

Guidelines



A Religious Education Handbook For Families

DIOCESE OF VENICE IN FLORIDA
Department of Education
Office of Catechesis

January 2012

Dear Parish Director/Coordinator of Religious Education:

The following guidelines are written to assist you in creating a comprehensive **Religious Education Handbook for Families**. You may choose to do this with input from your catechists or from other knowledgeable persons at your parish. In any case, before sending the handbook to catechists, your Pastor/Administrator should read and approve the document.

The scope of the handbook should take into account all aspects of your religious education program of which parents need to be aware. These items range from policies and procedures regarding student pick-up to the student dress code.

The following pages delineate each of the categories which need to be contained in the handbook. After you have reviewed them all, you should write up the appropriate processes, procedures and/or specifications that apply to your parish relevant to each category.

The parish **Religious Education Handbook for Families Catechist Handbook** should be a living document which is reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

Two excellent reference guides published by *the National Catholic Education Association* regarding legal issues surrounding parish religious education programs are:

Religious Education and the Law: A Handbook for Parish Catechetical Leaders

Religious Education and the Law: A Catechist Handbook

These handbooks, copies of which you should purchase and maintain in your parish religious education library, are authored by Sr. Mary Angela Shaughnessy(SCN).

Once your handbook has been approved, please send a copy to the Office of Catechesis to be placed in your file.

Yours in Christ,



Dr. Kathy Kleinlein
Director of Catechesis
Director of Safe Environment Awareness and Certification

Attendance at Religious Education Sessions

Indicate the manner in which the parent/guardian is to report the absence of a child from the catechetical session as well as the procedure for alerting the parent/guardian when a student is absent and no notification has been given by the parent/guardian. This is especially important when the student is not regularly brought to the program by the parent/guardian.

Specify the number of absences (and late arrivals) which will be accepted before the child is required to make up the material missed. Clearly state how these sessions or their catechetical content are to be made up.

Attendance at Sunday Liturgy

Emphasis should be placed on the importance of attending Sunday Liturgy on a regular basis. Note should be made of the time and frequency if there is a Family Mass at the parish.

Admission Policy:

Include a non-discriminatory statement that there is no discrimination on the basis of race, sex, national origin or handicapping conditions.

Agreement with Parent/Guardians

Parents/guardians should sign an agreement that they will abide by the rules outlined in the handbook.

Alcohol

Note should be made that alcohol is not allowed on parish premises when students are present.

Calendar

At the beginning of each academic year, a calendar is to be provided to the parent/guardian listing the dates for religious education, safe environment training for children, special parish events, etc. when the program will be held, the dates for holidays, and make-up days for violent weather. The times when the classes will begin and end are also specified. Parish religious education programs should have a minimum of 45 contact hours with students.

Cancellations of sessions should only be made only significant reasons such as dangerous weather conditions. The manner in which parent/guardians, and all other concerned persons will be informed of the cancellation of sessions is stated in the handbook.

Child Abuse

See **Diocesan Safe Environment Policy**

Code of Student Conduct

A page of delineating which items are to be agreed to parents/guardians and students (include signature lines) should be addressed in the handbook. A sample of a Student Conduct Form copy is located in the Appendix.

Communication

Communications to the parent/guardian should be written and mailed unless they can be handed directly to the parent/guardian by a catechist or staff member.

Custodial Rights of Parent/guardians

State that the Director should be informed by the custodial parent/guardian of the rights of the noncustodial parent/guardian as these pertain to the child's participation in the program as well as release from the program. Legal documentation, if available, should be kept in the student's file.

Discipline

If a catechist is allowed to keep a student after the session for reasons such as misbehavior, lateness, or additional instruction, this should be stated as program policy along with the procedure for carrying this out. This procedure should include the manner in which advance notice will be given to the parent/guardian.

Include a statement that the Religious education program reserves the right to remove a student from the group session:

- if it is believed that the student would benefit significantly from a one-on-one or smaller group situation, if the student's behavior is seriously inhibiting the learning of others
- if temporary removal is used as a disciplinary measure for serious and persistent disruptive behavior.

Such action should be preceded by a consultation involving the student, the family, the Catechist and the Director.

Dismissal

Unscheduled early dismissals should never occur.

The handbook should state that at the end of the catechetical session children are dismissed to the care of the parent/guardian or parent/guardian substitute. The parent/guardian substitute must be someone designated in writing at registration on the "**Parent/Guardian Consent to Release Minor to Third Party and Release of Liability/Agreement to Indemnify**" form, a copy of which may be found in the Appendix. If someone other than the parent/guardian or parent/guardian substitute is to pick up the child, this change must be given in writing to the Director prior to the session in question. Catechetical staff should not drive students home.

