

Written in response to a Diocesan request for information about our parent nights.



Our Lady of Dolours Parish Chatswood

Children's Sacramental Program An Overview of our Parent Input Nights

We teach the parents, and the parents teach their children using the workbook series created by Adelaide Archdiocese and published by Harper Collins Religious (available from Sydney Catholic Books and Resources ph 02 9390 5122):

- “Growing With the Spirit” (Confirmation)
- “Preparing to make Peace” (Reconciliation)
- “Preparing to Celebrate” (First Communion)

I think the Broken Bay Diocesan program content is excellent, however it presumes small groups, each with a leader. Because we don't have the small group system here we find the Adelaide booklet suitable for any parent to work through with his/her child. Our booklet is particularly good for helping parents to explore bible passages with their child. It does involve the child in a lot of drawing, and sometimes this does not suit the boys, so we have supplementary puzzles/word games for those children who are not into drawing.

Over two Parent Nights of one hour each, this is what we cover...
 (“We” = the children's sacramental team)

- We welcome the parents warmly, try to know as many as possible by name (we are talking about 80-100 parents), envelop them in a sense of community.
- We begin with a prayer experience (not just ‘a’ prayer). We are still experimenting with this, but at our last Confirmation night we just invited them to kick back and breathe in the Holy Spirit while we played a beautiful ‘Holy Spirit’ song on CD (‘Spirit Blowing Through Creation’ As One Voice Vol 2. no.51). We set the atmosphere with symbols, candles, lighting, and tried to make it a beautiful space for people to come into after a frazzling day at work. It worked beautifully... we really felt the Spirit descend and something shifted in the room! People who were coming in the door late, stopped in their tracks and stood there respectfully, as if they also sensed something sacred happening in the seated group. It encouraged us to keep working at this prayer aspect... i.e. create a space for the Spirit to move rather than busily ‘saying prayers’.
- We then canvass their reactions to the sacrament. Get them thinking about their own memories/experiences of receiving this sacrament.
- We offer some good informative input. I haven't found the ‘perfect’ video yet, but the following have been quite good...

- *A Walk Through the Mass*. (Catholic Update Video) The 14 min teaching segment explains the Mass well in terms of a family meal.
 - *The Church Celebrates the Reconciling God* (Catholic Update Video). The 7 min teaching segment explains the second rite quite well. Both are American videos (which irritates some viewers), good contemporary theology behind it, clear narration, strong sense of the church as *communio*, available from Pauline Book & Media, Castlereagh St Sydney. 9264 8630) Also helpful for RCIA groups.
 - Suzanne Power: 'The Celebrating Church' A series of 4 videos/DVDs on the sacraments. Ph 07 5533 3045 Email spowell22@optusnet.com.au These are Australian, well produced, good contemporary theology underpinning it, use teenagers as presenters. Sometimes the narrative is not crystal clear, can drag in parts, but lots of good stuff too. Can be used with secondary school students or adults.
- We encourage some discussion on the meaning of the sacrament, field questions etc. In doing so, we are trying to implicitly communicate a vision of church as a community of love, centred on Jesus, 'being' the body of Christ, parish as family, the importance of belonging etc. We are always keen to impart the message that baptism is an unbreakable bond; hey, if you've been baptized a Catholic you are part of the family! In subliminal ways we try to ensure that the 'lapsed' Catholics know they are welcome.
 - We provide an overview of the workbook content, clearly stating the program goals.
 - We suggest lots of practical tips for responding to their child, encouraging them to share their own best idea with the group.
 - We encourage them to celebrate the sacrament in 'little ways' in the home. We hand out copies of the following Story Source publications:
 - Ten Ways to Celebrate your Child's Confirmation at Home
 - Ten Ways to Celebrate your Child's Reconciliation at Home
 - Ten Ways to Celebrate your Child's First Communion at Home
 - Ten Ways to Create a Sacred Space at Home
 - Ten Ways to Listen with Love
 - We are conscious that some parents want/need extra resources (for 'remedial' or 'extension' purposes), so we have a resource table set up with a range of alternative books and pamphlets on that sacrament. They can browse afterwards, and borrow a book by a simple 'sign-out' system.
 - We impress upon them the importance of working at their own faith, and recommend Celebrate Love for married couples, and other parish opportunities (e.g. RCIA for non-Catholic parents)
 - In our parish we are blessed to have an excellent children's Mass each month. We urge them to bring their children and boldly say 'Don't squander these riches!. One day you may be in a parish which doesn't having anything for your children, but in this parish at this time there are wonderful opportunities for your child! So don't waste them - take them to Mass!'
 - We emphasize the centrality of their example, their witness. In fact, in our Reconciliation program last November we really put a lot of work into dismantling their barriers, relieving their anxieties, healing their hurts so that they would actually COME to the sacrament on the night. We put all the objections up and dealt with them one by one. We explained, we

probed, we shared, we empathized, we challenged. We got Vince to talk about what it was like from the priest's perspective to allay the fear of 'What will the priest think of me?' We were so elated at our Reconciliation ceremony last November when the parents actually came forward in excellent numbers!

- Of course we discuss all the practicalities of the ceremony itself (and for some parents this is really all they come for... 'what do they have to wear?').
- We close with a short prayer.
- We try (usually successfully!) to be punctual, well organized, available for individual questions before and after, and responsive to individual family situations.
- We offer babysitting for children (not babies).

We see the Parent Nights as part of a whole process of evangelization, complemented by all the other aspects of the program and bouncing off other parish initiatives (e.g. well celebrated Masses, Children's Liturgy of the Word, RCIA, Infant Baptism program, good parish-school relationships, etc)

You've heard the expression 'Death by a thousand cuts'. Well, this is 'Life by a thousand caresses!'

We are far from perfect, but always trying to do things better, learning from each group's response. For example, in our new intake of parents come July (for Confirmation) we are going to precede the whole program with a general sacraments information night before getting into the specific sacraments.

We have also developed a one page resource which encourages the parent to treat each step of the process as a gift, not just boxes to tick off but an opportunity to reflect on their relationship with their child. The children have a similar resource designed for them, helping them to understand the process as a special journey.

Also, we have a new REC this year, a wonderful young woman who comes with considerable sacramental experience, so she is going to introduce a First Communion Retreat Day for the children: the day has four segments where they do different activities all designed to help them appreciate the Eucharist and have a lot of fun in the process!

So, we are evolving...

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2004-2009
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