

Every Child Welcome

*A Ministry Handbook for
Including Kids with Special Needs*

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Katie Wetherbee & Jolene Philo



Every Child Welcome: A Ministry Handbook for Including Kids with Special Needs
© 2015 by Katie Wetherbee and Jolene Philo

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr.
NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505-6020.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4350-3

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 / 5 4 3 2 1

*To those who were my students during my teaching career:
You taught me more than you will ever know.
~Jolene*

*To my wonderful parents, Mary and Barry Livingston,
who faithfully took me to Sunday School and who were
always certain that one day, I would write a book.
~Katie*

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Introduction

Jesus sets a high standard in Matthew 19:14 when He says, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” His invitation is inclusive. No gender is specified. The call is not limited to children who will sit quietly at His feet and listen, color between the lines, raise their hands and wait to be called upon, or who work at grade level. No child is disqualified because of preexisting physical conditions, mental illness, or behavior issues.

Jesus sets a high standard that can be difficult for children’s ministry volunteers with willing servant hearts, but without professional child development or educational training, to attain. Difficult, but not impossible. Because when God issues a command like “Let the children come unto me,” He equips people with willing, servant hearts to carry out His will.

Our Parenting Stories

We know this to be true because we are parents of kids with special needs. Katie’s daughter, Annie, had a stroke at the age of five as the result of a rare circulatory disease. The damage to her brain caused right-sided paralysis. Annie also lost her ability to speak. Treatment involved a ten-hour brain surgery and years of physical, occupational and speech therapies, which helped her to regain her strength and language.

Jolene’s son, Allen, had surgery for a life-threatening esophageal birth anomaly less than twenty-four hours after he was born. Complica-

Introduction

tions led to six more surgeries before he was five and a final surgery at age fifteen. He then lived with undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), caused by early, invasive medical treatment. The condition was diagnosed and successfully treated when he was a young adult.

How do we know God equips those He commands to do His will? Because neither of us felt qualified to train up our children with special needs as parents are commanded to do in Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it."

Even though we didn't feel qualified—to be honest, we felt young, scared, ignorant, overwhelmed, and unqualified—God equipped us to carry out his command. He gave us everything we needed to raise our children . . . who are now young adults.

God's Equipping

We met at a special needs ministry conference in Des Moines, Iowa in 2010. Katie conducted a workshop to help pastors and ministry volunteers understand and include families affected by disabilities. Jolene was there to sit at her book table—hopefully to sell copies of her first book for parents of kids with special needs—and to attend Katie's workshop.

Katie made a beeline to the book table and introduced herself. Jolene had attended Katie's workshop and loved what she had to say. Before the end of the conference, we exchanged email addresses and quickly became good friends. Maybe because we had a lot in common. After all, we were both parents of kids with special needs. We were both former public school teachers. We both had special education backgrounds. We shared a similar philosophy about inclusive education. And we discovered that though we had taught in different states, we had employed many of the same strategies to create inclusive classrooms for our students.

In emails and phone calls, we often brainstormed about how to equip children's ministry volunteers to create inclusive environments for kids with special needs. One of our ideas was to create a resource full of simple strategies volunteers could use to make a variety of children's ministry settings more inclusive and accessible for kids with special needs. That idea birthed this book.

The Goal of this Book

Because children's ministry workers are volunteers who may or may not have training in the field of special needs education, one goal of *Every Child Welcome* is to encourage quality teaching. The goal is accomplished when volunteers assess and understand each child's strengths and needs rather than focus on the child's diagnosis.

Why did we choose this goal? Because it follows the example of Scripture. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus interacts with people who are affected by physical and mental illnesses in the context of their strengths and their needs rather than in the context of a diagnosis. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul refers to his own personal weakness, perhaps what today would be called a special need, as “a thorn in the flesh.” Instead of giving a specific diagnosis, Paul says, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:8–9).

Jesus set a high standard with His command to bring the little children to Him, regardless of diagnosis. Children’s ministry volunteers can more easily obey Christ’s command and follow His example when they interact with kids in the context of their strengths and their needs, and when they are equipped. Our prayer is that this book will help equip you for the task. So let’s learn how to use this book to accommodate the needs of all the children who come to your church to meet Jesus.

How to Use This Book

Company’s coming!

These two words can evoke a variety of emotions.