The recommended method of dismissal is to have the parent/guardian come to the classroom where the children are waiting in the care of the catechist. The handbook should stipulate that if an individual student needs to be dismissed early, the request should be given in writing by the parent/guardian to the Director and presented prior to the scheduled class.

The handbook tells the parent/guardian to instruct their child to report to the director in the unforeseen event of not being picked up. The child will then remain with the director until the child's parent/guardian arrives.

Dress Code

A dress code should be included to specify modest dress. A good reference is the local public school district since families would be familiar with these requirements.

Electronics

A statement regarding what is allowed and what is allowed in class as to cell phones, picture taking, electronic games, etc. Again, you may want to refer to the policy dictated by the local public school district.

Emergency Procedures

The handbook states the procedure for notification of the parent/guardian and/or emergency personnel should an accident or illness occur

Field Trips

The procedure for parish field trips should be outlined in the handbook.

There may be a situation where volunteers have agreed to use their own automobiles to transport children for various religious education program activities. In these cases, the volunteers should understand that the automobile policy of the volunteer responds first in the event of any accident. (Insurance follows the car, not the driver.) Volunteers must have completed all background and fingerprinting checks as outlined in the Diocesan **Safe Environment Policy**.

Homework

If homework is to be given, this should be stated as a requirement for participation in the Religious education program. The handbook should also state the consequences of a student's not completing the required homework.

Letter of Welcome

The handbook should begin with a letter of welcome to families.

Medical Condition of Student

The catechist should be informed about any student who has a special medical condition which could flare up in the session or which could affect the teaching/learning environment (e.g. allergies, asthma, auditory or visual impairment, possibility of seizures, learning disability, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, etc.). A statement of confidentiality regarding medical conditions should be stated in the handbook.

Parents should be discouraged from bringing food/snacks to religious education classes because some children may have medical restrictions or allergies to certain foods or ingredients.

Medical Emergency Information

Every child should have on file in the parish religious education office the **Request for Medical Procedure Affidavit, Medical Release of Liability and Indemnification** which contains the medical emergency release. This form must be reviewed every year and bear the original signature of the parent/guardian. Any changes to the record are made in writing by the parent/guardian.

Medication

No medication of any kind (including both prescription and over-the-counter) should be administered to, or taken by, the student during the parish religious education program. If an exception has to be made, the parent/guardian must provide a written request and directives.

Visitors

No unauthorized persons should be allowed in the area where the catechetical sessions are taking place. The parent/guardian and other visitors go directly to the religious education office or designated reception area.

Mission Statement

The handbook should contain a Mission Statement of the parish as well as the goals and objectives of the Religious Education program of the parish.

Options for Religious Education Program

The handbook should indicate whatever options are available for students in the parish religious education program.

Prayers

As part of the handbook, a list of prayers to be learned by grade level should be included in the handbook. If desired, the actual prayers may be contained in this handbook or a separate book of prayers can be provided to families.

Records

A parent/guardian has the right to inspect any and all of their child's records; all persons except appropriate parish program authorities should be denied access without written parent/guardian permission or a court order.

Student records should be kept for a minimum of seven years.

Retention of Students

The parent/guardian handbook should clearly state the grounds for retention. These usually are excessive absence or poor performance. The program policy and procedures for addressing this situation should be clearly stated, including alternatives to repeating the grade level.

Registration Process

The registration process should be clearly delineated in the handbook and placed in the parish bulletin when appropriate. A sample registration form is contained in the Appendix.

Sacraments of Initiation

A separate handbook for the Sacraments of Initiation should be provided to families.

Saints

A list of saints to be learned by grade level should be contained in the Family Handbook.

Safe Environment Training for Children

An explanation of the safe environment training for children should appear in the handbook with an unequivocal statement regarding its importance and essential nature to the religious education program. The VIRTUS training program for children should be explained and it should be stated that children are not excused from safe environment training unless a written statement by parent/guardian/guardian is filed with reasonable justification. Parents/guardians should understand that if their child does not attend the training and there is no statement on file, the training must be made up at another session before the end of the year.

Snacks

It is recommended that the religious education program avoid serving food during the sessions because some children may have medical restrictions or allergies to certain foods or ingredients.

Special Needs Students

A statement on the inclusivity of the parish religious education program should be included with specifics regarding programming, materials and resources.

Supervision

The parent/guardian handbook should state that supervision is not provided before or after the times specified in the handbook.

Table of Contents

A table of contents should be included.

Volunteers

Parents/guardians should be directed to the Diocesan **Safe Environment Policy** and the requirements that apply to such service.

Welcome Letter

A welcome letter to families should follow the table of contents.

Youth Outreach

A separate handbook may be supplied for Youth Outreach.

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