

How to Talk
to Children
about

PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITIES

CHARLEEN KATRA

 TWENTY-THIRD
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TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS
One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200
New London, CT 06320
(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411
www.twentythirdpublications.com

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Introduction

“How do I talk to my child about...?” This is not an uncommon question among parents as well as teachers and catechists. Abstract concepts, hard-to-broach subjects, and sensitive issues all require a particular kind of language that gives a child enough information without being overly complex or confusing. The same is true for many aspects of our faith.

This series of books provides parents as well as teachers and catechists with a range of questions about these topics. Each one offers terminology relatable to a young child’s experience as well as family activities to stimulate further conversation and comprehension. In sharing these responses, you are likely to find yourself more than capable of talking to your child about these and other topics of faith and practice.

Made in God's image

For your information

The creation account in Genesis tells us that “God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Catholic social teaching affirms Scripture regarding the dignity of the human person and our sacredness. Every person has dignity. We are worthy of honor and respect because God created us. The more we internalize this truth about ourselves, the easier it becomes for us to see Christ in others.

God created us in his image, yet each one of us is unique. Anything that makes us unique is part of the definition of diversity. Diversity means all the ways we differ. Most important, diversity supports inclusion. We are each unique by God's design *on the outside*; but inside, our souls are the same—made in God's image and made for love! In every Scripture passage where Jesus Christ is present there is always a social and a spiritual dimension. We are created to be in relationships.

The words we use, the looks we give, the food, clothing, and shelter we share all matter to God. As disciples of Jesus Christ we want to speak, act, and love in ways that honor the dignity of all human life. We are called, both as individuals and as communities, to stand with and for persons who have greater needs than we do, those who are more vulnerable or marginalized in society.

Talking to your child

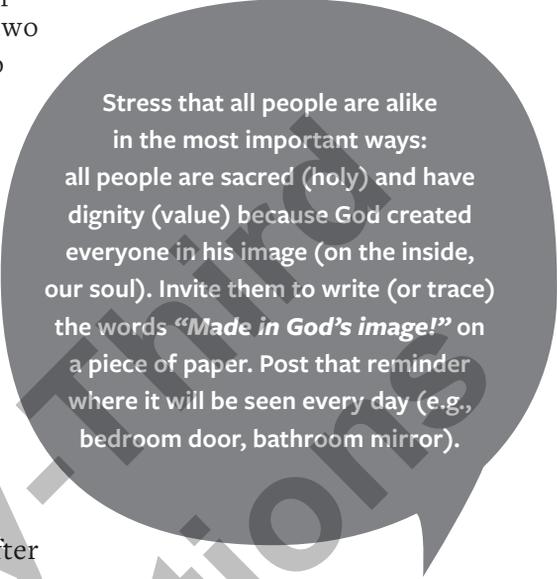
Prepare sets of matching Lego pieces (shape/quantity), one for you and one for each child. Let your imaginations inspire your designs. Use this experience to discuss how you all had the same Lego pieces, yet you each “created” something beautiful but unique!

Discuss how people are also different. No two are alike. People who are different from one another also have similarities. Invite your child to identify similarities. Now ask your child or group to name differences between themselves and their siblings and friends. After each one, have them name one thing they like about that person. State that our differences make our families, our friendships, and our world a more beautiful and exciting place. Encourage them to always try to learn something from everyone who is different from them. Tell them this is how they will grow to be a better person.

Remind them that, like the Lego experience showed, every person God creates is both beautiful and unique.

Prayer

Creator God, you made us in your image and unique for a reason. Help us see others through your eyes.



Stress that all people are alike in the most important ways: all people are sacred (holy) and have dignity (value) because God created everyone in his image (on the inside, our soul). Invite them to write (or trace) the words **“Made in God’s image!”** on a piece of paper. Post that reminder where it will be seen every day (e.g., bedroom door, bathroom mirror).

