

Including Children with Special Needs in the Life of the Church



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 **DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES**
The United Methodist Church

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God calls us for a purpose. God has shown, time and again, how God calls those who seem to be the least likely candidates and uses their willingness and talents to further God's kingdom. God, thankfully, views his creation with eyes set on possibilities. We, too, can do so with all the children who enter our congregations, as long as we remember to keep our eyes turned the same way.

According to the 2010 US census, almost one in every five Americans has some type of disability. (www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/income_wealth/cb08-185.html) When we look at these census figures through kingdom eyes, we realize that almost twenty percent of the American population is differently abled, but *perfectly made in God's image and ready to use the gifts God has given them to serve God*. As the church, we need to be ready to make the paths for discipleship unencumbered and welcoming.

In this resource, you will find information about:

- Who Is Coming? Identifying Populations
- Identifying the Needs of Exceptional Children
- Identifying the Needs of Parents and Families
- The Basics of Classroom Set-Up
- The Basics of Classroom Management
- The Basics of Adapting Curriculum and Activities
- The Non-Negotiables for Including Those with Special Needs and Their Families

Who Is Coming? Identifying Populations

Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most. The private parts of our body that aren't presentable are the ones that are given the most dignity (1 Corinthians 12:22-23, CEB).

All people, at some point in their lives, experience some challenge that has an impact on their routine. Exceptional children may experience one or more challenges that have an impact on their daily lives. There are several broad categories into which these challenges can be grouped.

1. Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities:

These refer to challenges in adaptive behavior (skills needed to function effectively in everyday life) in addition to difficulties in cognitive functioning (e.g. problem solving, reasoning, and comprehension). Down Syndrome, other sources of mental retardation, and traumatic brain injuries are included in this category.

2. Physical Disabilities:

These refer to challenges that affect a person's daily functioning, stamina, or coordination. Physical disabilities can occur on their own or with another disability. Physical disabilities include hearing impairments, vision impairments, cerebral palsy, seizure disorders, those requiring occupational (fine motor skills) or physical (gross motor skills) therapy, severe food allergies, and celiac disease.

3. Behavior/Emotional Disorders:

These refer to challenges that cause children to have difficulty building and maintaining appropriate social relationships. Children may display inappropriate behaviors and reactions to otherwise benign interactions or have a general mood of aggression, depression, or unhappiness. These disorders include attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, panic disorder, some mental illnesses, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

4. Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorders:

These refer to a complex series of disorders that affect a child's ability to build and maintain social relationships, tolerate typical activities within his/her environment (e.g. textures, sounds, lights), effectively communicate desires and needs. These disorders may affect sleep and gastrointestinal function. These include autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome.

Identifying the Needs of Exceptional Children

“I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me” (Matthew 25:40, CEB).

Everyone is able to participate in the life of a church. A few well-planned modifications will ensure that you are meeting the needs of exceptional children while highlighting their talents.

1. Considerations for those with Developmental/Intellectual Disabilities.

Those with developmental/intellectual disabilities can easily be included in classroom activities, large-group programs, and worship. Keep the following in mind as you plan.

- a. **Speed:** Keep a steady pace, but one that allows the person time to digest what is being said. A little extra time will go a long way in someone’s ability to understand and remember what you have said.
- b. **Auditory Memory:** Oftentimes, people with these types of challenges have a hard time remembering what was just said. Be prepared to repeat directions, as needed. It can also be helpful to ask children to repeat what you told them. Keep in mind that they want to remember, but need some extra time to do so.
- c. **Repetition:** Many people with developmental Intellectual disabilities have problems with memory. Repeating a concept a few times in a handful of different ways makes it more likely that people with a developmental/intellectual disability will remember and understand. They are able to meet goals and be disciples! Giving them some extra time with a concept will help ensure that they incorporate it into their lives.
- d. **Connections and Experiences:** Try to connect as much of what you are doing with what they have already experienced. When children can draw upon what they have already done, they can better understand what you are discussing.
- e. **Multiple Pathways:** Try presenting the same idea in a few different ways. Using an artistic project, a game, and a picture sequencing activity can all reinforce the same concept. The possibilities are limitless! Dramatic storytelling, game shows, sculpting, recreating a scene with blocks, researching and rebuilding a model of where Jesus preached, and creating a class picture book are a sampling of what can be done.

2. Considerations for Those with Physical Disabilities.

Those with physical disabilities can easily be included in classroom activities, large-group programs, and worship. Keep the following in mind as you plan.

- a. **Location of Materials:** Keep needed materials within easy reach. Not only will you increase the amount of time you are able to spend on an activity, but you will also eliminate any worry of those with motor issues having to navigate while carrying tools.
- b. **Clean from Cross Contamination:** For those with severe food allergies and celiac disease, cross contamination can be deadly. Be sure to keep surfaces clean so that any allergen (for food allergies) or gluten (for those with celiac) doesn’t get on to their snacks or tools. Even a small trace can set off a serious reaction.

- c. **Space Around Tables, Chairs, etc:** Keeping walkways clear of obstacles gives those with gross motor issues a chance to navigate independently.
- d. **Soft Surfaces for Landing:** If someone suffers from a seizure disorder, be prepared with some soft blankets or mats to place around him or her until the seizure stops. Such preparation can help reduce injury. (Never place anything inside the mouth of someone who is having a seizure.) Sometimes people with mobility challenges fall. If you are able to have some carpeting, it can help soften falls.
- e. **Soft Surfaces for Sound Absorption:** Carpeting and pillows can help absorb extra sounds, making it easier for those with hearing impairments to focus on important voices. Additionally, pay attention to surrounding noises. Placing someone with a hearing impairment near a praise band is going to greatly reduce that person's ability to filter out what he or she needs to hear.
- f. **Adaptations to Games:** Before beginning a game, be sure to consider what needs to be adapted so that everyone can fully participate. If someone has fine motor issues (e.g. difficulty holding a pencil because it is too narrow), consider the size of game pieces. Sometimes it is hard to keep one's body movements in a small area because of gross motor issues, so plan for alternatives to picking up a playing card or placing a puzzle piece in a small area.
- g. **Bold Colors and More Pronounced Nuances:** For those with vision impairments, the size and color of print can greatly affect success. Use dark colors (e.g. black, red, and purple) in activities. Larger typefaces make it easier for those with vision impairments to perform activities on their own. Ask children where they prefer to sit.

3. Considerations for Those with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders

Those with emotional/behavioral disorders can easily be included in classroom activities, large-group programs, and worship. Keep the following in mind as you plan.

- a. **Collaboration:** Ask the family what works for them. Always approach conversations with the desire to partner with the family. Together, you can find out what triggers reactions for the child and how best to help him/her.
- b. **Respite:** Sometimes, the family has had a difficult time before getting to you that morning. View that session as a time to give both the family and the child a respite from difficulty. The goals we meet may not be the ones we intended that day, but they are the ones that are needed.
- c. **Consistency:** For children who experience difficulty with socially appropriate reactions, consistent cues help coach them through difficult sessions. Code words or a tug on the ear can be pre-arranged signals to cue children into what is actually happening. Additionally, consistent reactions from adults help the children gauge the social cues and appropriate reactions. Have some consistent, calm, short responses that positively redirect behavior to help guide the children. (For example, "We will shake the person's hand" or "We will ask them to quiet their voices, please.")
- d. **Plan Ahead:** Before you start a session, be sure to think through any action or activity that could trigger a reaction. If you need to adapt the activity, do so. Be ready to give the child advance warning and discuss appropriate responses. If a child has ADHD, be

sure to provide opportunities to give him/her positive redirection in activities and ways to check in with you for feedback. If you know that an activity will be stimulating, give the child an index card that clearly and succinctly lists what needs to happen so the child can redirect independently.

- e. **Provide Additional Opportunities:** For children who have attention or hyperactivity issues, realize that they may not fit the traditional mold. They need opportunities to move and to receive positive feedback/redirection back to the task at hand. Consider posting a visual schedule so the children know what to expect and where they should be.

4. Considerations for Those with Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Those with autism or autism spectrum disorder can easily be included in classroom activities, large-group programs, and worship. Keep the following in mind as you plan.

- a. **Eliminate the Overload:** For those with autism, sensory issues cause major problems. It can be very hard for them to stay with a group if it is too loud, if there are too many displays in the room, if bright lights flicker, or if the temperature is too extreme. Keep the extras to a minimum. Ask the children and the family what bothers them so that you can set the stage for success.
- b. **Get the Background:** Sometimes people with autism will use phrases that seem out of place for the social situation. Ask the child how it relates to what it going on. This allows you to help the child make connections and to gain insight on how he/she sees the situation.
- c. **Silent Cheers and Fair Warnings:** Loud noises can be quite disturbing for those with autism. Consider this when planning large-group activities. Easy adaptations include silent cheers (instead of loud hurras), high fives, and warning the child if he or she is going to be in a situation where loud noise will happen (for example, praise bands).
- d. **Lots of Positive Discussion:** Make your group a safe place to get information. Discuss the talents of each member and refocus conversations that deal with the behaviors of those with autism along these lines. Be sure to discuss this about everyone, not just the children with autism. If the conversation is ongoing and open, the chances of gossip and misunderstanding decrease.
- e. **Teach the Desired Response:** One of the hallmarks of autism is the difficulty with interpreting social interactions. Quiet coaching in desired responses can go a long way in helping the child negotiate social situations in positive ways.
- f. **Be Prepared with Proper Staffing:** Having an extra servant team member/staff member working with your group will enable you to provide individualized attention when needed. Consider a hall monitor who can keep an eye on the comings and goings of programs.
- g. **On the Move:** Sometimes children with autism feel the need to leave classrooms and large groups. Determine why this is happening (some possible reasons are the need to escape from stimuli, the desire to find out information, and the desire to be in a favorite place), and make adjustments. Some ways to make the adjustments are to eliminate the overwhelming stimuli, schedule a time for the child to visit a favorite place, or provide ways to seek answers to questions within the classroom. Be sure to ask family members how they handle the situation. If you have a child who is “on the move,” be sure to dress so that you can move after him/her quickly.

Identifying the Needs of Parents and Families

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their hard work. If either should fall, one can pick up the other. But how miserable are those who fall and don't have a companion to help them up! (Ecclesiastes 4: 9-10, CEB)

Parenting is a blessed responsibility. However, there are times when parents get worn down or exhausted. Parents of exceptional children are not exempt. Sometimes, the needs of their children are intense and require more than we know. Brothers and sisters also feel the impact of having exceptional siblings. This is not to say that parents and siblings do not love the child or resent the fact that there are special needs! Be sure to remain in conversation with the family so that they know that you are there to provide fellowship and support. Some things to keep in mind when working with families are:

1. Partnering:

Parents and family members spend much time with the child with special needs. They are the experts in what is needed. Be sure to approach conversations with the intent to partner, not lead. You want to listen to what they know and what they need.

2. Respite:

The special needs of a child can lead to exhaustion for family members. Your church's programs can be a respite for the parents, enabling them to take a little time together to reconnect and recharge. This does not mean that the parents do not love their children. It simply means that, like all parents, a brief respite allows them to return to their children, ready to love and care for them.

3. Compassion:

There are times when people say things that they do not mean. Remember that parents of children with special needs may be exhausted. Do not assume that they do not love their children. Compassionately listen and determine what help the church can provide them.

The Basics of Classroom Set-Up

You must not insult a deaf person or put some obstacle in front of a blind person that would cause them to trip. Instead, fear your God; I am the LORD (Leviticus 19:14, CEB).

A classroom should be a place of shalom and fellowship—a place that allows for growth in discipleship. The best investment for the classroom is the time spent pulling it together so that everyone in the group can learn and grow together. Some tips for building a space where everyone, regardless of ability, can feel comfortable and supported are:

1. Clean, Tidy, & Safe:

Keeping the room clean means that surfaces are wiped down after use, and debris and dust are swept and thrown out. Cleaning helps eliminate the risk of cross contamination for those with celiac and severe food allergies. Keeping materials tidy makes it easier to locate them when needed, leading to less idle time. Regularly checking, repairing, and replacing furniture and materials ensures that your facility is ready to welcome all and keep them safe.

2. Cooperative and Individual Workspaces:

Providing spaces for group and individual work makes flexibility easier. Sometimes children need to have some time to gather their thoughts or work through a puzzling issue. Providing children with a quiet space gives them the opportunity to do so without singling them out. Group activities can take place around a table or on a clean floor space. There is no need for fancy set-ups; just a location that is clean, safe, and accessible.

3. Quiet Space:

Sometimes children need a quiet spot to refocus or pray. Set up a small area in the room that allows for this. Provide prayer beads or other tactile tools, along with some paper and pencils to enable children to express what they need. This area can be shared with the individual work zone, if space is an issue. Consider providing a small cloth that children could hang over the backs of their chairs to signify that they need to be by themselves for a bit.

4. Tools Easily Accessible:

No one wants to waste time trying to find what he or she needs. Stashing needed supplies within reach prior to the start of a session makes it easier to move seamlessly from activity to activity. Adult attention does not need to be taken away from children to find and gather supplies. Additionally, keeping what is needed nearby provides a level of safety for those who have mobility issues.

5. Not Too Stimulating:

For children with sensory issues, autism, or ADHD, deciding what from the environment they should focus their attention on can be difficult. Keep displays to a minimum, limit extraneous noise, and remember to plan ahead to help the children know what is essential to your activity.

The Basics of Classroom Management

Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain (Isaiah 40:4, CEB).

Keeping a classroom humming along with peace, excitement, and positive activity takes forethought and planning. Successfully managing all the different personalities, talents, and needs is important to building the fellowship of your group. A few considerations will go a long way toward meeting these needs.

1. Expectations, Not Rules:

We all respond better when we know what is expected of us, as opposed to what we are not allowed to do. Consider what is important to help your group's path to discipleship and help them do so through **expectations**. Presenting these as *we will vs. we can't* allows the children to know what is expected and how they can meet the expectations.

2. Govern the Behaviors of ALL Classroom Participants:

Expectations are for the adults and children!

3. Make a Covenant:

Covenants are in the Bible. Since we are kingdom people, we use kingdom language to help our children.

4. Broadly Phrase Statements:

Keep statements phrased so that multiple behaviors (including ones that you will never think of until a child does them) can be grouped together.

5. Limited Number:

People remember chunks of information. Keep your expectations no higher than what can be counted on one hand.

6. Write an Expectation Covenant Together:

Consider these phrases:

- We do our best.
- We keep one another safe.
- We use kind words.

7. Church Decisions:

Make sure you talk with church leadership and key allies within your church. Get them on board with what is expected. Be sure to have a discussion about what behaviors are considered non-negotiable. The more people who support your expectations, the better the success.

8. Be Sure to Tell the Parents:

Not only should parents see the expectation covenant posted in your classroom, they should hear about it during a class orientation time.

Basics of Adapting Curriculum and Activities

*Listen, my people, to my teaching; tilt your ears toward the words of my mouth
I will open my mouth with a proverb.
I'll declare riddles from days long gone—
ones that we've heard and learned about,
ones that our ancestors told us.
We won't hide them from their descendants;
we'll tell the next generation
all about the praise due the LORD and his strength—
the wondrous works God has done (Psalm 78: 1-4, CEB).*

No one person fits into the same mold as another. (Thanks be to God!) Because of this, we cannot expect every activity or lesson to fit the needs of each young disciple who enters our programs. There are many easy ways to make sure we are tailoring our activities to fit the group that we have.

1. Same Concept, Different Levels:

Everyone can meet similar goals using his or her talents. We need to provide different activities around the same concept to make this happen. Put together two or three different activities to augment the main Bible lesson of the day. Think outside the box! Try sculpting projects from homemade play clay, playing cooperative games, storytelling through finger puppets, using flip books created by a small group to retell a parable, and making butcher paper murals. These activities allow children to engage with the lesson according to their talents.

2. Positive Interaction:

Church is one of the last places where children can regularly interact with multiage groups. When you plan your activities, don't forget to include time for different ages and abilities to work together and learn from one another. There is much value in the personal relationships that we are able to foster.

3. Directions for All:

When we have multiple activities going at one time, it is always good to have small index cards placed around the room to clearly describe the activities. No one likes to be confused. It is also helpful for children who have memory or attention difficulties. Knowing that they can easily recheck the directions provides them with a comforting safety net.

4. Large Group vs. Small Group:

Plan a mix of activities. Some people thrive in large-group listening sessions. Some need small-group or individual work to interact with what was introduced in a large group. Planning for a mix of the activities not only ensures that you meet these needs, but ensures that you model corporate prayer and Bible lessons that happen in worship services.

5. Get Ahead of the Game:

Proper planning takes time. Tweaking a few details on a Sunday morning is fine, but the whole of the lesson should be in place beforehand. Consider planning seasonally, firming up each month, and having definite activities together four days before your session.

6. Build in Individualized Attention:

Have at least two adults with each group of children (Safe Sanctuaries!). That will ensure the flexibility to have guides who can circulate among the children. When you plan small-group activities, one adult can remain at an activity center while another checks in with the children. Or, if the small-group activities are self-directed, both adults can circulate. Be sure to get to each child that you know will need attention, but aim to spend some time with every child. The attention that each child needs may vary from week to week, so be prepared to spend more time with one child and check in less formally with other children.

7. Peer Buddies and Mentors:

Sometimes we are blessed to have youth and adults who would like to help out in classrooms or other church activities without making a long-term shepherding/teaching commitment. These youth and adults can be wonderful buddies or mentors for children who need consistent individualized support. They can stay with the children as they go through activities, helping them as needed. Not only do they provide needed support, they build relationships. Be sure to check in with the buddies/mentors to update them about the activities.

Non-Negotiables for Including Those with Special Needs and Their Families

Pleasant words are flowing honey, sweet to the taste and healing to the bones (Proverbs 16:24, CEB).

Children with special needs and their families need for us to make our churches and programs welcoming and inclusive. Remembering some key ideas will go a long way toward making them feel comfortable and welcome.

1. **Everyone Can Participate:**

Never believe that there is an activity that a child or family cannot join in. The church just needs to figure out how to make it accessible. Sometimes there are portions that are difficult, but prior planning can provide for a similar, concurrent activity. Sometimes it takes a different mindset for others in the church community to accept this; but as children's ministers, we can teach people as we modify.

2. **No Gossip/No Social Media Discussion:**

Never discuss anything about anyone in your program. Don't put anything on the Internet. Confidentiality is a must. Any respect and trust that has been built between a church community and a family can be obliterated by a few uncaring or unthinking words.

3. **Set People up for Success:**

If you know that an activity includes something that will be non-inclusive or that will trigger an inappropriate reaction, plan ahead. Either change the activity, add in an alternative, or be prepared to positively coach and support the child through an appropriate reaction.

4. **Refocus on and Remember the Good:**

Everyone makes mistakes. God is the ultimate model of helping people turn poor decisions into actions that glorify God. Children need to know that we will help them come out of quagmires and get them back on the right path. Don't remind them of what they have done wrong. Help them refocus to make the situation better. Not only will they remember how to come out of a problem, they will know that they have another chance to recover. (Thank you, Jesus.)

5. **Forgive, Learn How to Modify, and Move on:**

Sometimes events within the classroom rattle us. Children do not intend to upset us, nor do they understand how their behaviors affect us. The only behavior you can control is yours. After an incident, figure out how to change what you are doing so that the child can participate positively again. Make modifications and move on.

6. Sometimes a Break Is Needed:

Sometimes we are not equipped to keep a child safe in certain situations. You may need to take a *short* break to regroup and reconfigure. Not only will a few weeks provide you with time to properly plan and staff, but the child will have time to develop. A few weeks in the life of a child are huge to his or her maturity.

Including Special Needs Children in the Life of the Church is a resource developed by Elizabeth Christie through Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church to assist teachers and leaders of children in the area of faith formation. You will find this resource helpful as you provide intentional and radical hospitality to children with special needs and their families. Included is information on identifying the needs of parents and families, classroom setup and management, and also adapting curriculum and activities. Permission is granted for leaders to make copies of this material for use in annual conferences, districts, and local congregations of The United Methodist Church. For further information regarding this material or use of this material, please contact Melanie C. Gordon, Director of Ministry with Children, Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church mgordon@umcdiscipleship.org.

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