

Module 4: Apply some healthy peer pressure

Session 1: Why you must put peer companions on your team

Objective: Learn why the powerful positive influence of peer companions is essential for your child catechumens.

On Thursday morning of the first week of middle school, my youngest daughter came downstairs proudly adorned in a new back-to-school outfit. However, her beautiful blue eyes were completely ringed in dark black eyeliner. When I told her to march back upstairs and take the eyeliner off, she sassily replied, “Mom, everybody wears it!”

Healthy peer pressure

Like most children and teens, she was influenced by her peers. The “peer pressure” can be both positive and negative. In children’s RCIA, we want to create an atmosphere where there is a kind of “healthy peer pressure” for the young initiation candidates. In other words, we want the baptized kids in the parish to have a positive influence on the kids in the RCIA.

Peer companions in RCIA

The church recognizes the importance of this peer influence. In fact, in the opening paragraph on children, the RCIA says, the children are:

strongly influenced by their companions and their social surroundings.

Shortly afterward, in paragraph 254, the RCIA says again that the children’s formation:

depends on the help and example of their companions.

And then again, for a *third* time we hear:

their initiation progresses gradually and within the supportive setting of this group of companions (254.1).

This third reference to companions is particularly important because it tells us that peer companions are not just an “extra” added onto the initiation process. Rather, peer companions are integral to the process.

Initiation of children takes place “**within**” the group of companions. The companions surround the candidates and walk along with them. But, just who are these companions?

Who are the companions?

The companions are the baptized kids in the parish. They are the candidates' baptized Catholic peers, even though the rite doesn't call them "peers." The rite says this:

Since the children to be initiated often belong to a group of children of the same age who are already baptized and are preparing for confirmation and eucharist.... (no. 254.1; Canada no. 244.1)

Elsewhere the rite refers to "their baptized companions from the catechetical group" (no. 293; Canada no. 269). In other words, **the companions are the parish kids who are in the religious education program or Catholic school.**

What do they do?

The main thing that companions do is, well, be companions. Just be there and walk alongside the RCIA candidate. Here are a few of the more specific things that companions do.

- Be a friend. Get to know the candidate.
- Participate in some or all of the RCIA sessions.
- Share their faith. Be willing to talk to someone the same age about their faith.
- Accompany the candidate to some parish functions: social, service and worship activities.
- Be a witness at the liturgical rites (more specifics about this in the next module).
 - At the Rite of Acceptance
 - Introduce the candidate to the parish
 - Sign the senses of the candidates with sign of the cross
 - At the Minor Rites of the Catechumenate
 - Extend their hands over candidates in prayer
 - At the Rite of Sending or Election
 - Give testimony as to how they see God working in their friend's life
 - At the Scrutinies
 - Lay hands on their candidate in prayer
 - At the Easter Vigil
 - Stand with their friend as a witness and companion
- Be a role model of a young Catholic Christian.

Let's look more closely at this last point.

Role models—it's common sense

Another way to look at companions is to see them as role models for the initiation candidates. The baptized Catholic kids provide an example of the Christian way of life. They show the candidates how to be an 8, or 10, or 15-year-old disciple of Jesus Christ. It's just plain old common sense that children and teens that are learning what it means to be Catholic Christians need to be around other children and teens who are Catholic Christian.

Fun Fact

It's both/and

When the RCIA talks about who influences children, it talks about parents *and* companions. The second time that parents and companions are mentioned together, companions are listed first—before parents (no. 254; Canada no. 244). Interesting! Typically in Catholic liturgy and theology, the order in which items or people are listed is intentional and purposeful.



Take the example of 15-year-old Tyler. As part of his catechumenate formation, he participated in some of our parish youth ministry offerings. Daniel was a high school senior who was a small group leader in youth ministry, and he came to some of our RCIA sessions. Daniel and Tyler also attended the same high school. During a discernment conversation I was having with Tyler he said, “I want to be like Daniel because he always seems so sure of himself and what he believes. He’s not afraid to speak up at school, at parties, wherever.”

Fun Fact

Older high schoolers often like to be peer companions for two reasons: 1) it’s the Christian thing to do, and 2) it looks good on their college applications!

Daniel was a positive influence in Tyler’s formation as a Catholic Christian. When our RCIA team discussed who might be a good companion for Tyler, Daniel’s name immediately came to mind. It was a natural fit. Daniel was already a small group leader in youth ministry, so he already had some contact with Tyler. We just asked him to give some “extra attention” to Tyler and to attend a few of our RCIA sessions. We didn’t make a formal “job description” for Daniel. The main thing is to create opportunities for RCIA candidates to be with their peers.

Soon we’ll look more specifically at how you create those opportunities for this “healthy peer pressure” to happen. Before moving on to the next session, though, please go to Exercise 1 and give some further thought to “healthy peer pressure.”

