

Stross Newcom and his mother, Joy, review his school work.

Tips for First Time

TEACHERS:

An Orientation

Nervous chatter fills the humid great hall. It is Sunday night in summer and servants from around the country have arrived at Camp Matz in Watertown, Wis. Camp Matz is a fully accessible campground for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Most of the servants are teenagers and they quiet as Donna Winter, Camp Matz director, takes the stage.

The orientation begins. "It entails a lot of issues that will come up during the servants' week at camp; how to work with people with developmental disabilities; how to assist someone while preserving their independence, and how to approach someone," says Winter.

Still, as the presentation ends and the volunteers head to their sleeping quarters, the fears of many in the crowd, especially the first timers, haven't diminished. "They are scared of the unknown and that they are going to do something wrong," says Winter. These fears are similar to those that many first time teachers of people with developmental disabilities face. Unfortunately, first time teachers are often responsible for their own orientation.

Orientation Tip #1: PREPARE

Preparation beforehand can go a long way in making a smooth transition into teaching someone with developmental disabilities. “You can prepare with materials and resources. You can’t just walk in and read at somebody. It’s up to the teacher to take the bull by the horns,” says Sandra Rice, parish ministry consultant and leader of FACES Bible class in Tonawanda, N.Y.

One good way to prepare is to learn about the specific disability that the person you’ll be teaching has (see Resource Review, p. 2).

“The first thing that I would do is talk about how the person with developmental disabilities learns with the student and their parents or guardians,” says Rice, who also holds events that help children feel comfortable around people with developmental disabilities.

Joy Newcom, author of *Involuntary Joy* and mother to Stross, a teenager with disabilities, agrees with the importance of meeting teachers. “We meet every spring with his teacher for the next school year. The teacher then has time to warm up to the idea of having him in the class. I provide them with perspectives and information that I think are helpful and learn what it will be like for him next year,” says Newcom.

Still, regardless of disability, there is no magic way to teach an individual. Everyone learns things differently, and teachers must take this into account.

Orientation Tip #2: BEWARE OF DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

Just like people without disabilities, people with developmental disabilities all learn differently and have different capabilities. It is important to be aware of these differences.

“The process of learning is the same for people with and without disabilities, regardless of ability,” says Newcom. “Teachers need to focus on what the process of learning is. They need to discover what someone’s strengths are and how they learn. In both cases, teachers have to introduce the materials, they have to incorporate the understanding into students’ lives and apply that knowledge. The process is the same, the individuals are different.”

“Regardless of the concept, try to teach it multiple ways; through language, math, sensory activities and music. Take that one concept and incorporate all of the ways that people learn,” says Rice.

Many students with developmental disabilities learn best from activities that involve their senses. “Let’s say you are doing a lesson about Jesus dying on the cross; you could say it, write it on the board, show pictures of it, play a hymn, tell a story, feel a tree. You can use many ways to teach one concept,” says Rice.

“You have to meet a student where they are at. Bring it to their level and they will get it,” says Newcom.

THE STROSS CHRONICLES

Joy Newcom has her son Stross’ second grade teacher to thank for the innovation that most positively affected his learning. The teacher created a notebook to keep Stross up to date while he was out of school with an illness. “I started calling them ‘The Stross Chronicles.’ Anybody at school who wanted to talk to us wrote in the notebook,” says Joy.

“He has one until this day and the teachers enjoy it just as much as we do. When he was young, what it allowed us to do was not keep reinventing wheels. When he was doing math, once they figured something out or if we had an ‘ah-ha’ moment, it was shared. We’re always doing the same thing at home and school. I think that is invaluable. It demands that all involved focus on the child individually and encourages focus on strengths and abilities. Teachers can then approach the lessons that way,” says Newcom.

Years and volumes of ‘The Stross Chronicles’ later, Stross prepares to graduate from high school in June 2009.

To purchase Joy’s book, go to:
www.involuntaryjoy.com

Still, it is important to remember that there are many different learning styles, and teachers must be diligent in fitting one to their students. Often times, communication is the only way to find out.

Orientation Tip #3: COMMUNICATE

Communication with the student and their parent or guardian can go a long way toward ensuring that your student is learning. “Don’t be afraid to ask questions,” says Rice. “Ask, ‘how can we make this work for you?’”

It never hurts to think of creative ways to discuss learning. “In second grade, Stross had a lengthy hospitalization and his teacher began writing in a notebook to keep us up to date with the class. When he returned to school, the notebook was passed back and forth, his teacher told us how his day went and I wrote to her about what we had been doing at home and if it had been working or not,” says Newcom (see ‘The Stross Chronicles’ sidebar for more, p. 6).

“Treat each individual in a way that is appropriate to their age. A lot of the time people assume that because someone doesn’t learn something quickly, the material needs to be child like. That’s not the case at all. A lot of the time, people who are unaccustomed to working with people with

developmental disabilities treat them as kids and they are not kids,” says Rice.

Though communication is sometimes difficult, it is worth it in the end. “The reason conversations are hard is because they should be,” says Newcom. “We are all working toward the best possible learning experience for the people with disabilities.”

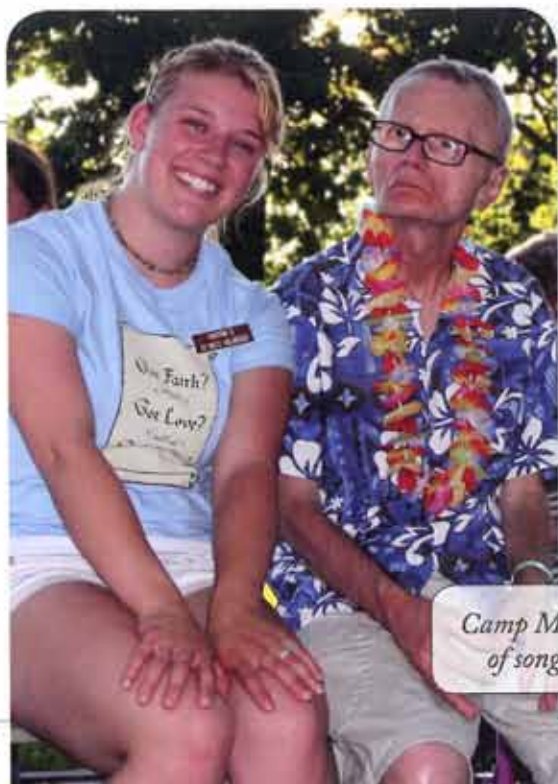
Fear of tough communication is just one thing that makes teachers afraid to teach people with developmental disabilities. There are many fears.

Orientation Tip #4: DEALING WITH FEAR

One of the most common feelings among first time teachers is fear, this is natural. “People are scared. They are afraid of the unknown; they are afraid that they are going to do something wrong,” says Winter.

“New teachers probably are somewhat hesitant or afraid they will make a mistake. They want to teach, but are afraid they won’t know what to do. The thing to remember is that everybody feels that way the first time they teach,” says Rice.

Simply, the most effective way of dealing with fear is jumping in and teaching someone with developmental disabilities. “If you spend time with someone with developmental disabilities, a relationship is formed,” says Rice.



The Last Day of Camp – It is Friday afternoon now. The servants say goodbye to their new friends, trees shading the soon-departing group from the hot summer sun. The fear is gone now, replaced by a mixture of joy and sadness.

“Generally the people that are the most fearful when they arrive on Sunday develop the strongest bond with campers,” says Winter. “By Friday, they’re upset and crying. They are emotionally attached to these new friends they’ve made.” ■

Camp Matz servant, Kristina, enjoys an evening of song by the campfire with Mark Matthias.