

Welcoming Children with Disabilities

Providing a warm and welcoming environment in our children's ministries for children with disabilities is an important way to affirm that *all* of our children receive God's covenant promises and serve in God's kingdom.

Your own acceptance of children with disabilities is the most important factor in helping the child to be accepted by the group. It's natural to have some feelings of uneasiness about working with children who have disabilities, but these fears will quickly disappear as you gain some experience. Seeking the advice and help of the child's family is a first critical step. Family members and other resourceful people in your church family can help you meet the child's needs with sensitivity.

Here are some general tips:

- Get to know the child as a unique person—you'll soon realize the child is more like other children than different. Eye-level contact and a warm smile can communicate an open invitation to get acquainted.
- Use age-appropriate language and activities.
- Don't do anything with the group that one child has no chance to do successfully.
- Don't feel sorry for the child. Respect the child's need to develop independence; be patient and praise the child's best effort.
- Talk to the whole group about the child with disabilities. Consider whether this is best done in the child's presence or absence, but stress that it's okay to be different; point out that we each have things that we struggle with, whether they're visible or not; and talk about how everyone can be loving and kind.
- Keep communication open and honest between you and the child's family. Request information from the family and offer your support.

Additional suggestions below will help you minister with young children who have four specific types of disabilities. Just keep in mind that each child is an individual, and that you and the child will discover together what works best.

Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities affect a person's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, or do mathematical calculations. Preschool and kindergarten children need lots of encouragement and praise so they can experience the joy of learning new basic skills.

In your group avoid putting an individual child in the spotlight. For instance, rather than asking each child to recite memory work, call on small groups (of varying ability) to say it together. Pair up children to help each other on tasks that may prove difficult to one of them alone.

Allow plenty of time for a child with learning disabilities to respond to a question, and provide visual prompts if necessary. Use contrasting backgrounds to display visuals. Avoid distracting background noise. Repeat directions and memory work often and in short sections.

For younger children, provide individual help with tasks that require eye-hand coordination; use large crayons and markers for drawing. Guide the child during physical activities. Use bags to organize the child's take-home papers and any other projects.

For older children, it's also helpful to break tasks into smaller steps. Repeat directions or write them on a chalkboard. Provide reading markers (note cards, bookmarks, or rulers) to focus on the text, and let the child read along while listening to a taped story. Introduce the key points of a story, and repeat these points during the summary time. Offer a choice of activities.

Attention Deficit Disorders

Children with attention disorders may be hyperactive, easily distracted, and/or impulsive. The terms Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may be used to describe the child's difficulty with staying on task. Many of the things that help the child with attention disorder will benefit all children: smaller classes, quieter classrooms, routines, limited distractions, praise rather than criticism, friendship, peer helpers.

If your group is large, consider dividing it. If this isn't feasible, ask for an adult volunteer so that you can work in smaller groups (or one-to-one if necessary) for some of the activities.

Establish regular patterns and routines. The way your curriculum structures the sessions should help you establish these routines. Younger children will benefit from using the same song to open your session or repeating the same greeting to introduce story time. Listen to stories on a CD or tell them to the children yourself. See the session plans for additional ideas. Keep instructions and rules simple, and then be firm about your expectations. Try to maintain face-to-face contact with a hyperactive child, especially when moving from one activity to another. Remember to keep your attitude positive—this will encourage the other children in your group to accept the child too.

For more ideas, check out [*Learning Disabilities and the Church*](#) by Cynthia Holder Rich and Martha Ross-Mockaitis. This brief and practical manual helps churches better serve youth and children with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders.

Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disabilities cause delays in most areas of development, including development of intellectual and social skills. Techniques suggested for the child with learning disabilities will also help the child with intellectual disabilities. Repetition of songs, memory work, key points in the story, names of others in the group, and routine directions will help the child learn and become a part of the group.

Motion activities can be fun for the whole group to practice over and over and can reach the child who is nonverbal. Find other simple ways—such as pointing and nodding—to communicate with the child who is nonverbal, or learn some of the basic signing language the

child may also be learning. Mainstreaming of a young child often works best with the help of another adult and is recommended until the child is about age ten.

The older elementary-age child may benefit more from a program such as Friendship, which is designed especially for children with intellectual disabilities. (If your church or community does not have a [Friendship program](#), contact Friendship Ministries for information and sample curriculum materials or visit their [website](#).)

Older children may be somewhat self-conscious about talking about or asking questions about a disability and will need your help in finding a comfortable way to break down barriers. Encourage the child with a disability to become the "expert" teacher to help others understand and to give you tips for helping him or her learn in the least restrictive way possible. You will find much joy in reaching out to welcome the child with intellectual disabilities. Each child can experience God's unconditional love through your faith in action.