Love one another

For your information

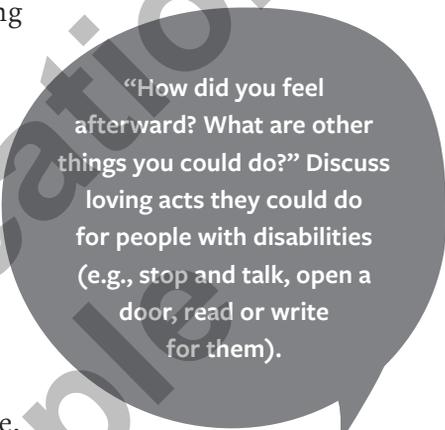
The Greatest Commandment—“love one another as I have loved you”—summarizes the heart of the Bible. True love for others is demonstrated beyond our inner circle of favored family and friends. It is when the love of God, first given to us, is generously passed on to others, especially when there is no expectation of repayment or even any means to do so. It is love that is other-directed, especially to the most vulnerable among us. God’s love teaches us the value of having a servant’s heart. To form hearts for God in others we must first look within. How does the Greatest Commandment impact how we perceive or treat individuals with disabilities? Do we see the face of Christ in their face? Can we allow them to lead us in prayer? Scripture calls us to love and affirm one another at all times. In doing so, we embrace the reality that we need each other. When children see and hear adults live this biblical truth, they are more likely to become adults who will do the same.

Talking to your child

Ask them how BIG their heart is. Explain that the heart is a muscle about the size of our fist. Like all muscles it needs exercise. Have them name exercises they do (e.g., jumping jacks, running). Now explain that how we treat other people affects how “big” our heart becomes. State that every time we show love to another person, the love that God placed in our heart grows. Ask your child or group to think about the most loving people they know. Tell them that even though you don’t know who they are thinking about, you believe you can describe them.

- They are always happy to see you.
- They make you feel special when you are together.
- They are always peaceful and happy.
- Their smile makes other people smile.
- They share what they have with everyone, especially people who have less than they do.
- Their generosity can make people cry—not because they are sad, but because they are filled with joy and gratitude.

Explain that having a loving heart is like having an invisible magnet in your heart; it attracts people to you. Everyone enjoys being near people who have loving hearts. People who are loving are loved by others and beloved by God. God blesses people who love generously by filling their hearts with more love, peace, and joy. We say that loving people have “big” hearts. Jesus showed us how to love everyone and calls us to do the same. State: “Tell me about a time when you showed God’s love to someone, like Jesus taught. Why did you do so?”



“How did you feel afterward? What are other things you could do?” Discuss loving acts they could do for people with disabilities (e.g., stop and talk, open a door, read or write for them).

Prayer

Loving God, enlarge our hearts so that others always feel loved and cared for when they are with us.

Words and actions matter

For your information

Language impacts brain development. Language also influences individuals and societies as both evolve. You may remember terminology such as “gimp” or “crippled” being used decades ago to describe a person with a disability. More recently, words like “handicapped” and “disabled” meant the same. Today, the use of “people-first” or “person-first” language promotes more accurate and respectful terminology that affirms the human dignity of every person with a disability. It puts the person before any diagnosis or descriptor of them. Instead of referring to an “autistic girl” or a “Downs boy” we refer to a “girl with autism” or a “boy with Down syndrome.” To learn more, a Google search will quickly provide many more helpful examples.

When children see someone with a disability they will often do one of two things: ask questions, or stop and stare at the person. How adults respond makes a difference. Ignoring the inquiry by changing the subject or quickly moving the child along will send a message that having a disability is shameful or embarrassing. Answering questions or providing information directly teaches children that every person is made uniquely by God. Providing factual information in clear and simple terms teaches children that our diversity is a sign of God’s artistry to be celebrated.

Talking to your child

Read together or recall the book *Curious George*. Discuss how George was a monkey who was curious about a lot of things. He wondered about things he hadn’t learned yet. Ask your child if they have ever been curious about something or someone. Affirm that it’s always good to be curious because that means our brain is

Give children permission to ask you or others “getting to know you” questions. Discuss how God wants everyone to use polite words that emphasize a person’s strengths, not weaknesses. What words would they like used to describe them? Affirm that it’s always better to ask questions out of curiosity than to not ask and judge wrongly or ignore someone.

working, and a working brain is a thinking brain! Asking questions is a great way to learn new things. The more we learn, the more we understand. Have them tell you what they think is the first question people ask when they want to get to know someone. It usually is “What is your name?” Names are special because they are chosen for us individually by people who love us. Many traditions exist around the world for how names are chosen. A name may indicate something that parents hope will shape their child’s personality and influence their future (e.g., Esperanza/Hope). *Curious George* received his name based on a characteristic of his personality. Calling someone by their name shows that we respect them, and we are called to respect and love all people because God created them.

