



 NCCL
Accompaniment
in Faith

PRACTICES + SKILLS FOR CATECHISTS & EDUCATORS

Video Guide

Creating the Right Climate for Learning
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Creating the Right Climate for Learning

Ideas from the Video Presentation

One of the first tasks catechists and educators is to create the right climate—the right conditions—for faith to grow and flourish. Faith formation requires a climate that is conducive to an encounter with the sacred. In particular, the job of a catechist and educator is to create a climate of prayer.

1. Establishing Trust

Creating this climate begins by establishing trust. When learners feel safe and secure within a circle of trust, remarkable things can happen. As catechists and educators, we establish trust by being authentic: speaking credibly, acting reliably, being approachable, and focusing on the needs of others. To establish and build trust in your learning space, consider the following:

- ✦ With input from the learners, clearly articulate and clarify expectations and expected behaviors for all (including yourself).
- ✦ Consistently, fairly, and gently confront violations of such behaviors and affirm adherence.
- ✦ Encourage and protect honest and open expression.
- ✦ Encourage risk-taking, exploring, and curiosity, and do not fear failure or disagreement.
- ✦ Incorporate cooperative learning activities so children become comfortable working together.
- ✦ Share responsibilities and tasks with learners.
- ✦ Show compassion and empathy.
- ✦ Celebrate diversity.
- ✦ Admit your own mistakes, shortcomings, and limitations.
- ✦ Make yourself available (within reason).
- ✦ Generously affirm.
- ✦ Respect and enforce boundaries (physical, emotional, behavioral) that create a safe environment.

2. Creating the Climate to Encounter Christ

Another way to create the right climate in your learning space is by making it more conducive to an encounter with Christ. In other words, to the extent you can, prepare your learning space to feel less like an academic experience and more like a prayer experience. Faith formation should feel *less like class and more like Mass*.

3. Removing Distractions

Start by removing distractions and clutter. A clean and organized faith formation space is conducive to positive feelings and good behavior. It's to your own benefit to arrive early and tidy up your learning space so that it is conducive to maintaining focus.

4. Paying Attention to Ambience

Pay attention to ambience. We are called to provide “intimate settings” in which our learners can truly encounter the Risen Christ who sees each one of us as a “beloved disciple.”

5. Arranging Seating

Provide a welcoming seating arrangement. Arrange seating in a circle or semicircle (some arrangement other than rows). Your seating arrangement should encourage interaction and be conducive to prayer.

6. Providing Name Tags

Especially at the start of the year, provide name tags or name tents. Knowing and using the names of young people is a way of honoring them and letting them know that you really are interested in them. With young learners, it is also a way of keeping order in your faith formation space. If someone is misbehaving, it helps to be able to call him or her by name rather than saying “Hey, you!”

7. Displaying Your Big Idea

A catechist and educator should always know what the BIG IDEA or the main focus of the session is. A good way to announce this BIG IDEA is to arrive early and write, post, or display your BIG IDEA on the board, an easel, or a SMART Board, or include it in your PowerPoint slides. This way, when your session begins, you can refer to these images without turning your back on your learners to write.

8. Organizing a Prayer Center

Now for the centerpiece of creating a climate of prayer: organize a prayer center. In a faith formation setting, the central focus of your space should be Jesus. The best way to do this is to create a prayer center or a prayer table which opens our eyes to the sacred. Consider the following objects for your prayer center:

- ◆ a prayer cloth that reflects the color of the liturgical season
- ◆ a Bible and a Bible stand on which to enthrone God’s Word
- ◆ a crucifix
- ◆ a candle (preferably flameless)
- ◆ an icon or statuette
- ◆ a plant or flower
- ◆ a small bowl of holy water
- ◆ seasonal symbols (for example, an Advent wreath during the Advent season)

9. Displaying Sacred Art

In addition to a prayer center, and to the extent that you are able, display sacred images, sacred art, and sacred objects in your learning space. Today’s learners are more visual than previous generations so give them a feast for the eyes. These images tell stories from Scripture and the lives of the saints, they establish a climate of prayer, they reinforce your lesson, and they speak to the hearts of learners.

