



## Welcoming Children with Special Needs and their families in Church School and Church

NAECED Conference January 2010

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know full well.*

*Psalm 139:14*

### Getting Started:

Types of Disabilities commonly found in your church school:

Physical Disabilities:

Learning Disabilities:

Developmental Disabilities:

What are your goals in including children with special needs in our church school?

- Students will find ways of knowing God
- Whole community understand that we have intrinsic value because we are children of God, not because of other factors
- Serving God through serving those marginalized or in need
- Providing support and respite to family
- Learning and growing in our own spiritual journeys through the ministry of the children
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How do we find out about children's disabilities?

- Family registration
- Observation
- Survey sheets

(Thought provoking question: Does it matter if children are identified? Are there reasons a family might choose NOT to tell you about a disability? Can accommodations still be made?)

Who is impacted by these disabilities?

Student  
Family  
Other Students  
Teacher



## How do we serve children?

We need to keep in mind the whole community of children.

### Classroom environment –

- Not overly or underly stimulating – enter at child’s level and watch for distractions
- Consistency important
  - routine of class
  - of people teaching/helping
  - consistent expectations
  - clear transitions – warning that transitions are about to occur

*tools: Schedule Strip, timers,*
- Open ended crafts and activities that invite participation at a variety of levels– no cookie cutter projects!
- Don’t require reading out loud
- Offer opportunities for both group and individual work
- Allow opportunities for movement
- Consider adaptations – “fidgets” for children who have difficulty sitting still while listening, adaptive scissors, etc.

### Handling disruptions in the classroom

- Nip it before it starts – have ways for children to enter the room positively and in control of themselves. Greet them at the door. Talk them down if necessary. Remember that the first person to arrive in the room will be in control of the class time.
- Have a cooling off spot that is not viewed as “timeout” or “punishment.” (The idea is to help the child get back in control, not to punish them. We can model the expectation that all of us sometimes need to regroup.)
- Check self and own engagement with the conflict. If a child truly has special needs, they are not trying to engage you in a power struggle. NO ONE wins a power struggle, it is a lose-lose proposition, so work on changing this mindset.
- Consider what is best for the whole circle.
- Be consistent – stay calm, act before you’re frustrated. How we treat each other as Christian people may be the biggest lesson that is taught on a particular day.
- Remember that your actions will speak as loud or louder than your words.
- Catch them being good! Reinforce the positive as often as possible.
- Reflect on your church school sessions with your co-teacher. Discuss issues that arise and brainstorm solutions. Consider whether something in the environment is contributing to the issue. How can we set kids up for success? Think ahead to next time – where do you foresee difficulties? What possibilities for adaptation exist?
- Certain children may need an aide who sits with them during class and helps them stay focused and participating. Ideally, this aide would be a consistent presence for them in the class.
- Pray for your class and students.

### Home Communication

- Set up home communication through use of registration forms.
- Communicate with parents about behavioral issues in a confidential manner. **Make sure they understand that you are not blaming them.** Help them understand that you want to be in partnership with them.
- Parents are likely to be your best source of information for strategies that work for their son/daughter. However, parents may be in different stages of readiness in their ability to talk about their son/daughter’s disability. Respect whatever stage they’re in.



## Resources:

Sheryl Burgstahler. Equal Access: Universal Design of Instruction: a checklist for inclusive teaching. University of Washington DO-IT program. 2009. [http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/PDF/equal\\_access\\_udi.pdf](http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/PDF/equal_access_udi.pdf)

Malesa Breeding, Dana Hood and Jerry Whitworth. Let ALL the Children Come to Me: a practical guide to including children with disabilities in your church ministries. Cook Communications. 2006.

Dontie Fuller. "Take One Step at a Time to Include Children with Disabilities in Classrooms and Worship," Episcopal Teacher. Virginia Theological Seminary. Spring 2005.

Carol Stock Kranowitz. The Out-of-Sync Child: recognizing and coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction. Skylight Press. 1998.

Barbara Newman. Autism and Your Church: nurturing the spiritual growth of people with autism spectrum disorders. Friendship Ministries. 2006.

Barbara Newman. Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities. CRC Publications. 2001.

Jim Pierson. Exceptional Teaching: A Comprehensive Guide for Including Students with Disabilities. Standard Publishing. 2002.

Jim Pierson, Louise Tucker-Jones, Pat Verbal, et. al. Special Needs, Special Ministry. Group Publishing. 2004.

Amy Rapada. The Special Needs Ministry Handbook: a church's guide to reaching children with disabilities and their families. CGR Publishing. 2007/

Thomas E. Reynolds. Vulnerable Communion: a theology of disability and hospitality. Baker Publishing. 2008.

Cynthia Holder Rich and Marth Ross-Mackaitis. Learning Disabilities and Your Church: including all God's kids in your education and worship. Faith Alive Resources. 2006.

Cindy Spencer. "Godly Play and Special Needs Children," The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Vol. 5. Living the Good News. 2003.

[www.keyministry.org](http://www.keyministry.org). An online site dedicated to helping churches welcome and include children with special needs and their families. Newsletters, toolkit and checklists for getting started.