Prayer

God, grant us a spirit of genuine curiosity that inspires words and actions that always respect the dignity of every person.

Visible and invisible

For your information

Typically, approximately twenty-five percent of every community consists of people with a disability; faith communities are no different. When parish leadership states that no one with a disability (physical, intellectual, emotional, or behavioral) is present, that statement may signify that the community is not seen as accessible to individuals with disabilities and their families. Barriers to access may be physical (e.g., lack of ramps, accessible restrooms, or electronic door openers) or attitudinal (e.g., receiving stares and glares, being dismissed or ignored, judged or talked about). Not all disabilities are visible. Not everyone uses a wheelchair. This can make knowing if someone has a disability difficult or even impossible. A caution in this regard is always to “be curious, not judgmental.” A person parking in an accessible parking space and walking into a building may have a disability that legally supports their using that space. They may have a heart condition, severe joint pain, etc. The blessing of good health allows others to gratefully walk extra steps.

Talking to your child

If it seems like people with disabilities are “missing” from a group, use this as an opportunity to have a discussion about inclusion. Keep the conversation respectful and age appropriate. Share the story of the teacher who, when taking attendance, jokingly said, “Anyone who’s not here, please raise your hand.” Emphasize that the teacher’s joke makes a good point. If you’re not present, you can’t raise your hand. It also means you can’t be seen or included.

If you are teaching a group of children, ask for a show of hands by those present to see how many of them know or love some-

one with a disability. Watch how many positive responses appear. Invite them to tell you more. You will hear about their family members, friends, and neighbors. You will hear about various disabilities. Use this information to discuss visible and invisible disabilities.

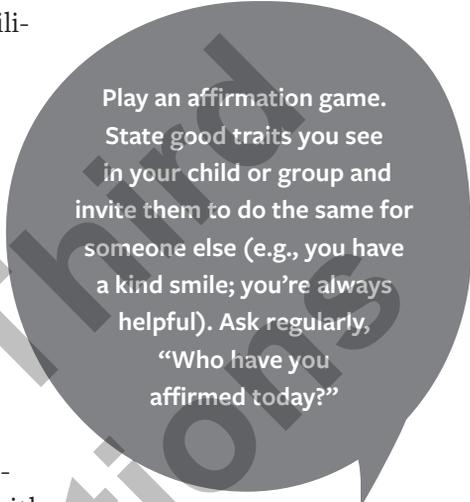
Begin with the visible: persons who use wheelchairs or walkers, who wear glasses or hearing aids, have service dogs, or have Down syndrome, etc. Aim to teach something positive about every disability discussed (e.g., most people with Down syndrome are very social and loving).

Then talk about the invisible; autism, attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, mental illness, Alzheimer's, etc. Repeat, this time highlighting strengths (e.g., people with autism are good at following schedules and have passion for their interests). Invite everyone to make a list (or draw pictures) of what they are good at. You do the same. Compare information.

Discuss how important it is for every person to be seen, known, and loved. People who are shy, different, lonely, or sad need other people to see, know, and love them too.

Prayer

Slow us down, Lord, to see all people with our heart's eye. Inspire us with your spirit of love so that everyone we meet will feel known and valued.



Play an affirmation game. State good traits you see in your child or group and invite them to do the same for someone else (e.g., you have a kind smile; you're always helpful). Ask regularly, "Who have you affirmed today?"

Wheelchairs, ramps, and more

For your information

More than any generation before them, children today are familiar with people with disabilities. They may know a friend, relative, or neighbor who has a diagnosis of one kind or another. Though our world is more inclusive than it once was, there are still great advancements and progress to be made.