10. Introducing a Language of Mystery

Displaying sacred objects and images is just one example of how catechists and educators can and should introduce learners to a language of mystery—a language that we most often use at Mass. This is a language that goes beyond words and enables our sessions to resemble the Mass more than “class.” In addition to transforming your learning space and using images, signs, and symbols, consider the following ideas.

11. Integrating Music

Integrate music and singing in your sessions. Music touches and lifts the heart in a way that spoken words cannot.

12. Incorporating Rituals

Include rituals such as having learners participate in prayerfully setting up the prayer center to begin your session, greeting your learners with a ritual greeting such as “This is the day the Lord has made!” and having them respond, “Let us rejoice and be glad!” or having learners bless themselves with holy water as they enter and leave your learning space.

13. Planning for Silence

Plan for moments of silence which teach the virtue of reverence. You can pause in silence before beginning a learning activity or reading from a book, before a Scripture reading, or during prayer experiences.

14. Expressing through Movement

Invite children and adolescents to express themselves through movement and gesture such as involving them in processions in your learning space, inviting them to bow, before the enthroned Bible, having them make the threefold Sign of the Cross on their forehead, lips, and chest as a way of asking that God's Word be in their minds, on their lips, and in their hearts as the session progresses, and sharing a sign of peace with one another as they leave.

15. Engaging in Storytelling

Engage in storytelling which is an effective way to create a prayerful and inspirational mood. Storytelling creates what Christian author Nate Wilson refers to as "the aroma of the Gospel." As a catechist and educator, you are called to share three types of stories: Scripture stories, stories of the lives of the saints, and stories of your own journey of faith and discipleship.

Catechists and educators, in many ways, are teaching learners how to speak a new language: God's language, which is a language of mystery. At Mass, we rely on this language of mystery to create a climate conducive to worship. Bring this language into our faith formation spaces in order to create a climate of prayer that will enable our learners to encounter the Risen Christ.

Creating the Right Climate for Learning – Checklist

Use this checklist when setting up your learning space and planning a session — the goal is a climate that feels "less like class and more like Mass," where trust and an encounter with Christ can happen.

1. Establishing Trust

Trust is built by being authentic: speaking credibly, acting reliably, being approachable, and focusing on the needs of others.

- ☐ Have I co-created expectations and behavior norms with my learners (not just imposed them)?
- ☐ Do I consistently, fairly, and gently address violations — and just as consistently affirm good behavior?
- ☐ Am I encouraging and protecting honest, open expression in my space?
- ☐ Do I welcome risk-taking, curiosity, and even disagreement without fear?
- ☐ Have I built in cooperative learning opportunities this session?
- ☐ Am I sharing responsibilities and tasks with learners rather than holding them all myself?
- ☐ Am I showing compassion and empathy consistently?
- ☐ Do I celebrate diversity within my group?
- ☐ Do I model humility by admitting my own mistakes and limitations?
- ☐ Am I making myself reasonably available to learners?
- ☐ Am I generous with affirmation?
- ☐ Do I respect and enforce physical, emotional, and behavioral boundaries that keep the space safe?

2. Creating a Climate to Encounter Christ

Faith formation should feel less like class and more like Mass.

- ☐ Does my space feel more like a prayer experience than an academic one?
- ☐ Have I planned at least one element this session that shifts the tone from "classroom" to "sacred space"?

3. Removing Distractions

- ☐ Have I arrived early to tidy and declutter the space?
- ☐ Is the room free of visual/physical distractions that pull focus from prayer and learning?

4. Paying Attention to Ambience

- ☐ Have I considered lighting, noise, and overall mood — not just content?
- ☐ Does the space feel intimate and welcoming, not sterile or rushed?