Session 2: Four places in your parish to look for peer companions

Objective: Explore multiple possibilities for locating companions for your child catechumens.

The RCIA tells us that companions are baptized children from the catechetical group (no. 254.1; Canada 244.1). Let's get more specific and describe who these companion children are. I will highlight four possibilities for companion children and give an example of each.

- Children from the religious education or youth ministry program
- Children who are preparing for confirmation and Eucharist
- Children from the Catholic school
- Children from a sponsoring family

Companions are children from the religious education or youth ministry program

Tony, Max, and Sam all played baseball on the same Little League team. This meant the three boys spent a lot of time together. Max and Sam were members of Our Lady of Refuge, and sometimes Tony came with them to church and even to religious education. When Tony said that he wanted to become a member of Our Lady of Refuge, it set the ball in motion for the beginning of children's RCIA for Tony and his family.

It's easy to see how Max and Sam were Tony's companions on the journey of Christian initiation.

Companions are children who are preparing for confirmation and Eucharist

This second example is really a subset of the first, since usually children who are preparing for confirmation and Eucharist are also part of the parish religious education program or youth ministry. So let's take an example from youth ministry this time.

Taylor's dad hadn't been to church in nearly 15 years, but for some reason he had decided now was the time. He was "making" Taylor go these youth ministry classes, and that's how Taylor had found herself in the sophomore youth ministry group at Our Lady of Refuge. The sophomores at Our Lady of Refuge were in the first of two years of confirmation preparation. When the Coordinator of Youth Ministry discovered that Taylor had not been baptized, he put a call in to Taylor's dad. This led to Taylor and her dad entering the "children's" RCIA.

In the broadest sense, everyone in the Our Lady of Refuge sophomore class was a companion to Taylor. But, in a more personal sense, it was a little bit later that Mandee and Allison became her truest companions.

Companions are children from the Catholic school

Carmen had been a student at St. Augustine Catholic School since kindergarten. However, now that she was in fourth grade, it was really bothering her that she couldn't go to Communion like the other kids. Something about fourth grade moved Carmen and her grandma to begin the children's RCIA. Carmen's Catholic school classmates were already her companions.

Companions are children from a sponsoring family

Connor really didn't know anybody at St. Patrick Parish. His dad and step-mom had recently gotten married, and now they wanted him to get baptized and become Catholic. The recent marriage was the catalyst for Connor to begin the children's RCIA.

Connor and his family were new to St. Patrick Parish, and there were no obvious companions for him. So in the initial conversation, I asked the parents if they knew anyone in the parish. Yes, Connor's dad worked with one of our parishioners, Troy Davis. The Davis family had two boys that were just slightly older than Connor. After some explanation, the Davis family became the sponsoring family for Connor and his family. The Davis boys were his companions.

Other scenarios for companions

These four examples are not the only scenarios for companions in the RCIA. The situations and scenarios can be as diverse as the RCIA candidates, the companions, and the parishes themselves. Do what works for your parish.

Nonetheless, here is one important companion lesson I have learned. You have to put effort and structure into the companion piece of RCIA. Do not think, as I have in many instances, "Oh, we have a friendly parish; the kids and their parents will meet people." And then leave the companion piece to chance. Then, what happens is that the RCIA families don't feel connected to the parish. Plus, they get to the place when it's time to pick godparents (prior to the Rite of Election), and they don't know anyone!

Therefore, think about how you can best connect the children in RCIA to their same-age companions. Turn to Exercise 2 to help you think about the companion piece for your parish.

The Catholic school

For Carmen, who attended Catholic school, her companions were ready made— for the most part. She was learning how to be Catholic Christian from the children she went to school with everyday. There is one large caution here.

We must remember that children are being initiated into the church—not a school. The children are being incorporated into the Body of Christ, which is embodied by the local parish that worships together on Sunday at Eucharist. They have to be a part of a parish and not only the school.

Sometimes a Catholic school is integral to the parish. But sometimes, particularly if it's a cluster school like St. Augustine, the school is fairly independent. In these latter cases, a child is drawn to the school community and may not have a good sense of belonging to the worshipping, eucharistic community.

In order to ensure that the inquiring child is bonding with the parish and not just the school, be sure to have companions that are parish-based in addition to the school friends. Here are some ways that Carmen got connected to kids at the parish.

- Carmen was already evangelized and quickly celebrated the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. She and her grandma started participating in Sunday Mass at St. Augustine where Carmen participated in the Children's Liturgy of the Word with other parish children.
- Carmen also was dismissed from Mass every Sunday along with three other child catechumens for RCIA dismissal catechesis.
- Carmen and her grandma were paired with the Graves family who had a fourth grade daughter and were members of St. Augustine Parish. (We'll talk about sponsoring families in the next session.)
- Carmen, her grandma, and the Graves family attended the RCIA catechumenate sessions.
- Carmen's school classmates and Addy Graves participated in the rites, including the Easter Vigil.