We are unique for a reason—because God intended it that way. Every person has different abilities and needs. Everyone’s needs are special and important to them. Some people have greater needs than others. The greater the needs, the higher the level of vulnerability. If we have lesser needs than another, then we are called to be additional eyes and ears and voices to assist those most vulnerable in the world. Doing so assists their loved ones who valiantly strive every day to protect and advocate for them. The following quote by St. Teresa of Calcutta summarizes our need for one another. She stated that “The problem with our world is that we draw the circle of family too small.”

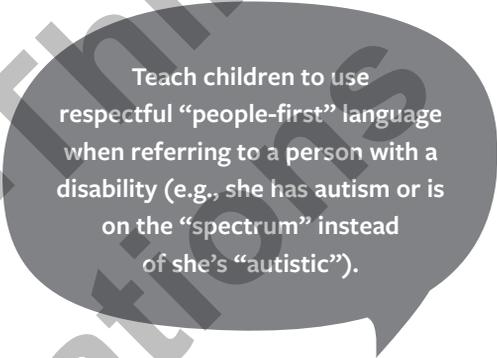
What have we learned? How can we share our knowledge and passion for inclusion with others, especially with children? We start where we have influence to do so: in our homes, schools, faith communities, etc.

Talking to your child

Consider incorporating information about disabilities in family conversations and catechetical curricula whenever opportunities arise or when otherwise able to do so. A lesson about the human body easily lends itself to a discussion about differences among

people. Some people will need glasses, hearing aids, wheelchairs, assisted communication devices, etc., to live fully the life that God intended for them.

- Use role play or disability awareness activities to briefly experience various needs and differences (e.g., communicate without talking aloud, eat or drink blindfolded, navigate a classroom using a wheelchair).
- Teach children a few words in American Sign Language (e.g., make a fist with the right hand and rotate it a couple times in a clockwise motion on the chest to say, “I’m sorry”).
- Encourage children to look for accessible parking spaces, ramps, and curb cuts during neighborhood walks; look for Braille in elevators and for accessible water fountains and restrooms inside of schools, stores, theaters, airports, etc.
- Create a relaxed atmosphere for questions and answers about disability-related matters.
- Teach respect for necessary medical equipment, electronic devices, and other items as being “tools” not “toys.”



Teach children to use respectful “people-first” language when referring to a person with a disability (e.g., she has autism or is on the “spectrum” instead of she’s “autistic”).

Awareness of the needs of others raises our sensitivity and ability to advocate for the needs of others, most especially for persons who cannot do so for themselves.

Prayer

Father, inspire us to use the abilities that we have to advocate for the needs of others.

Being friends

For your information

To have a friend and to be a friend are basic needs. Friendship supports emotional development and fosters a sense of social belonging. The word “friend” enters our vocabulary early in life as does our ability to emulate social skills. Even a six-month-old will crawl toward another baby for social interaction. As children quickly imitate what is seen, heard, and done, they learn new behaviors. Over the years, children will experience varying degrees of success at making and keeping friends. To assess social competence, we need only observe a child’s interactions with others. The skills required for success come naturally to some children and prove challenging for others. Children with disabilities can struggle to make and maintain friendships for various reasons. It can be impossible to commit to social or extracurricular activities when hours spent with doctors and therapists take priority. When hurtful and exclusionary behaviors prohibit friendships, we must intervene. Promoting a sense of belonging for all children means intentionally creating opportunities for full inclusion. Every parent wants their child to have *friends*—not be a service project! When we celebrate the genuine benefits that friendships bring to every life we are living the gospel values we profess.

Talking to your child

Social settings will always provide a means for behaviors to be learned throughout life. When positive behaviors are acquired, everyone advances. Being included not only feels good, it also strongly helps the child develop appropriately modeled social and behavioral skills.

Discuss definitions and qualities of the words “friend” and

“friendship.” Ask your child or group to draw a picture or describe their friends for you. Talk about what their friendships mean to them. Tell them about someone you have known who has a hard time making friends. Ask if they know someone who has a hard time making friends. Ask why they think that is so. Together, brainstorm actions that they or their friends could take to be a friend to others, to be more inclusive.

Attend activities or events that children with disabilities participate in: Special Olympics, dances sponsored by the Down syndrome association, autism society, etc.