5. Arranging Seating

- ☐ Is seating arranged in a circle, semicircle, or another non-row configuration?
- ☐ Does the arrangement encourage interaction and support a prayerful atmosphere?

6. Providing Name Tags/Tents

- ☐ Do all learners have name tags or tents, especially early in the year?
- ☐ Am I using names consistently — for connection and for gentle behavior redirection?

7. Displaying the BIG IDEA

- ☐ Have I identified the one BIG IDEA/main focus for this session?
- ☐ Is it written, posted, or displayed (board, easel, slide) *before* learners arrive?
- ☐ Can I reference it without turning my back on the group during the session?

8. Organizing a Prayer Center

The centerpiece of a climate of prayer — the focal point of the space should be Jesus.

- ☐ Do I have a designated prayer center or table set up?

Have I included seasonally appropriate items? Check what's present:

- ☐ Prayer cloth (liturgical season color)
- ☐ Bible + Bible stand
- ☐ Crucifix
- ☐ Candle (preferably flameless)
- ☐ Icon or statuette
- ☐ Plant or flower
- ☐ Small bowl of holy water
- ☐ Seasonal symbols (e.g., Advent wreath)

9. Displaying Sacred Art

- ☐ Have I displayed sacred images, art, or objects relevant to this session's theme?
- ☐ Do these visuals reinforce the lesson and speak to learners visually, not just verbally?

10. Introducing a Language of Mystery

A language that goes beyond words — resembling Mass more than "class."

- ☐ Have I planned signs, symbols, or sensory elements beyond spoken instruction?

11. Integrating Music

- ☐ Have I included music or singing somewhere in this session?

12. Incorporating Rituals

- ☐ Do learners help prayerfully set up the prayer center to begin the session?
- ☐ Do I use a consistent ritual greeting (e.g., call-and-response)?
- ☐ Have I included a ritual for entering/leaving (e.g., blessing with holy water)?

13. Planning for Silence

- ☐ Have I built in at least one intentional moment of silence (before a reading, activity, or prayer)?

14. Expressing through Movement

- ☐ Have I included any movement or gesture — procession, bowing, Sign of the Cross, sign of peace?

15. Engaging in Storytelling

Three types of stories to weave in: Scripture, the saints, and your own journey of faith.

- ☐ Have I planned a Scripture story for this session?
- ☐ Have I included a saint's story where relevant?
- ☐ Have I planned a moment to share something from my own faith journey?

Pre-Session Snapshot

A fast run-through before learners arrive:

- ☐ Space is clean and free of distractions
- ☐ Seating supports interaction and prayer
- ☐ Prayer center is set up and seasonally appropriate
- ☐ BIG IDEA is visibly displayed
- ☐ Name tags/tents are ready (if early in the year)
- ☐ Opening ritual, music, and moment of silence are planned
- ☐ At least one story (Scripture, saint, or personal) is ready to share

Planning Tracker

Revisit this checklist periodically — climate-building isn't a one-time setup but an ongoing practice that shapes how learners encounter Christ each time they enter your space.

Principle	Currently doing well	Needs attention	One action step
Trust-building			
Space & Ambience			
Prayer Center			
Rituals & Silence			
Storytelling			

Creating the Right Climate for Learning - Activities

Trust and Psychological Safety

- 1. "Our Circle" Covenant.** Co-create simple community agreements on day one and revisit them monthly.
 - *Children:* Draw pictures next to each rule ("We use kind words" with a heart).
 - *Teens:* Let them debate and word the covenant themselves; have them sign it.
- 2. Weekly Trust Circle.** Sit in a circle and pass a small object (cross, stone, shell). Whoever holds it may share one honest thing — a worry, a joy, a question — without interruption or feedback from others.
 - *Children:* Keep prompts concrete ("Something that made you happy this week").
 - *Teens:* Allow deeper prompts ("Something you're wrestling with right now").
- 3. Mistake Amnesty Ritual.** Occasionally share your own mistake or doubt from the week, then invite (never require) learners to do the same. Normalizes imperfection as safe, not shameful.

