

Techniques from A to Z

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We are so fortunate today! We are becoming ever more aware of the countless ways in which we learn. There are myriad techniques and methods available to us as catechists.

Let's explore these twenty-six (but there are many more). Each of these is broad and can be used in various settings with all age groups. This article gives one or two examples for each, but your creativity will give you innumerable more ways.

Jesus used teaching tools and various methods: the birds of the air, the fig tree, teachings, questions, and wonderings. Let us continue to use all the resources and techniques that will break open the faith of our children, youth (and adults) so that it will be conscious, active and alive!

A ... ADVERTISEMENTS

Future artists (and even those who think they aren't imaginative) can be encouraged to design ads about God, Jesus, Christian living, Scripture, sacraments, etc. for a magazine or billboard. Have them make posters advertising some aspect of religious belief or practice. Put these in the back of church, the parish hall, or ask local businesses to display them.

B ... BRAINSTORMING

This is a helpful way of inviting people to participate in sharing ideas and coming up with good solutions. The rules of brainstorming ensure that each person is encouraged to suggest any ideas they have with no comments made by others. All the ideas are listed; then a discussion takes place about which are the most practical, which fit in with Gospel teaching, etc.

Another approach for brainstorming is to pair youth together or put them in small groups. Give them a designated time to jot down ideas, and then have each pair or small group share. This helps more reserved people voice their ideas within a small setting, rather than in large groups.

C ... CASE STUDIES

A technique to help children/youth to apply the content of the lesson to their own lives is to work on case studies. True cases can be found in newspapers, online, or in books, or the catechists can make up her/his own. This method involves solving problems of real or made-up people. By applying the principles found in the lesson to other people, the learners also begin to see how the lesson applies to their own lives.

D ... DRAMA

Myriad types of drama are available. Role-playing is one extremely effective approach. There is no written script in role-playing. The action and plot develop as actors react to one another in a given situation. Role-playing is a device for examining different options – one of the best helps toward conscience formation.

E ... EXHIBITS

Hearing something is one thing, but seeing it is another. Don't just talk about something important when you can show your young learners. For example, when studying a sacrament, let them see and touch all the tangible signs of the sacrament: water, oil, candle, etc. Encourage the youth to design exhibits that can be shared with the parish or community at large, like they would do in a science fair.

F ... FIELD STUDY

Go where the people are, where the events are actually happening, rather than just reading about them. Go to senior housing, soup kitchens, hospitals, a home for those with disabilities, shelters for the homeless, etc.

G ... GUIDED MEDITATION

This form of Scripture-based prayer is one that young people usually find very appealing and helpful. In this prayer, the prayer leader (catechist) helps children/youth to enter the Scripture story and become one of the characters. They see, hear, and experience the story as one of the participants and then have the opportunity for quiet prayer to talk with Jesus or listen to him about what just occurred in their meditation.

Any Scripture passage can be prayed this way; there are many books available, which have already-prepared guided meditations.

H ... HOLY DAY CALENDAR

Research – have the children research – the holy days, the feast days, the important events of our year. Create holy day calendars that list an action to do each day, which would be an act of holiness.

I ... INTERVIEWS

Interviewing can take many forms. Real interviews would occur when the children/youth interview their parents, people in the community, other parishioners about an issue in the Church, a practice of their faith, etc. During a Scripture study, one child might assume the role of reporter while the others are assigned the roles of various Bible characters. The reporter then interviews each Scripture character about her/his part in the Bible passage.

J ... JIGSAW METHOD

This method is a cooperative learning strategy, which allows for each person to become an expert in one aspect of the information covered in a specific chapter or theme.

1. Establish small groups with as many youth per group as there are topics to be learned.
2. Assign a different topic to each member of the group.
3. A mixer takes place where the youth form new groups made up of all those who have been assigned the same topic.
4. These "learning groups" master the assigned material and develop a unique teaching strategy.
5. The youth return to their original "teaching groups" and teach one another what they have learned.

K ... KEEPING A JOURNAL

Encourage children to keep journals in which they record their responses to topics covered in each session. They may want to keep prayer diaries in which they compose prayerful reflections after each session. They might want to “become” someone from Scripture, recording in their journals how that person might have thought or felt.