- Extend an invitation to social gatherings; parties, sports.
- Plan a class activity or community building event that commits to involving everyone.
- Talk, sit, laugh, eat, study, play, dance—the list is endless—together to develop an authentic friendship with someone who is different from you.

No two friends are alike, but all friends bring us joy, happiness, and love. Explain that the ability to make friends easily is a gift from God. People who have this gift are the best people to extend their hand and heart in friendship to others. God’s gifts are always intended to be shared. Remind them that being a good friend takes time and practice. Just like being a friend with Jesus. We are all called to be a friend, to “be Jesus,” to others.

Prayer

Bless us, Lord, with different types of friends so that our appreciation of the giftedness of others grows.

Do no harm

For your information

Bullying is a repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm others, creating a real or perceived power imbalance. It can be verbal (insults, teasing, name calling, threats), social (exclusion from activities, or places or groups, gossiping, embarrassing someone, cyberbullying, hurting someone's reputation), or physical (hitting, spitting, pushing, tripping, stealing, or destroying property).

“Being different” or “not fitting in” are common reasons why many children are teased or bullied. Having any kind of disability makes a person an easy target.

Talking to your child

If the “age of reason” is seven years old, then children entering second grade are able to discern right from wrong. Why, then, do children who intellectually know better sometimes act in cruel or unloving ways? One way to find out is to ask them.

If it is not right to bully or hurt another person, then why does it happen?

Have you ever been bullied? How did it feel? What did you do? How did it end?

Have you ever bullied someone? What made you do it? How do you think the other person felt?

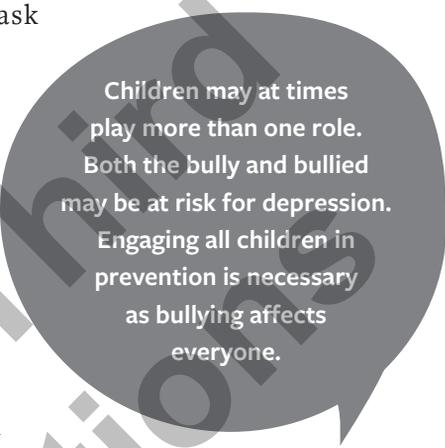
Do you know a bully or someone being bullied? How can you help them?

People of all ages blame someone else when they don't want to take responsibility for their actions. Children are no different. They may state that someone is annoying, weird, or unpopular in an attempt to justify their behavior.

Such moments are opportunities for parents to *offer redirection*.

Instead of stating “I don’t care what other children are doing or saying,” take the time to discuss the situation. This is a teachable moment and when capitalized upon is food for thought for self-reflection.

Resist judging. Instead, ask them to explain what is annoying or weird or to tell you why no one likes an individual. The act of answering such questions requires thoughts and feelings to be formulated and expressed. Being heard and validated creates a space for meaningful dialogue to occur. The head and heart are now better able to hear and receive another person’s perspective.



Children may at times play more than one role. Both the bully and bullied may be at risk for depression. Engaging all children in prevention is necessary as bullying affects everyone.

Bullying involves the bully, the bullied, and the bystanders. Bystanders have a vital role to play because they have the greatest ability to influence outcomes. Discussing the part a bystander plays is important:

- *Assist:* encouraging or joining in;
- *Reinforce:* remaining or laughing provides a desired audience;
- *Observe:* without reinforcing the bully or defending the bullied; may want to help, but not sure how;
- *Defend:* comforts the bullied and stands up to bullies.

Prayer

Protect and guide us, Father, to make smart decisions in tough situations. Grant us wisdom to use technology to enhance our lives and to do no harm.

Making sense of sensory processing

For your information

If asked to state how many senses a human has, you would likely answer five, followed by: “see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.” And you would be right, sort of. There are actually seven identified sensory systems that affect everyone, though each differently. The additional two are vestibular (balance) and proprioception (body awareness). Our brain has the incredible task of constantly sorting through every piece of input being received. Right now, you are seeing words on paper, feeling a seat below you, experiencing lights, sounds, temperature, etc. Most people can easily process a combination of sensory input. Imagine not being able to effectively eliminate specific input. Or worse, having every sensory input colliding on you simultaneously and each extremely amplified (e.g., dripping faucet, fan oscillation, bright lights). Did you know that one in six children struggles with a sensory processing disorder? Knowing this enables us to empathize with the everyday challenges that exist for others. These ongoing difficulties can result in chronic anxiety for the child and elevated stress for parents and educators.