In addition, we also celebrated the minor rites of the period of the catechumenate with Carmen and her school classmates. This helped them to be more connected to Carmen's process of initiation. Furthermore, when there was a Catholic school Mass, Carmen was dismissed with a catechist, just like at the parish on Sunday.

Your parish

Your parish no doubt has a religious education program or Catholic school or both. How do the ideas for connecting companions presented in this session resonate with your experience? Please go to Exercise 3 for further reflection.



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Session 4: How to connect children in RCIA with other kids in the parish (Part 2)

Objective: Explore how to pair companions preparing for sacraments with your catechumens.

Another way to bring together children in RCIA with their baptized Catholic peers is to link children preparing for sacraments. After all, kids in RCIA, confirmation preparation, and Eucharist preparation are all preparing for the celebration of sacraments of initiation. The RCIA refers to this fact in National Statutes (these are rules for initiation written by the United States bishops).

Some elements of the ordinary instruction of baptized children before their reception of the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist may be appropriately shared with catechumens of catechetical age. Their condition and status as catechumens, however, should not be compromised or confused, nor should they receive the sacraments of initiation in any sequence other than that determined in the ritual of Christian initiation (National Statutes, no. 19).

Thus, we learn here that the church is urging us to catechize the children together, to the extent that it is appropriate. However, we are not to treat the catechumens as though they are baptized candidates for confirmation or Eucharist.*

Connecting children in RCIA with their companions preparing for confirmation and Eucharist

Then, what are some of the ways we can connect the unbaptized children in RCIA with the baptized companions that are preparing for sacraments of initiation? Here are some ideas:

- RCIA candidates and their parents participate in confirmation preparation sessions or Eucharist preparation sessions as appropriate.
 - Remember Taylor from Session 2? We determined that she would participate in all the confirmation preparation sessions in her parish. Those sessions were once per month, and she also participated in the RCIA sessions.
 - Remember companions Mandee and Allison, who were also mentioned in Session 2? We asked them to be the companions who gave “extra attention” to Taylor. They came to some of Taylor’s RCIA sessions and stood with her at the rites.
- RCIA candidates participate in confirmation retreat or first Eucharist retreat.
- RCIA candidates participate in service opportunities for confirmation candidates.

- Some of your parent sessions and sponsor sessions may be helpful for RCIA parents, depending upon whether they are more oriented toward spirituality of sacrament or information about a particular sacrament.

Connecting children in RCIA with companions in a sponsoring family

The first thing I want to say about this option is that it can easily be combined with all the other options for companions. I gave an example of this in Carmen from the Catholic school also having a sponsoring family. In fact, any one of the companion ideas can be joined with another one. As for sponsoring families, here are some ideas for connecting an RCIA family with a sponsoring family.

- The sponsoring family is friend, companion, and role model for the RCIA family. (See Rita Burns Senseman, *When Your Child Becomes Catholic: What Parents and Sponsors Need to Know* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000), pp. 31-36.)
- Like adult sponsors in the RCIA, have a clear “job description” of what you are asking the sponsoring family to do.
- Sponsoring family accompanies the RCIA family to parish social, service, and worship events.
- Sponsoring family attends some or all of the RCIA sessions.
- They stand up with the child candidate during the rites and give testimony.

Catechumens Are Different

Catechumens aren’t just another type of confirmation or first Communion candidate. Sometimes we want to “just baptize” a child, so they can “fit in” with all the other confirmation candidates or first Communion candidates. In this good-faith effort to be inclusive, however, the child can be short-changed. An unbaptized, uncatechized child needs a different type of formation than a baptized, catechized second-grader who has grown up in a Catholic family. That’s why the U.S. bishops tell us to “not compromise” their status as catechumens. And, **again they caution that only “some elements of the ordinary instruction”** are appropriate for the unbaptized.

A word about RCIA candidates and religious education

Some will argue that the best way to connect children in the catechumenate with the kids of the parish is to have RCIA candidates in regular religious education. I have heard stories from folks who say that this works very well. And, I agree, in some instances it does work well. However, there are three major concerns with this approach:

- 1) Typical religious education programs are written for children who were baptized as infants and who have been practicing the Catholic faith. Religious education textbooks are not designed for catechumens.
- 2) Asking a family to participate in RCIA *and* religious education is overly burdensome for any family.
- 3) Having an unbaptized child in religious education and then adding the liturgical rites of the RCIA is not being true to the guidelines given us in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. RCIA is more than religious education with rites added.

FUN FACT

Sometimes kids *want* to be in both the catechumenate and religious education. Kids who are very social and have friends in the religious ed program may want to go to both! Just don’t overload parents, especially those who may have recently returned to church.