- Joy
- Panic
- Irritation
- Excitement

Whatever our emotions when company’s coming, we as hosts must spring into action. We have tables to set, grocery lists to make and powder rooms to scrub. And, whether we’re serving pizza on paper plates or lobster on our best china, we have planning to do. Even the most inveterate hosts among us agree that when we can pause, pour a cup of coffee, and plan purposefully, our dinner parties are more enjoyable for everyone. Think of *Every Child Welcome* as your guide, written to assist in your purposeful planning in a variety of ways.

As a Planning Tool: Planning for children’s ministry programs is not much different from planning for a dinner party. We want our guests to feel welcome and nurtured, enjoy each other’s company, and be enriched and nourished by the conversation. Moreover, we want them

to leave feeling content and excited to return. When our guests have special needs, we must consider this in our preparation. Just as we create a menu to accommodate dietary restrictions, we must be sure that our children's ministry activities accommodate the unique needs of the children in our care. In doing so, we increase the likelihood that they'll digest the important concepts we're presenting. We want the hour we spend with them to increase their knowledge and nourish their souls.

As a Cookbook: Like a good cook who turns to a favorite selection of recipes to accommodate every guest who's coming to dinner, you can use this book to accommodate the children you work with. It provides a menu of helpful tips, activities, and information. As you get to know your students, you can choose activities that will enhance their learning, meet their needs and hold their attention.

As a Menu of Options: Do you want to create a welcoming environment before kids arrive? Then turn to chapter 1, *Setting the Table*. You'll find ideas about how to welcome children and set a positive tone in chapter 2, *Greeting the Guests*. Chapter 3 provides appetizers so kids can learn more effectively by connecting new information to what they already know. Chapter 4 explains how to create a positive environment so every child feels welcome. We have included main-dish strategies for reinforcing the main idea of a lesson, building background knowledge and reviewing important concepts in chapter 5. Chapter 6 provides a selection of side dishes: hands-on activities to supplement instruction and to increase attention and participation. For special days like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, turn to chapter 7, *Party Time Treats*, which describes activities to keep those days holy—and wholly understandable—to all kids.

In addition, chapter 8, *Service with a Smile*, is devoted to service activities, because we know that all kids—including those with special needs—can effectively serve the kingdom. We've designed strategies for wrapping up an activity effectively in chapter 9, *Washing Up*, and for providing reinforcement for continued learning at home in chapter 10, *To-Go Box*. Finally, because even the best cooks and children's ministry workers can get stuck in a rut, you'll find a menu of books, blogs, and websites in the resource section at the back of the book, so that you can supplement your understanding of disabilities, special needs, and best practices.

We hope this book will become just like that well-worn cookbook on your kitchen shelf, with dog-eared pages and your own notes scrawled in the margins. We also hope the children you are working with will learn some of these recipes by heart, so they can taste and see that the Lord is good!

Chapter 1



Setting the Table: Creating a Welcoming Space for Children

We've all experienced that awkward moment at a dinner party. We've gone through the buffet line and aren't quite sure where we're supposed to go next. We stand, uncertain between the dining and living rooms wondering what to do. Sit down and begin eating? Or wait until everyone has been served? Will we pray together first, or is this a mingling party where we'll stand around and eat? It can be distressing to even the most socially savvy party-goer. The bottom line is that we want our host and hostess to give us clear directions on what to do and where to go.

Planning for children's ministry activities is not much different from planning for a dinner party. We want our guests to feel welcome, enjoy each other's company, and be strengthened by our time together. Most of all, we want them to be excited to return.

Fortunately, we know more than we have ever known about how children learn and we understand their behavior much more intricately. This allows us to plan more proactively for our classes, worship services, and youth groups. However, before we even open our resource books or leader's manuals, we can plan for successful learning.

A Prayer of Preparation

Lord, as I open the leader's guides to plan for this week, I am aware of this wonderful opportunity to teach about You. I ask for Your guidance as I approach this task. You are a God of order. You created time and space and information. Help me to create a sense of order for these children so that nothing will distract them from learning about You.

Strategy 1—Creating a Team

As with most ministries, special needs inclusion works best when a cohesive team is in place. After all, we're the body of Christ, and we need the gifts of everyone to be a complete community. We only need to look to the longstanding public school method of identifying and educating kids with disabilities to know that a team approach works. Here are some tips for creating your team:

- *Identify stakeholders from all areas of your church.* This includes facilities, children's ministry, leadership (elder board or pastor), parents of kids with special needs, parents of typically developing kids, medical or educational professionals from the church or community.
- *Invite anyone who might be interested.* Remember, this is a ministry of *inclusion*. Begin your ministry with a culture of acceptance and model that everyone who has a willing heart has gifts that can and should be used.
- *Find another church with a similar ministry.* There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Invite the advice and counsel of other leaders, especially those who are connected in your community.

