



Ministering to Children with Disabilities

By: Julie Horner

The Americans With Disabilities Act defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits walking, speaking, seeing, or other major life activities. Approximately 49 million Americans are considered disabled by this definition, yet children's ministry participants often do not reflect this percentage.¹

Jesus modeled compassionate and purposeful ministry to individuals with disabilities. Based on His ministry to a blind man in John 9, here are six suggestions for effective ministry to children with disabilities:

Focus on the child, not the disability. From His busy schedule, Jesus paused to speak and minister to the man who was born blind. Using people-first descriptors shows children with disabilities you care about them. They will appreciate the effort you are making to see them as people.

Offer training for staff and volunteers. Jesus used this opportunity to train His disciples for effective ministry. During a church worker training session, define different disabilities and suggest ways to accommodate children with these disabilities. All God's Children by Gene Newman and Joni Eareckson Tada offers helpful insights for church workers on this topic. In public schools many children with disabilities are mainstreamed into regular education classes. Recruit volunteers to help in classes that have children with disabilities. Just having an extra adult worker makes mainstreaming children with disabilities possible.

Welcome children with physical disabilities through facility preparation. Unlike Jesus' day, today's laws govern building accessibility. How accessible is your church? Park your car in the handicap space and enter the building just as a person with disabilities would. (Better yet, use a wheelchair.) How much of your church can children with disabilities independently access? Ask ushers to accompany visitors with disabilities to their classes and note areas of concern. Consider relocating classes or making other accommodations so children with disabilities can enjoy full participation in children's ministry opportunities.

Remember families of children with disabilities have needs too. Reassuring the blind man's parents of their innocence, Jesus ministered to them. Children with disabilities and their families often grieve about the loss associated with a disability. But unlike the traditional grief process, this developmental grief indicates the family may suffer reoccurring losses as their child grows.² Offering caring concern and counseling if necessary will help families work through their grief.

Allow children with disabilities to use their talents for God. Following his healing the blind man proclaimed Jesus' testimony. Don't wait for healing to allow those who are disabled to serve in ministry. "Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22, NIV). Focus on what they can do and release them to serve.

Recognize God has a purpose for children with disabilities. Jesus acknowledged the man in John 9 was blind so the work of God could be displayed in his life. What a great way to view children with disabilities! Your children's ministries program can prepare children with disabilities to fulfill God's purpose for their lives.

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Footnotes

1. Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Jansen, *Barrier-Free Friendships* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 48.
2. John R. Ball, "Pastoral Help for Families of Handicapped Children," in *The Exceptional Child: A Guidebook for Churches and Community Agencies*, ed. James L. Paul (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1983), 135.