Talking to your child

Invite your child or group to experience their seven senses through the following activities:

1. Play “I Spy” or “Finding Waldo” (sight).
2. Close eyes and identify various sounds: zipper, bell, stapler, etc. (hearing).
3. Feel items inside of a bag to identify them: shoelace, feather, sponge, etc. (touch).

4. Eat with eyes closed to identify various foods: M&M, apple, carrot, etc. (taste).
5. Close eyes and smell to identify various aromas: cinnamon, popcorn, flower, etc. (smell).
6. Use a rocking chair, trampoline, swing, or slide to identify speed and direction of body movement (vestibular/balance).
7. Kneel down or make the sign of the cross to identify the location and movement of the body (proprioception/body awareness).

Which experiences

did they enjoy, or not? Why?

Explain that every person's

brain is different. Not right

or wrong, just different. One

person loves carrots, and another

does not. One person loves roller coasters, and

another does not. Stress how some people have great difficulty with sight, touch, movement, etc. Discuss how people with autism

often struggle with sensory input. They may need clothing tags removed and more room around them (no bumping). They may

need to wear headphones, or sunglasses or carry a small soother (fidget). They may flap their hands, called "stimming," to try to

block out sights and sounds. Doing so helps control anxious feelings. Walking around, spinning in a chair, or chewing on items can

also be ways to calm themselves down.

Try this autism awareness activity. Tell your child or group to pay attention while you read quietly to them as music plays and you fan them with paper. Afterward, ask them to state what they remember hearing. Was it hard to focus? Discuss their experience.

Then look up the word **empathy** and discuss the definition.

Prayer

Gracious God, help us to see the good in all people and to be sensitive to what is happening in their lives.

Siblings have needs too

For your information

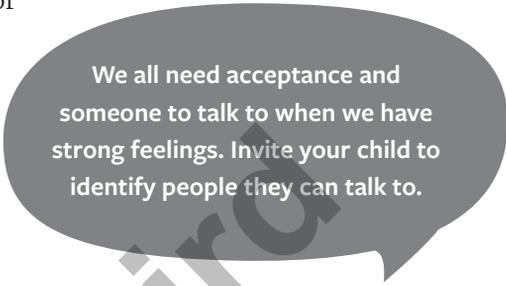
Parents who have more than one child generally strive to be available to the needs of every child proportionately. The more children, the more taxing this balancing act can become. When the needs of one child significantly outweigh the needs of others, little choice remains. Families, like any “society,” are called by God to care for the people with the greatest needs first and foremost.

Parents of children with disabilities carry this awareness in their hearts all the time. It affects them and their entire family: physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Siblings of a child with a disability have their own set of needs. They may not speak about it or be overtly aware early in life that they are maturing and becoming more independent sooner than their sibling. By their life circumstance they will share in providing care for their sibling or siblings, as some families have more than one child with a disability. It’s been said that if you want to know how to treat someone with a disability, watch their siblings. They spend their entire lives in a front row seat observing their parents model compassion, patience, and love beyond measure (though we must also recognize that having a child with a severe disability can also tear a family apart). Siblings may exceed their parent’s expectations in adulthood, but that doesn’t mean childhood was easy for them.

Talking to your child

Ask your child or group if they know what the word “stigma” means. Look it up together, and discuss a simple definition (e.g., something to be ashamed of). Ask if they know anyone who has a disability. Or, if any of their friends has a sibling with a disability. Imagine together what it might be like to have a sibling with

a disability. Make a list of your responses. Try to identify aspects to celebrate (e.g., you always get along; no fighting) as well as challenges (e.g., you spend a lot of time in hospitals). How do they think it would feel to (name a response)? Why? Explain that a sibling can feel many emotions—anger, hurt, fear, etc.—but more than anything they want everyone to treat their brother or sister with love just as they do. The fact that their sibling looks or behaves differently doesn't matter in God's world. We all act and behave differently.