In concluding this module on connecting RCIA candidates with their baptized peers, the most important thing to remember is that kids are influenced by other kids. Provide opportunities to allow that to happen, and don't worry about doing it all just right. There isn't a right way or a wrong way to include companions. In fact, there are pros and cons to each approach.

Turn to Exercise 4 for our online dialogue, and let's talk about those pros and cons.



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Session 5: Standing up for a friend

Objective: Learn what it means for the baptized companions to give “testimony” at the rites.

As we stood in the back of church, eight-year-old Pam was visibly nervous, fidgeting and prancing around her mom. We were waiting for Mass to begin and with it, the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens. Pam was being accepted as a catechumen and her mom, dad, and three girlfriends were standing with her. After the opening song, Fr. Tom came and asked the parents to introduce Pam. He then turned to Pam’s three girlfriends and asked them if they wanted to say anything about their friend. Sarah boldly took the microphone and added, “This is Pam, and she wants to join our church.”

With those words, the assembly spontaneously applauded, and Pam smiled, no longer fidgeting. The community had obviously accepted her as one of its own. Even though she didn’t use these words, Sarah’s presence and “testimony” told the assembly that Pam was her friend and that she would be a terrific member of our Christian community.

Here is a bit of the back story. Pam was a second-grader who became interested in church because her three best girlfriends were members of our parish. The girls served as Pam’s companions throughout the process. Sarah’s family was also her sponsoring family. Thus, when Sarah spoke of Pam’s desire to join our church, her testimony was credible and rang true to the assembly.

It’s pretty simple

Sarah’s words were simple. She spoke in her own words, and it wasn’t a big speech. Sarah and the other girls’ presence was in and of itself a testimony. Although Sarah’s words were simple, the meaning was clear and sincere: Pam has a genuine desire to join our community of disciples, and my friends and I attest to her sincerity. At this point in the process, the rite of acceptance, the main criteria for becoming a catechumen is a sincere desire and the beginnings of conversion. The girls could vouch for Pam.

At the same time, in order to vouch for Pam, the girls had to know her. In this case, that was fairly easy because Sarah and company had known Pam for quite some time. For a child who doesn’t know anyone in the parish, you will need to structure time for candidates to get to know their companions. Spending time together is the starting point for a relationship. And a relationship is necessary if the companions are going to provide testimony. Hopefully, the relationship develops into a friendship.

In addition to the simple testimony that Sarah gave, I suggest you consider a more extensive testimony, particularly if the companions are older than age eight. Notice in paragraphs 50 and 264 (Canada, 50 and

254) that the celebrant asks the candidates “to express their intention.” The companions can attest to the sincerity of this intention. So, for example, Sarah might also have said, “This is Pam, and she wants to be a member of our church. She has a lot of friends here, and she wants to learn more about Jesus.”

When you or the liturgist is choreographing this testimony, keep in mind these practical tips:

- Prepare the companion well in advance. Explain the importance of their role. Work with them on what to say at the rite.
- Have a wireless microphone with new batteries. Children must have a microphone in order to be heard. They must be heard in order for the rite to be effective.
- If they need it, let the companions use a 3x5 note card that contains their testimony. This helps alleviate fears of forgetting. Parents can be in charge of the note cards.
- Rehearse the rite with the companions, adult sponsors, and parents. The candidates don’t need to rehearse. They can rely on their parents and companions. In this way, the candidates enter more fully into the liturgical experience.

Testimony at the rite of sending or rite of election

In the first session, I gave a whole list of ways that companions can be involved in the liturgical rites. Probably the most important thing they do, however, is to provide testimony. The testimony described above is the first and simplest form of testimony. It’s even more important in the rite of sending or rite of election.

The Rite says on the day of election “the faithful, when called upon, should be sure to give honest and carefully considered testimony about the catechumens” (RCIA, no. 9.3, also see no. 283; Canada no. 9.3). Although the Rite doesn’t specifically call for companions to give testimony, I contend that the companions are certainly “members of [the] assembly” (no. 283; Canada n/a) who know the child catechumens well enough to give honest and credible testimony. Usually the testimony is given at the rite of sending instead of the rite of election.

The rite of sending is a celebration that takes place in the parish prior to the rite of election. Often, the parish hears testimony and “expresses its approval” of the catechumens and then “sends” the catechumens to the bishop for election. In Exercise 5, we’ll ask you to read more about the rite of sending and rite of election.

Here are two final tips for helping companions prepare and give testimony at the rites:

- Well in advance of each rite, meet separately with companions to help them prepare their testimony.
 - For the rite of acceptance, testimony should focus on the catechumen’s desire or intention..
 - For the rite of election, testimony should focus on how God is working in the catechumen’s life.
- Relax! Help the companions relax and speak from the heart. Their presence at the rites is the main part of their testimony.

Lastly, don’t forget to go to Exercise 5 for more on companions at the rites.