Strategy 2—Web-Based Communication Tools

When it comes to communication, our world moves faster than ever before. Gone are the days of telegrams and carbon copies. Technology can definitely enhance our ministry to those with disabilities. Consider the following online tools to see what might work for your team.

- *Ning.* Mike Woods, Director of Special Needs Friends Ministry at First Baptist Orlando, uses Ning with his ministry volunteers. He says, "It's a social networking site that, for our ministry page, is

‘invite-only.’ We can talk, share information, post training videos, and keep it only to members who are invited.” (www.ning.com)

- *Google+*. Another way to create online group communication. (www.plus.google.com)
- *Facebook*. This social media site has an option for closed groups which might be helpful for general communication between parents, volunteers, and Sunday school staff. Uses include posting Bible memory verses, links to curriculum activities or videos, and outlines of plans or upcoming events. (www.facebook.com)
- *Free Conference Call*. This recommendation also comes from Mike Woods: “We’ve been able to have volunteer or buddy meetings from the convenience of everyone’s home.” (www.freeconferencecall.com)
- *Yammer*. Laura Haas, who works in Children’s and Inclusion Ministry at Faith Family Church in Canton, Ohio, recommended this resource. (www.yammer.com)
- *Wiggio*. Our friend and colleague Sara Moses suggested this tool. She used it for several groups, including an inclusion ministry. (www.wiggio.com)
- *Live Binders*. This resource was recommended by Michelle Thomas-Bush, Associate Pastor for Youth and Their Families at Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. It allows you to upload docs, slide shows, links, forms, and other information to share with your team. (www.livebinders.com)
- *Google Docs*. This is another method of sharing information, including training materials, spread sheets, presentations, even brainstorming lists. Google also has a calendar feature that team members can access and edit. (docs.google.com)

Remember, you can use these tools for a variety of different reasons. One web-based tool need not fit all of your needs. As you peruse these sites, keep in mind that **privacy is paramount**.

In your ministry, you’ll be privy to sensitive information about children and their families. As such, you cannot rely solely on the privacy cap-

abilities of social media

When training volunteers, include a rule that forbids sharing ministry site passwords with friends, family, or colleagues who are not directly involved in the ministry. Privacy settings are only as sensitive as the people who are using them.

sites. **Your volunteer and staff training must include in-depth discussions about handling information.**

One final note: God created people long before computers ever appeared on the scene. So put people first. There isn't a high-speed connection anywhere that can ever replace human relationships. While technology, used well and wisely, can enhance communication, it won't ever replace community.

Strategy 3—Policies and Procedures: Create Them from the Inside Out

Katie filed into the conference room, along with other new hires at the psychiatric hospital. This was her first job, and she was excited to get started. She would be teaching in the acute-care classroom, as well as helping to design a new unit for young children. She and her new colleagues looked around anxiously and made polite small talk in hushed tones. The director of human resources finally entered the room.

The chit-chat ended as he launched into a litany of policies and procedures. The new hires watched a video that featured pretty, tanned actors portraying staff and patients. Scenes in the video showed laughing families, therapists and patients engaged in meaningful dialogue, and a staff-patient volleyball game, complete with laughter and applause.

Katie couldn't wait to get started. However, during the time she worked there, she experienced nothing remotely similar to the lovely infomercial. Later, she realized that the hospital was very high on external policies and procedures. Employees were told what to wear, how to speak, what to say in public about the hospital. It was rather like biting into a mouth-watering, chocolate frosted, cream-filled donut, only to discover sour jelly inside.

What does this have to do with starting a special needs ministry? Simple: Your policies and procedures must be developed from the in-

Sample Special Needs Ministry Mission Statement

Our Special Needs Ministry has a two-fold mission:

1. To help our church become a place where children with special needs and their families are welcomed and included as full participants in the life of the church.
2. To help children with special needs know, love, and share the Lord.

side out. Too often, we belabor the formation of policies, and become mired in the minutiae. We need to avoid this in order to formulate policies and procedures that will make sense. We can do this by identifying the heart of the ministry: its mission.

