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PRACTICES + SKILLS FOR CATECHISTS & EDUCATORS

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## Video Guide

# Building Relationships and Community Mariette Martineau

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# Building Relationships and Community

## Ideas from the Video Presentation

### **1. Feeling Safe and Valued**

We need to have knowledge of each young person – how they learn, what is important for them in their life, who their families are – to build respectful healthy relationships with them. "We know from experience — and science confirms it — that a child who does not feel safe cannot learn. Safety comes before content. Always."

### **2. Knowing their Names**

Building relationships with our children and adolescents means knowing their names. How they say their names, how they spell their names. From day one, calling them by name. Knowing names enables us as catechists to build relationships that are authentic and meaningful because we know who they are.

### **3. Knowing their Gifts**

Knowing our children and adolescents means knowing the gifts they bring to our learning community and affirming them for those gifts. We take the time in our classes to invite learners to share the things they love to do, and to share how they think God has blessed them with gifts and talents.

### **4. Being Aware of How They Learn Best**

Building relationships with our learners is being aware of how they learn best, so that how we teach is not about what is most comfortable for us, but what is most comfortable for them. That is hard to do but is part of the call of being catechist and educator.

### **5. Enabling Access to the Learning**

When learners are struggling, the first question needs to be to ourselves: What do I need to change to enable each learner to have access to the learning they are being offered?

### **6. Having a Voice in the Learning**

Relationships happen when both learner and catechist have a voice in the learning. That is, we are building relationships in which a deep respect of learner thinking and experience is a norm. We do not ask questions for the sake of obtaining right answers, we ask provocative questions to enable a learner to engage in critical thinking which in turn deepens the respect between catechist and learner for both have an active role to play in the learning. In turn, the questions learners raise enable us to understand their thinking better, and in doing so to know them better.

### **7. Sharing Our Stories with Learners**

We build relationships with learners by bringing our stories into the learning too. When we share stories from our own lives or share our stories of faith it enables learners to see us as journeyers too. "We are not teaching information about God. We are introducing learners to a Person. And you cannot introduce someone to a Person you love without the whole of who you are showing up."

***No matter what we teach, or how we teach, the presence of Christ will be known through the relationships we nurture as we teach.***

# Relationship-Building – Checklist

*Use this checklist when planning a session, unit, or the start of a new year/term. It's organized around the seven relationship-building principles: safety, names, gifts, learning style, access, voice, and shared story.*

## 1. Feeling Safe and Valued

*"A young person who does not feel safe cannot learn. Safety comes before content. Always."*

- ☐ Have I greeted each young person personally before starting to teach?
- ☐ Do I know something about each young person's home/family situation that affects how they show up today?
- ☐ Is my room tone calm and predictable, or rushed and reactive?
- ☐ Have I checked in with any young person who seemed "off" recently?
- ☐ Is my correction/discipline approach protecting dignity, not just enforcing compliance?

## 2. Knowing Their Names

*"Knowing names enables us to build relationships that are authentic and meaningful because we know who they are."*

- ☐ Do I know how to pronounce every young person's name correctly?
- ☐ Do I know how each young person spells and prefers to be called (nicknames, etc.)?
- ☐ Am I using names consistently — in greetings, in questions, in praise, at dismissal?
- ☐ If new children or adolescents joined recently, have I learned their names yet?

## 3. Knowing Their Gifts

*"We take time to invite learners to share the things they love to do, and how they think God has blessed them with gifts and talents."*

- ☐ Have I created space for children or adolescents to share what they love doing?
- ☐ Do I know at least one gift or talent for each young person in my group?
- ☐ Have I affirmed a specific person's gift out loud recently — connecting it to how God made them?
- ☐ Am I giving children and adolescents different ways to shine (not just the same few each time)?

## 4. Being Aware of How They Learn Best

*"How we teach is not about what is most comfortable for us, but what is most comfortable for them."*

- ☐ Do I know the general learning styles/needs represented in my group (visual, hands-on, auditory, etc.)?
- ☐ Am I varying my teaching methods across a session or defaulting to what's easiest for me?
- ☐ Have I noticed which young people engage more with movement, art, discussion, story, or quiet reflection?
- ☐ Am I willing to adjust my planned lesson if it's clearly not reaching the group?

## 5. Enabling Access to the Learning

*"When learners are struggling, the first question needs to be to ourselves: what do I need to change?"*

- ☐ Have I identified any child or adolescent currently struggling to access the material?

- ☐ Have I asked myself what I can change (pacing, format, support) before assuming the struggle is the child's alone?
- ☐ Do I have a plan or accommodation for children or adolescents with particular learning needs?
- ☐ Am I offering multiple entry points into the lesson (not just one way to "get it")?

## 6. Having a Voice in the Learning

*"We ask provocative questions to enable a learner to engage in critical thinking... the questions learners raise enable us to know them better."*

- ☐ Are my questions this session designed to provoke thinking, not just extract a "right" answer?
- ☐ Am I making space for questions, even unexpected or difficult ones?
- ☐ Do young people have real opportunities to shape discussion, not just respond to me?
- ☐ Have I listened to their question or comment recently in a way that helped me understand *them* better, not just the content?