L ... LITERATURE

Children’s literature is an ideal way to introduce a topic or to make real – in today’s language and events – a lasting-truth or value you are exploring. Visit the library often. Purchase and use frequently our many children’s classics.

M ... MUSIC

Music builds community; it touches the affective aspects of our faith, not just the cognitive. Our liturgical music reiterates the Scripture message, often helping it to take root within us more deeply. Use music to reinforce a lesson, to set a mood, to gather or dismiss the children/youth, to move from one activity to another, to have fun.

N ... NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES (AND THE INTERNET)

Newspapers and magazines, as well as the internet, provide endless techniques. Analyze editorials for the values that are inherent in them.

News articles are good discussion starters, especially if they present a problem, conflict, or situation involving Christian (or lack of) values. Youth can be encouraged to bring in as many articles as they can find in relation to a topic under study.

How does the secular press report a current religious event? How would the children/youth add to or change the report?

O ... OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Sometimes our questions might call for pat answers or simple recall answers. Those have a place, but our quest is to help children/youth internalize the Gospel message for their own lives. The questions we pose (as well as the questions we encourage them to ask) need to allow room for reflection and for personalization.

Questions such as:

- If Jesus had three wishes for the world, I think they would be
- I wonder what Jesus and Zaccheus said as they walked together?
- I was moved by
- The answer is Jesus. What are ten possible questions?
- What color reminds you of the Holy Spirit? Why?
- I was surprised that

P ... PANTOMIME AND CHARADES

Children/youth can silently act out a Bible story or modern-day situation which calls for a Christian response. One child (or small group) might be asked a week ahead of time to act out the following week’s Scripture story and have the others guess what it is.

Q ... QUIZZES

“Who am I?” quizzes are a good way to open the session and review the previous week’s theme. Encourage cooperation in answering the question rather than competition between the children.

R ... REWRITE

Rewrite parables as how Jesus might tell them today. Rewrite a current events story if Catholic social teaching had been in the minds of all the participants.

S ... STORYTELLING

Watch for stories in the news, on the web, and on TV. Keep a journal of the inspirational stories that circulate through e-mail. Tell a Bible story as if you are there and actively participating in the action.

T ... TAPE RECORDER

Tape the Scripture story ahead of time – using your family for various voices and your home for sound effects. Pre-record examples of situations that the children can analyze as applications of the lesson. Some youth who are hesitant in spontaneous prayer are comfortable recording their prayer while alone; then are comfortable if it is used during a group prayer time.

U ... USE SIMULATION GAMES

This type of game simulates a possible real-life event. It gives people a feeling/an experience from which they can begin to see things from another’s viewpoint. One such game might be called “Unequal Resources.” To play, the group is divided into smaller groups and each group is assigned the same project. Envelopes containing the needed supplies are given to each group. The experience begins when most of the groups discover they are missing some of the supplies they need and one group has all the missing parts. They might think a mistake has been made. In time they might realize that the unfairness was intended. What will they do? Will they trade supplies? Will they beg? Will the group that has more than it needs share? The lesson, of course, is about the way the earth’s resources are distributed around the world. God has supplied all the resources human beings need to survive, but some people have an abundance, while others are forced to do without.

This is one example of a type of game that can be used effectively to make a point.

V ... VIDEO

Invite the young people to make one (even a music one) to illustrate one of the Gospel passages, one of the themes you are studying.

Use some of the ones that have been specifically produced for faith formation. Stop them before the end and ask: how do you think it should end?

W ... WATER

Use holy water to bless the children during prayer, at the end of the day when they leave to return home.

X ... EXPERTS

Invite “experts” to assist you whenever possible: parish staff members, lay ministers in the parish, people who are witnesses to their faith in their working world, etc.

Y ... YOUR PRAYER AND YOUR EXPERIENCES OF GOD

Books don’t teach people; people teach people. Faith deepens because we associate with faith-filled people. Our children and youth will “learn” more because of your faith sharing than they will from anything they read or memorize. Make faith come alive through your sharing of what it means in your life.

Z ... ZEALOUS HELPERS

There are many around. You don’t have to do everything. Invite someone to team-teach with you. People can help from their homes by preparing materials you will need. Use people for one-time instances during your session: drama, an art project, a service opportunity, etc. Invite parents, senior citizens, youth in older grades, etc.

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