We all need acceptance and someone to talk to when we have strong feelings. Invite your child to identify people they can talk to.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the gift our family. We ask that you always stay close to us as you provide for all of our needs.

Everyday superpowers

For your information

In Exodus, God insists that Moses take off his sandals, “because where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). Was this merely a lesson in good manners? No, God was highlighting the significance of humility. He knew Moses needed to learn humility before he could fully commit to leading the Jewish people. Faith and humility go together. Thomas Merton once wrote that “In perfect humility all selfishness disappears and your soul no longer lives for itself or in itself for God; and it is lost and submerged in him and transformed into him.” In humility lies the foundation for empathy, respect, kindness, and compassion. To acknowledge our ability to learn lessons from experiences with people unlike ourselves (e.g., persons with disabilities, the vulnerable and marginalized) is to be willing to take off our sandals because we are aware that we are standing on holy ground—the “holy ground” being the dignity of another person and all the intimate needs and realities they possess that may be unfamiliar to us. To be human is to learn from the humanity of others.

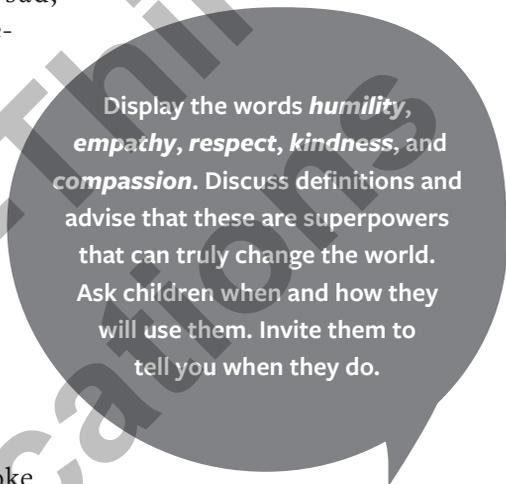
Talking to your child

Use the social/emotional awareness activities below to broaden your child’s understanding of the feelings of others while nurturing their spiritual growth. Invite your child or group to imagine that they have superpowers. Let them name and describe them. Then enjoy these games:

- Direct everyone to take off one shoe and place them in a pile. Then have each person, in turn, select a shoe that is not theirs to “try” on. Discuss what happened. Invite sharing. Ask what

would happen if they had to walk in the “other” shoe all day. How would they feel?

- Show pictures of different types of shoes (ballet slipper, cowboy boot, soccer shoe, etc.). Ask: Who do these shoes belong to? What does this person do? Where do you usually see them? Is this person (provide two choices): loud, quiet, happy, sad, scared, excited, peaceful, angry, mean, or nice? When have you felt this way?
- Play a version of musical chairs. Prepare index cards that each contain a scenario and reflection question: How would your friend feel if you broke their toy? How does your parent feel when you don't do your chores? How does your sibling feel when you take something from their room? Place one card on each chair. Once seated, children take turns sharing aloud their question and response to it.
- Create a multiple-choice game. Create scenarios like: “A new person at school doesn't have friends yet. You: a) stare in passing, but don't speak, b) invite them to join you for lunch, c) talk about them with others, or d) wait for them to speak first.”

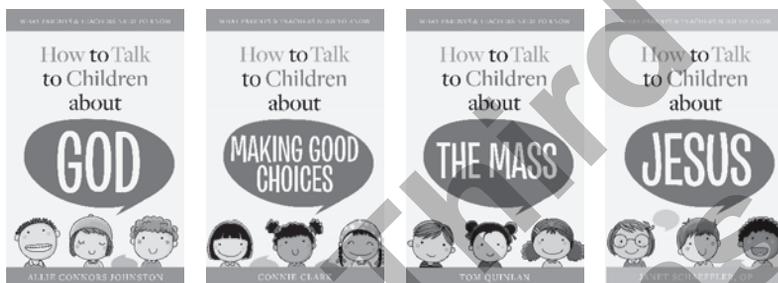


Display the words *humility, empathy, respect, kindness, and compassion*. Discuss definitions and advise that these are superpowers that can truly change the world. Ask children when and how they will use them. Invite them to tell you when they do.

Prayer

Dear Jesus, help us to use our superpowers to bless the world!

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