With your team assembled, discuss the mission of your ministry. It's rather like choosing your destination for a trip. Until you do this, it's impractical and frustrating to pack up the car and drive. It will be important to review your church's mission statement, as well as the mission statements of the church's ministries for children and youth. Savvy special needs ministry planners will also consider the mission statement for the adult education ministry, knowing that kids with special needs will transition to adulthood one day.

Strategy 4—Security Issues: How to Keep Safety First

Safety first! This motto used by Scout troops applies to ministry environments as well. Safety is an ideal that must be actively pursued, and consistently monitored, particularly when working with children who have special needs. Several aspects of ministry require safety inspections as well as careful planning.

Policies for Staff and Volunteers

All volunteers and staff must have a criminal background check prior to working with children. Although you've known Mrs. Ellis for decades and are sure she would never, ever harm anyone, you must show wisdom in staffing programs. Often, local police departments will help with the screening process, or churches can use a service like www.protectmyministry.com to obtain information.

In addition to a background check, volunteers should be trained to effectively and safely manage emergencies. If a child has a seizure or an allergic reaction, volunteers and staff will need to know how to care for the child and keep him/her safe until help arrives. By implementing training and even practicing procedures periodically, adults gain skills to anticipate and manage crises.

Finally, no child should ever be alone with an adult. The gold standard for safety in this area would be two supervisory adults who are not married to one another. Many couples enjoy teaching together, and this can be a very effective ministry for a marriage. If this is the case, be certain that the couple is not alone with an individual student. This protects both the child and the volunteers.

Facilities

Not all church buildings are accessible to those with physical disabilities. However, all buildings can be made safe. When planning for a program or class, be certain to assess the space for safety. The checklist below can help:

- Are outlets covered?
- Is the furniture in good condition? Can it collapse or fall over with normal use?
- Can you see every child in the room with the current arrangement?
- Is there a window to the hallway in each classroom door?
- Do windows/doors to the outside lock so that children cannot escape?
- Are scissors or other sharp objects placed away from kids' reach?
- Is there a bathroom or sink in the classroom? If so, how will this be monitored to prevent injury?

Staffing for Safety

Sometimes, the best way to provide security is by recruiting some extra volunteers. Safety patrol volunteers can be stationed at exit doors to be certain that kids don't leave the building. In addition, these folks can be assigned as rovers who move from class to class to provide additional behavioral support when necessary.

In addition to the safety patrol, consider policies and procedures for bathroom breaks and diapering. Each church handles this differently; some churches page parents for diaper duty while others have a diapering station in the nursery. When considering the needs of older children with disabilities, be sensitive to their emotional development as well as their physical needs. Creating a diapering station in an adult bathroom that is behind a partition can be one respectful way to manage this. A private room for this purpose can also be an alternative, though it is usually difficult to designate a room for this because of the demands for space. Whatever policy is adopted, remember that when volunteers or staff are changing diapers, they should not be alone with a child. This is a time when two adults, not married to each other, should be working together.

Safety procedures can be tedious and even uncomfortable to discuss. However, they set a tone of professionalism, care, and respect to which parents—and kids—will respond.

Strategy 5—Space and Materials Planning

Before a dinner party, we sometimes need to pay close attention to seating arrangements. For example, we know that Cousin Jeffrey likes to be seated on the end of the table; he's a lefty who doesn't want to bump elbows throughout the meal. And of course, we don't want Aunt Sally and Grandpa seated near each other. Remember last Thanksgiving when they had that debate about foreign policy? Aunt Sally locked herself in the powder room for forty-five minutes after that showdown. We also like to arrange our pre-dinner space so that guests know how to find drinks, appetizers, and comfortable seating—out of the way of the cook's last-minute preparations.

Set-Up

Similarly, when we plan for activities, we want the space to reflect our desire for children's comfort and learning. When kids enter, they should feel welcome and comfortable. Clearly defined areas with distinct purposes help kids know what to do and how to behave when they enter the room.

In addition, if you are planning special activities—for example a stage to act out a story, or a cave to help kids experience the empty tomb on Easter morning—the set-up should be done in advance. The most enriching activity can be ruined if kids lose attention while leaders assemble the activity. Finally, we know that seating arrangements can make a difference. Knowing how to group children in the available space can assist them with focus, cooperation, and learning.

Materials

Make a list of all the props, papers, art supplies, and books you will need for your activity. This might seem tedious, but consider our dinner party analogy: Everything runs much more smoothly when your ingredients, dishes, and place cards are at the ready. It's awful when the host of the party needs to run to the attic to retrieve a serving dish. By making a list and setting the table for participants, you ensure that everything needed is at your fingertips.

Strategy 6—Schedule and Transition Planning

An education mentor shared this bit of wisdom: "You have to plan every single minute. Kids get in trouble when they don't know what they're supposed to be doing."

We don't want kids to get into trouble, especially when we can prevent it. Thorough planning can eliminate many worries. To see how that happens, let's compare two activity plans for a second grade midweek program.

Plan One:

- Kids arrive, do worksheet
- Opening activity (procedure in leader's manual)
- Read Bible story
- Have kids write in their journals
- Talk about field trip to the nursing home (next week's activity)
- Work on group mural
- Discuss the importance of obeying God
- Clean up the room
- Sing closing song

Plan Two:

- 7:00-7:05** Kids arrive, write on Weekly News Board, work on tabletop activities
- 7:05-7:06** Transition to front of the room by playing Follow the Leader
- 7:06-7:10** Introduce the evening's topic, have kids pick color cubes from basket; break into small groups according to color to do opening activity (See leader's manual for activity)
- 7:10-7:20** Read the Bible story from manual; have kids write three facts in their journal. Stand and play Praise Ball (kids tell the group something they're thankful for when they catch the ball)
- 7:20-7:28** Return to seats while singing "This Little Light of Mine." In preparation for next week's service project (visiting the nursing home), practice introducing each other and asking getting-to-know-you questions.
- 7:28-7:30** Give verbal and visual directions for group activities. Transition to small group activity rotations (15 minutes each)
 - Small group discussion with leader (questions in manual)
 - Mural project with teen helper

- Free choice from the back table supervised by teen helper
- 8:15-8:20** Clean up, closing ceremonies
8:20-? *Veggie Tales* movie until parents arrive

Do you see the difference between the two plans? The first is an outline of activities that shows what thorough planning looks like. The second pays close attention to the situations where kids with special needs are most at risk: arrivals, transitions, and free choice.

The second plan seems tedious. But it works because planning arrivals, transitions, and breaks is just as important as planning your content. You need to plan out these procedures for your group so that everyone is on-task, engaged, and learning. This helps kids learn kindness, turn-taking, and respect. It helps them to function like a church family.

Strategy 7—Creating Quiet Zones: We All Need a Break Now and Then

Children's ministry activities can be crowded, noisy, confusing, and downright overwhelming for kids. More so for children who are sensory sensitive or unable to communicate their feelings effectively. A quiet zone or break zone gives these kids a place where they can calm down and regain a sense of security before rejoining the group.

How To Create a Quiet Zone

By thinking creatively and proactively, quiet zones can be incorporated into most children's ministry activities.

- A corner of a classroom can be fitted out with a portable screen to reduce visual clutter, a bean bag chair, some stress balls, and other soothing items.
- If space allows, a small classroom can be designated as the quiet zone. It can be available during noisy, large group activities such as Awana game time, youth group gatherings, or Sunday morning contemporary worship services. A small church in Wisconsin did this and stocked it with two gym mats, a mirror, chalk, markers, a weighted vest, therapy balls, and a mini-trampoline purchased using funds from a grant received from their denomination. Members of the congregation donated homemade afghans, a boom box, and a small pup tent.

- If you're taking children to someone's house, talk to the host beforehand about creating a quiet zone somewhere. You may want to ask parents to help stock the quiet zone: a cuddly toy, a blanket, or even an iPod for a child who responds well to relaxing music.
- For outdoor excursions, designate a particular place—perhaps a picnic table, a visible area a short distance from the main action, a shelter house, or even a section of the church bus—as the break zone. Stock a backpack with some of the more portable items mentioned above and place it in the quiet zone.

How to Introduce a Quiet Zone

Once the designated quiet zone is ready for use, train volunteers and children so they know how and when to use it. Explain its purpose to volunteers. Go over safety procedures and discuss how to monitor children. Allow kids an opportunity to try out the zone and become comfortable with both what the space is like and when to use it. This can be done during a get-acquainted tour with the child and parents (see Strategy 10—*Welcome Aboard! Planning a Church Visit for Children with Disabilities*, page 25), or during one of the first times a child attends the program.

For many kids, knowing a quiet zone is available eases their anxieties, and they won't need to use it. For others, the quiet zone allows them to participate in some activities they might otherwise avoid. The quiet zone speaks volumes to parents, too. Its presence tells them their children are valued enough to make them feel safe. Parents who hear that message are more likely to make the effort, bring their children to church, and encourage them to stay.

Strategy 8—Rooms that Make Scents

What happens when you walk past a bakery and inhale the aroma of fresh bread? You suddenly feel hungry. How about when you walk past a Christmas tree lot on a frosty morning and the smell of pine and cold fills your nostrils? Does it make you want to sing Christmas carols?

If ordinary scents and aromas can affect adults that powerfully, imagine what they do to children with sensory sensitivities and allergies. Kids on the autism spectrum are prone to sensory sensitivity to smells, also known as olfactory sensitivity, but sensory sensitivity also affects children with other special needs. Several simple modifications can be

made before kids walk through the doors to make the classroom space welcoming to sensory-sensitive kids and safer for those with allergies.

Educate and Advocate

Start by educating others in your church about sensory sensitivities and how they affect kids. Advocate for a children's ministry fragrance-free policy. Pass out notes at registration describing the policy. Ask the custodians to use scent-free cleaning products, scent-free soap, and paper products in the bathrooms. Remove air fresheners from the premises: free-standing, plug-ins, and aerosols. Also, ask others to refrain from using candles or incense.

Adjust Your Location

Ask for a classroom as far away from the bathrooms or kitchen as possible. Inside your classroom, use creative seating arrangements. Seat children with sensory sensitivities near a window so they can get fresh air. Seat them as far away from classroom aromas (craft table, snacks, children with body odor) as possible.

Adjust Your Hygiene Habits

Use scent-free toiletry products and refrain from wearing perfume, cologne, and aftershave lotion. Ask any volunteers working with you to do so, too. A classroom that accommodates for kids with sensory sensitivities encourages them to attend more frequently and makes participation much more pleasant for them. Any way you sniff it, it just makes *scents!*

How kids with olfactory sensitivity respond to scents:

- Fixate on a smell because it is overpowering
- Nausea
- Smell foods before eating and smell materials before using them
- Recognize smells before others

How kids with allergies respond to scents:

- Headaches
- Wheezing or difficulty breathing
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Sneezing
- Skin rash

Strategy 9—Other Sensory Issues

Worship leaders everywhere have heard it all before.

- The music is too loud!
- The music is too soft!
- Why do we need all these video screens?
- Can't we use more video?
- The lights during the sermon aren't bright enough!
- I can't concentrate on the pastor with all of the lights on in the sanctuary.
- Why are we using these chairs? The pews were much cozier.
- Can't we go back to using chairs? They're more comfortable than these pews.

It's impossible to keep everyone happy. We all have preferences about our church environment. From music to lighting to seating and volume, we know what we like. For some kids, however, these sensory components go beyond personal preference. Children with sensory integration disorder or sensory sensitivities can become anxious, afraid, or unbearably uncomfortable when the environmental input overwhelms them. While we can't predict or meet the needs of every individual, we can set up our rooms and programs to create a sensory-friendly experience.

Sound

Rather than having loud music playing when kids arrive, choose quieter, slower music. This will be easier for kids who are sensitive to sound, and even typically developing kids will respond to the more relaxed tone you're setting. In addition, use chimes or a train whistle as a signal for attention. Loud noises, such as clanging bells, buzzers, and even voices, can be difficult for kids with auditory sensitivities. During singing time, allow kids who have a sensitivity to noise to stand in the hallway; they can still see and hear the worship music, but the noise will be more manageable. For children with more pronounced sensitivities, consider offering noise-canceling headphones.

Visuals

We do love to decorate our classrooms. Bulletin boards, kids' artwork, and murals make the space welcoming and attractive. To avoid having too much of a good thing, implement some of these tips.

- As you decorate, leave some uncluttered space for the eyes to rest.
- Put out just a few decorations at a time and rotate in new ones when the previous ones come down. This can make the room more visually appealing to all kids, and communicate a sense of organization.
- Choose neutral or muted tones if you have the opportunity to choose colors for a new space. While bright colors are fun, they can be overwhelming. Allow color to come in on posters or bulletin boards.
- Consider lighting choices carefully. Fluorescent lights are inexpensive and widely available, but they are also overwhelming for kids with sensory sensitivities. Incandescent bulbs are preferable. If you have fluorescents in your current space, remove some of the bulbs to reduce the glare. You can also purchase filters or materials to make light-softening filters at www.educationalinsights.com.