Physical Disabilities

A wide variety of conditions and diseases challenge children with physical disabilities. Some are present at birth; others are a result of disease or injury. The disability may interfere with performance in some important area of development.

Since physical disabilities can present a wide range of needs, it's especially important to work with the family to understand the child's specific needs. You can start by providing a safe physical environment and lots of encouragement for the child to be as independent as possible. Enlarge visuals; sign some of the songs. Be aware of food allergies or diabetes when serving snacks. Direct children's natural curiosity about wheelchairs or other adaptive devices by letting children touch the special equipment (with the child's permission), or by asking the child to demonstrate how it works.

Hearing Loss

Every child who is hard of hearing has unique needs, and each one requires different attention to those needs. Talking to their parents will help identify those needs and how to address them. Asking the child directly may not be the most effective. Most children with hearing loss want to fit in, so it is quite common for them to say nothing about their hearing loss or their difficulty in understanding speech. They can be very self-conscious of their hearing loss, especially when it is constantly pointed out by their friends at school and when they get special attention from teachers and adults because of it. Therefore, it is important to be conscious of their disability but subtle in addressing it. It is important to recognize that their hearing loss is part of who they are, but it is not what defines them. Above all, it is key to remember the importance of sharing the Word of God. If we are attentive to their needs in regards to hearing the Word, God will do the rest.

Some key things to consider in a classroom with a child or children with hearing loss:

- Be sensitive to how children who are hard of hearing feel. Many are embarrassed to ask for help or admit that they can't understand speech.

- Be aware of children with hearing loss who may be present in the classroom. Hearing aids may not be visible (or may have been taken out). Children who are intent on other people's faces may be reading lips. Children who look bored or inattentive may not be hearing you and may be afraid to tell you so.
- Arrange the room so everyone can see each other.
- Ensure that only one person speaks at a time. Encourage the children to raise their hand before responding and point to the person speaking so the hard of hearing can look and lip-read. In a large classroom, ask the child who is speaking to stand. These visible cues can help direct the attention of children who are hard of hearing in the right direction.
- Repeat what was said. Children with hearing loss may have caught part of what was said, but not all of it. Since it is impossible for them to tell you what part they missed, avoid asking questions like, "Did you understand what was said?" or "What did you miss?" These questions not only draw attention to their hearing loss but are impossible to answer.
- To ensure they heard and understand, find appropriate times to ask children who are hard of hearing to repeat things back to you, without calling attention to them.
- It is difficult for children with hearing loss to have to adapt quickly to many different people speaking. Everyone has an accent or speaks differently, and this is true for lip-reading too: everybody's lips shape words differently. If children are being encouraged to read passages from the Bible, have the reader stand or come to the front so all can see and hear. In addition, encourage children to follow along together, with each person underlining the passage with his or her finger. This is really helpful for children with hearing impairments, and when everyone does it, it helps them feel that they fit in.
- When other children are talking and/or reading, make sure that they keep their head up and speak clearly. Make sure that they are not chewing gum, candy, or other food, or covering their mouth while speaking. This ensures that the children who are hard of hearing have the opportunity to lip-read.
- As much as possible, keep distractions to a minimum. Background noise is especially difficult for children with hearing loss to tune out. Ensure that the classroom door is closed to keep out extraneous noise.
- Not all children with hearing loss are afraid to say they can't hear. Encourage them to interrupt if they can't understand and ask for things to be repeated. Say this to the entire class; everyone has difficulty hearing sometimes.
- It can be very difficult for children who are hard of hearing to do two things at once, like write down words the teacher is saying or look up multiple Bible passages while the teacher is talking. It's very difficult for children with hearing loss to listen and write at the same time. Thus, give the class time to record the important word(s) or find the passage before reading or talking.

Show great compassion to children with hearing loss. Most of them are too embarrassed to ask for any help or admit that they have hearing difficulties. Continue to pursue better ways to serve them in your classroom. Talk with their parents and/or consider using some sign language if the child is comfortable with it. Think of ways to communicate learning that is not verbal or based

on sound (i.e. learn a song using sign language; teach stories with pictures). Keeping in mind the end goal of learning and understanding the Word of God, be creative in trying new ways of learning and teaching that do not rely solely on sound and hearing.

In addition to the ideas expressed above, these resources may provide helpful ideas for your Sunday school program:

[*Helping Kids Include Kids With Disabilities*](#) by Barbara Newman is a wonderful how-to manual for teachers of children in church programs. It offers practical suggestions and short session plans for helping groups of elementary-age children understand and welcome into their group a child with a particular disability.

[*Autism and Your Church*](#) by Barbara Newman is very helpful for teachers who have kids with autism or other disabilities in their class. Though the book's main focus is on autism, the basic template for inclusion (talking with parents, learning as much as one can about the child, using forms provided to gather helpful information, etc.) is appropriate for welcoming any child with a disability.