A Space Set Apart

- 4. Threshold Ritual.** Mark the doorway as a transition point — a small bowl of holy water to bless themselves entering, or a simple sign ("You are entering sacred space") posted above the door.
- 5. Prayer Center Build-Out.** Rotate 2-3 learners each week to reverently set up the prayer table (cloth, Bible, candle) as others settle in.
 - *Children:* Give each object a simple name and job ("This candle reminds us Jesus is the light").
 - *Teens:* Let them choose readings, symbols, or music tied to the liturgical season — ownership deepens investment.
- 6. Big Idea Unveiling.** Write the day's focus on a card and reveal it ceremonially rather than just posting it — a small "unveiling" signals this isn't ordinary information.

Encounter Through Silence and Senses

- 7. Sacred Pause.** Ring a small bell or chime before Scripture or a key activity, followed by silence.
 - *Children:* 10-15 seconds, paired with "hands still, eyes closed."
 - *Teens:* 30-60 seconds; frame it as a break from constant noise/notifications — many secretly crave this.
- 8. Icon Gazing.** Display a piece of sacred art. Ask only: "What do you notice? What do you wonder?" Let the silence do the teaching before any explanation.
- 9. Sensory Prayer Walk.** For a Scripture passage, provide different sensory stations (touch a rock for "the rock of our salvation," smell oil, hold bread) that learners move through slowly and quietly. Works well for children as tactile learning; teens often find it surprisingly moving if framed seriously, not "babyish."

Ritual and Rhythm

- 10. Call-and-Response Opening.** Use a consistent phrase weekly: "This is the day the Lord has made!" — "Let us rejoice and be glad!" Predictability builds a sense of sacred rhythm.

11. Threefold Sign of the Cross. Before the Bible reading, trace a small cross on forehead, lips, and chest — "that God's word be in my mind, on my lips, in my heart." A tactile, repeatable anchor for all ages.

12. Procession of the Word. A learner carries the Bible to the prayer center while others stand, then places it reverently on its stand. Physical reverence teaches faster than instruction alone.

13. Sign of Peace Send-Off Close every session with learners offering each other a simple sign of peace before leaving — ends class relationally, not just logistically.

Voice and Ownership

14. Learner-Led Prayer Moments. Rotate who leads the opening or closing prayer each week (written or spontaneous, their choice).

- *Teens especially* benefit from ownership — being trusted to lead deepens their sense of belonging to the faith, not just receiving it.

15. "Where Was God?" Reflection. After any story (Scripture, saint, personal), ask: "Where do you think God was in this story?" Then gently open: "Where did you notice God this week?"

- *Children:* May need sentence starters ("I saw God when...").
- *Teens:* Need permission and patience — don't rush the silence before they'll answer.

Story as Encounter

16. Three-Story Rotation. Structure storytelling across weeks: a Scripture story one week, a saint's story the next, your own faith journey another. Keeps content varied and models faith as lived, not historical.

17. "Aroma of the Gospel" Storytelling. Tell Scripture stories with full presence — voice, pacing, even simple props — rather than reading flatly. The goal is for learners to feel *inside* the story, not just informed about it.

Music and Movement

18. Anchor Song. Choose one simple sung phrase or chant used every week to open/close — repetition turns it into a marker of sacred time.

- *Teens:* Contemporary Christian music tied to the day's theme often lands better than traditional hymns alone.

19. Reflective Background Music. Play soft instrumental or worship music during journaling or silent reflection — especially helpful for teens who feel exposed by silence alone.

The Common Thread Across Ages

Children need shorter, more repetitive, highly sensory rituals; teens need the *same* sacred elements but with more ownership, more silence, and more trust that they can handle depth. Both groups are being taught the same "language of mystery" — just at different volumes.