## 7. Sharing Our Stories with Learners

*"You cannot introduce someone to a person you love without the whole of who you are showing up."*

- ☐ Have I shared something real from my own life or faith journey this term (age-appropriately)?
- ☐ Am I presenting faith as something I live, not just something I teach?
- ☐ Have I let my group see a moment of my own doubt, growth, or wonder — not just certainty?
- ☐ Do they see me as a fellow journeyer, not only an instructor?

## Quick Pre-Session Prompt

Ask before every session: *Who in this room might not feel safe, seen, or known right now — and what's one small thing I can do about it today?*

## Planning Tracker

*Create a plan for developing your skills in building relationships with children. Complete this form at the beginning of your program or your year and then revisit it before the next program or midway through the year and then at the conclusion. Identify how you have grown and the areas for further growth.*

| Principle      | Where am I strong? | Where do I need to grow? | One action step |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Safety & Value |                    |                          |                 |
| Names          |                    |                          |                 |
| Gifts          |                    |                          |                 |
| Learning Style |                    |                          |                 |
| Access         |                    |                          |                 |
| Voice          |                    |                          |                 |
| Shared Story   |                    |                          |                 |

# Relationship-Building – Activities

## Building One-on-One Connection

**1. “Two Truths and a Blessing.”** Each person shares two true facts about themselves and one way they feel blessed/gifted by God. Simple icebreaker that surfaces both personality and faith identity.

- *Children:* Keep it concrete (“I have a dog, I like soccer, God blessed me with a big laugh”).
- *Adolescents:* Can go deeper (“I play three sports, I’m bad at math, God’s blessed me with patience for my little sister”).

**2. Partner Interview.** Pair learners up with a short list of questions (favorite saint, hardest part of the week, something they’re praying for) and have them introduce their partner to the group afterward.

**3. Name Tent Symbol.** Have each person decorate a name tent with a small drawing representing something about them — used all year for seating and as an ongoing conversation starter.

## Building Group Identity

**4. Class Covenant.** Co-create a short list of community agreements on day one (“We listen, we don’t laugh at questions, what’s shared here stays here”). Post it and revisit monthly. Adolescents especially benefit from writing and signing it themselves — ownership matters more at this age than at younger ages.

**5. Group Mural or Banner.** Over several weeks, have the class build a collaborative piece — each person adds a symbol, word, or handprint representing their faith or hopes for the group. Display it in the room as a visual reminder of belonging.

**6. Class Name or Patron Saint.** Let the group choose (or vote on) a patron saint for the year and learn that saint’s story together. Gives the class a shared identity beyond “Tuesday’s group.”

## Peer-to-Peer Trust Building

**7. Prayer Partners.** Pair learners to pray for each other by name during the week, rotating partners every few weeks so bonds form across the whole group, not just existing friendships.

**8. Trust Circle.** Sit in a circle and pass an object (small cross, stone). Whoever holds it shares one honest thing — a worry, a joy, a question — without interruption or judgment from others.

- *Children:* Simple prompts (“something that made you happy this week”).
- *Adolescents:* Can handle heavier prompts (“something you’re wrestling with right now”).

**9. Compliment Circle.** Occasionally go around and have each person say one genuine, specific thing they appreciate about the person next to them. Structure it enough to prevent awkwardness or exclusion.

## Collaborative Activities

**10. Service Project Partnership.** Work side-by-side on a recurring service activity (cards for a nursing home, food bags, letters to missionaries). Shared purposeful work builds bonds faster than sitting and listening.

**11. Small Group Bible/Discussion Teams.** Break into the same small groups of 3-4 for several weeks running (rather than shuffling every time) so learners build familiarity and trust with a consistent set of peers before rotating.

**12. Skit or Story Reenactment.** Have small groups act out a Scripture story or parable together. Requires cooperation, gives quieter kids a role, and creates shared memory and inside jokes that build group cohesion.

## Ongoing Community Rituals

**13. Sign of Peace Send-Off.** End every session with learners offering each other a simple sign of peace or handshake before leaving — turns dismissal into a relational moment.

**14. Birthday and Milestone Recognition.** Mark birthdays, First Communion, Confirmations, or other milestones with a simple blessing said over the person by name, maybe with the group's hands extended toward them.

**15. “Where Did You See God?” Sharing.** Periodically open with: “Where did you notice God this week?” Let it be voluntary, but model it yourself first so learners see it's safe to share. Adolescents often need a longer silent pause before someone will volunteer — resist the urge to fill the silence yourself.

## Leadership and Ownership

**16. Rotating Class Roles.** Give different learners weekly jobs (holding the Bible, leading opening prayer, being “table captain” for discussion). Being trusted with responsibility deepens investment in the group.

**17. Student-Led Teaching Moment.** Occasionally let a learner teach the group something unrelated to the lesson — a hobby, a fact, a skill — for a few minutes. Flips the power dynamic and shows their voice matters in the room. Adolescents especially respond to being treated as a contributor, not just a recipient.

## Cross-Age Note

Children build community mostly through repetition, physical closeness, and shared play — the same partner games and rituals done consistently. Adolescents build it through being trusted with real responsibility and real conversation — they bond more through shared purpose (service, leadership, honest discussion) than through games alone. Both groups need consistency: the deepest community forms not from a single great activity, but from the same handful of relational rituals repeated faithfully over the year.