



# Welcoming Children of All Abilities

## *How Your Children's Ministry Can Adapt to Fit the Diversity of God's Family*

*We are grateful for the contributions of Barbara Newman on this resource.*

How do we who work in children's ministry best prepare to receive each child? When one child has an IQ of 140 and another an IQ of 40, one child is a social butterfly and another seems to avoid social contact, one child delights in loud noises and another covers her ears from the pain, how do we ensure a place of belonging for each child in the mix? How do we equip our volunteers?

In some ways, it may be easier to recruit volunteers, choose materials, and set up meeting spaces when the children in church ministries are thought of like the contents of a can of Pringles. Neatly stacked, easily contained, all shaped and formed exactly alike—one size *could* fit all within this paradigm.

Our creative God, however, clearly has a different vision. Children are wonderfully diverse. They differ in size, personality, interests, strengths, and challenges. God's children combine to make a group that looks far more like the contents of a bag of trail mix than a tube of Pringles.

With that in mind, this resource will offer two sets of suggestions. The first will follow the example of architects and educators in thinking about the concept of Universal Design for children's ministry. The second set of ideas may be helpful as you think about specific individuals in your group who may have differing abilities and need additional supports to be successful in your setting.

## Universal Design for Children's Ministry

Today's architects design buildings with the expectation that people of all abilities will need to access the building. They know the elevator will be used by the person who is a wheelchair user as well as people who choose the elevator instead of climbing the steps. This idea of universal design for the physical building includes many features such as braille plaques, curb cutouts, sounds associated with each passing floor on the elevator, and bathrooms built for all kinds of building visitors. In general, 100% of the people who visit will benefit from these built-in options.

Many educators have also picked up on the idea of universal design, focusing on the area of learning. They build lessons with many options, recognizing that some students will write a report while others will give a speech or make a visual presentation.

Architects and educators expect from the beginning of the project that people of all abilities will be part of the environment. It's far easier to make this type of plan from the beginning of the project or lesson than to retrofit a building with an elevator or add in an idea for students of differing abilities later in the session.

With universal design as our model, what preparation steps and options can we plant within our children's ministries, recognizing that God creates children with great variation? Here are some ideas to get you started.

### