to repeat as much or as often.

Do I begin with one catechism question or a whole set?

This depends on your child and his or her particular level. Some autistic children become confused when presented with more than one

question at a time, while other children become bored being asked to repeat only one question over and over. Try your child on one or two questions to begin, and work up from there.

Why are some questions repeated in several catechisms?

Autistic children tend to be rigid thinkers. When teaching an autistic child a particular principle, it is important to be sure that the child recognizes that it may be applied to multiple situations or considered from several different angles. The use of the same questions in different catechisms assists the autistic child in comprehending and applying the concepts.

Should I reward my child for learning the catechism?

It is often helpful to offer small rewards as motivation. Autistic children may be quite unmoved by the usual parental praise (“Good job!”), but they may respond well to stickers or small toys or outings to the park. It is NOT recommended that any parent punish a child for failing to learn the catechism. Autistic children are often severely handicapped in their ability to learn language, and it may be difficult for them to recall the answers, especially when they first begin the

program. Punishment may only discourage the child and give him or her a negative attitude toward religious training. Patience is needed to teach any child, and especially an autistic child. In the end, however, the rewards are well worth the difficulties.

What should I do if my child cannot understand even the modified catechism?

The catechisms in this book are written for mild to moderately autistic children. Some children who suffer from more severe forms of autism may not be able to understand them. Since even mild to moderately autistic children vary in their comprehension level, some children may need further modification of the catechisms. If substituting a few words or adding in a few extra questions and answers improves your child's comprehension of the concepts, feel free to make these alterations to your program.

How long does it take?

The catechism method takes only a few minutes per day. However, it is important to keep up with it every day in order to see significant progress.

THE CATECHISMS

CATECHISM ONE

WHO MADE YOU?

Q1. Who made everything?

A. God made everything.

Q2. Did God make the stars?

A. Yes.

Q3. Did God make the sun?

A. Yes.

Q4. Did God make the moon?

A. Yes.

Q5. Did God make the ocean?

A. Yes.

Q6. Did God make the fish that swim in
the ocean?

A. Yes.

Q7. Did God make the trees and flowers?

A. Yes.

Q8. Did God make the animals?

A. Yes.

Q9. Who made you?

A. God made me.

Q10. Why did God make you?

A. God made me for his glory.

CATECHISM TWO

WHO IS GOD? (Part 1)

Q1. Who made you?

A. God made me.

Q2. Where is God?

A. God is everywhere.

Q3. Can you see God?

A. No, but God can see me.

Q4. How many Gods are there?

A. There is one God.

Q5. How many persons are there in God?

A. Three.

Q6. Who are those three?

A. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Q7. Is the Father God?

A. Yes.

Q8. Is the Son God?

A. Yes.

Q9. Is the Holy Spirit God?

A. Yes.

Q10. Which one is Jesus?

A. Jesus is the Son.

Repeat Q4 for emphasis:

How many Gods are there?

A. There is one God.