

General Guidelines for the Atrium Environment in light of COVID-19 concerns

Here are some general guidelines that might help you think through your situation:

- Safety first! Infection prevention guidelines must be implemented as the experts have compiled them.
- Children can have set places for doing individual work rather than moving around the room using different spaces during a session.
- Use clipboards for the children's writing. They should each have their own.
- Instead of shared writing equipment, the children will each need to have their own set for a while. Remember to have extra ones for the children who lose their pencils!
- Have a plan for how sheets of paper that are written and drawn on throughout the atrium session are to be stored and at what time during the day they might be placed in binders or folders.
- Use observation to take notice of when children need to wash their hands, if surfaces need to be cleaned, if there is enough soap, paper towels, etc. It may be useful to create checklists in order to assist all adults to adjust to these new observational elements and routines.
- Try to prepare so that the children can be independent, even if they may need to be independent under supervision for as long as infection prevention requires, such as when washing their hands.
- Think through your timing, in order to ensure good flow in the working environment and at the various stations to avoid conflicts and unnecessary stress.
- Use Grace and Courtesy presentations to establish new routines and to explain to the older children why it is necessary to do these things. When possible, allow the children to take part in developing some of the routines and rules (make sure this is only in areas where different solutions are possible – do not present the opportunity to choose when there is none!)
- Remember, there are some places in the world where children work outside with atrium materials depending on where they are. If you have well-established routines for taking care of the materials, the children can work just as well with them outside .
- The infection prevention guidelines require us to clean materials and equipment regularly and between groups, but they do not say that cleaning needs to be done between each time a child uses the material. The most important thing is that the children have good hand hygiene. Of course, differences apply if we are referring to school-aged children or toddlers who are still putting things in their mouths.
- Include the children in the cleaning routines during or at the end of the atrium session. Find out what kind of cleaning they are able to safely do themselves and what the adult needs to take sole responsibility for.



- Make sure the children's hands are clean before a presentation, so that they touch the materials with clean hands. Set procedures to clean the materials frequently.
- Exercises of Practical Life and other practical work might need to be very limited and might simply connect all activities to the practical aspects of our work in the atrium.
- Before reopening, check your water system, HVAC, Gas, and other systems that have been shut down for a long period.
- Plan for more children and staff out sick or parents who do not want their children in the atrium.
- Consider whether there are some materials that could be made during the summer that might allow:
 - Children to take a material home to support remote learning
 - Children to have their own set to comply with regulations
 - One to be taken out of circulation for cleaning while another can be put on the shelf for use.

This list is far from comprehensive and it works best for catechists in connection with the core texts, catechist's formation course notes, and personal album. We should regard the current circumstances as an opportunity to better hone a sense of what is essential whether that be for how to best prepare a clean and sanitized environment that protects children and adults or in how the catechist presents the proclamations of the Christian message to children in the presentations and with materials.

Many catechists experienced this when CGS suddenly had to find ways to adjust with parents and children to other options for connecting aside from the atrium, Everyone needed time to settle into new at home routines. If we are aware of this, it can help us to start with small steps, to celebrate small victories, and to identify what worked well, so we can do more of it.

We must have faith that human nature will allow us to adapt and that our human tendencies will help us look for solutions. It is important that we not only see limitations, but that we stay positive and open to finding new possibilities within the restrictions we have been given. In order to do this, we must encourage and affirm each other, be open to possibilities for ways of offering the children the retreat experience they so often desire and find during their atrium sessions. It is important to share ideas and be generous, praise each other, and share this recognition with parents, parish leadership and pastors.

Sofia Cavalletti reminded catechists what brings us together, which applies even in these days:

"We all have a common spring at which we drink: the mystery of God filtered through the child. The face of God has many aspects, and what is shown to us through the child, is different from what is familiar to us as adults. We enter into a spontaneous relationship with God because it is He who first 'called us by name.'"