Textures

Children with sensory processing disorders often struggle to feel comfortable with certain textures. As a result, parents of kids with these issues embrace tag-free clothing, as the feel of a tag can be irritating or painful for their child. To offer “tag-free” comfort at church, try these strategies.

- Provide comfortable places for kids to sit. Bean bag chairs and rockers can offer a soft place to land.
- Offer choices during activities that involve textures. For example, a child might choose to color with markers rather than finger paint.
- Allow children to refuse snacks or bring their own; eating involves textures, too.

When we consider these sensory issues, we can set kids up for a more relaxed and comfortable time in church—a place where we want everyone to be comfortable.

Strategy 10—Welcome Aboard! Planning a Church Visit for Children with Disabilities

For children with disabilities, new experiences (such as coming to church) require some extra planning. Often, when a student with special needs visits a new place or experiences a change in routine, he or she

experiences anxiety. This can set the child (and teachers and classmates) up for failure ...and his parents for isolation and disappointment. Offering an opportunity to practice new routines and experience unfamiliar settings can greatly increase the likelihood for success.

Consider, for example, an experience recently created at the Philadelphia International Airport for families affected by autism. Families come to the airport, check in, go through security and board their plane. Dr. Wendy Ross, who designed the program, described the economic impact of difficult travel: "These families [affected by autism] are not going out.... So for businesses, that's a huge loss." Dr. Ross also mentioned that the goal of the program is to educate both airline officials and families, giving them strategies "to build a bridge between them."¹

When families affected by autism don't buy airline tickets, purchase goods and services, or book hotel rooms, it certainly does affect the economy. When they don't come to church, it affects the body of Christ. We're incomplete.

Build a Bridge

In order to build a bridge, we can provide an opportunity for children with autism, sensory issues, or other behavioral special needs to *practice* coming to children's programs, thus allowing them to become familiar with the building and routines. This simulation should take place on a day or evening when the building is relatively quiet. The experience might include the following:

- Checking in at the information/name tag table
- Entering the classroom or activity space
- Reading the schedule for the activity
- Listening to music
- Looking at pictures of other children in the program
- Working on a small craft or coloring sheet
- Taking a bathroom break (if the child needs assistance, two adults or a parent should be present)
- Praying together
- Enjoying a snack
- Reading a Bible story
- Saying goodbye and leaving the building

1. <http://www.abc-7.com/story/13938553/program-helps-autistic-kids-handle-airlines?clienttype=generic&mobilecbypass>, accessed February 3, 2014.

Build a Short Bridge

All of this can be accomplished in twenty to thirty minutes. Although this investment of time is a sacrifice, it will likely pay huge dividends for everyone, as the child will be better prepared to attend children's ministry

programs. In addition, the child may begin to recognize the children's ministry wing as a supportive, safe place. The parents will hopefully enjoy the luxury of an easier drop-off time, along with the ability to blend in and perhaps even sip a cup of coffee before attending adult church activities.

Bridge Building Safety Tips

Tip 1: Before sharing photos of other children, obtain signed photo releases from parents.

Tip 2: Always have two adults or a parent present when assisting children in the bathroom.

Strategy 11—Proactive Communication with Parents

Every child is unique, and so is every parent. Thus, parents' communication styles and expectations may vary widely. Some parents might come to you with more information than you think you need. Others will drop off their child without a word, just a weary look of relief. A few might even show up on Sunday morning, and with palpable frustration say, "Here, you deal with him for a while."

Special Needs Ministry Covenant

Research about parent-teacher relationships indicates that shared expectations lead to more positive, collaborative problem-solving and higher rates of learning for children. That's why it's important for us to communicate clearly about our plans for kids' programming, rules for behavior, and also our own need for information. One way to do this is by providing a covenant like the Special Needs Ministry Covenant, which can be found in Appendix A (page 165). It clearly lists the rights and responsibilities of every member of the ministry team, including the child.

Letter of Introduction

In addition to an agreement like this, you can communicate proactively in more general ways. For example, send a letter of introduction prior to the program year. In this letter, invite parents to call or email you if they'd like to share information about their children. In this letter, also indicate that you are very interested in learning about

each child's strengths, as well as any special needs they might have. This underscores your awareness of special needs issues, as well as your willingness to learn about each child.

Classroom News

While individual conversations provide valuable information to volunteers, parents will often benefit from general classroom news as well. Create a private Facebook page or publish a newsletter to inform parents of upcoming events and provide ideas for reinforcing lessons at home.

Positive, proactive communication takes planning and patience. However, this investment of time will likely pay great dividends in relationships which ultimately benefit the kingdom.

Strategy 12—Extra, Extra, Read All About It

Have you ever counted the number of people your students and their families meet between the front door of the church and your classroom? The number may be surprising, even overwhelming. It may make you wonder how to make all those people part of an unofficial and effective church welcoming team. The weekly bulletin and church newsletter can be a good place to begin. Here are a few ways to use these familiar tools to promote special needs ministries and educate your entire church family:

- Ask the person who creates the weekly church bulletin and/or monthly newsletter to include a special needs ministry announcement in every issue. The sidebar has several examples.

Special Needs Ministry Announcements

Sample One: The members of _____ Church welcome people who live with disabilities. Please ask a greeter, usher, or the welcome booth host if you need any assistance. You can also call the church office to discuss your needs or send an email using the contact information on the front of the bulletin.

Sample Two: Our church is committed to fulfilling Jesus' command in Matthew 19:14 to let the children come to him. We welcome children with special needs to worship with us and attend children's ministry activities. To learn more, contact _____ by phone (000-000-0000) or email (childrensministry@yourchurch.com).

- Write a short "Did you know?" special needs filler for the monthly newsletter. See the sidebar for examples.
- Offer to pen a special needs column for the newsletter. If once a month is too much, how about once or twice a year?
- Once you've taken advantage of paper-and-ink options, move on to electronic options young parents love. If your church has a website, ask the webmaster to add any of the above to it. Ditto for the children's ministry page on the website and the church Facebook page.

By using both hard copy and electronic options, you can deliver two powerful messages to two important groups. You increase special needs sensitivity and education within the general congregation. And you let families of kids with special needs know they are valued and welcome members of the body of Christ. Now that's a special needs win-win situation for sure.

Monthly Newsletter Special Needs Filler Samples

- *Did you know* some children with special needs are sensory sensitive? They perceive sounds, smells, lights, textures, and flavors very intensely and may be scared or repulsed by them.
- *Did you know* some children are highly sensitive to sound? They may wear headphones during worship to make participation more comfortable.
- *Did you know* some people with special needs in our church can't control their emotions or speech? When they speak or shout during worship, know that the joyful noises they make are sweet to God's ears.
- *Did you know* that many children at _____ Church live with food allergies? That's why our nursery and children's ministry programs offer allergy-free food options for kids allergic to nuts, eggs, dairy products, soy, and corn.
- *Did you know* that _____ leads our special needs ministry? Please call her at 000-000-0000 for more information about how we serve children with special needs.

Strategy 13—Book Talk: Beefing Up the Special Needs Section of Your Church Library

During Jolene's years as an elementary teacher, she welcomed students with a variety of special needs into her mainstream classroom. She often read carefully selected children's books to her students to demystify special needs and encourage children to be patient and compassionate with one another. You can accomplish the same goal by beefing up your church library's selection of special needs-related books. Begin with children's books, but if possible, also add books of interest to adults who want to learn about special needs and books that offer support to special needs families.

Start by contacting the person in charge of ordering books for your church library to explain your goals. Offer to prepare a book wish list to be used when ordering new books. If you get the okay, here's a good book list to get you started:

For Younger Children

Just the Way I Am: God's Good Design in Disability; Krista Horning (Christian Focus Publications, 2011)

In Jesse's Shoes: Appreciating Kids with Special Needs; Beverly Lewis (Bethany House, 2007)

A Friend Like Simon; Kate Gaynor (Special Stories Publishing, 2009): Autism Spectrum Disorder

My Friend Isabelle; Eliza Woloson (Woodbine House, 2003): Down Syndrome

Ellie Bean the Drama Queen: A Children's Book About Sensory Processing Disorder; Jennie Harding (Sensory World, 2011)

Thank You, Mr. Falker; Patricia Polacco (Philomel, 2012): Dyslexia

For Older Children

Window Boy; Andrea White (Bright Sky Press, 2008): Cerebral Palsy

Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio; Peg Kehret (Albert Whitman & Co., 1996)

No Library at Your Church?

Go to your public library, research their special needs offerings, and present the public librarian with your wish list. Ask the person in charge of the newsletter at your church to feature a special needs book from the public library each month.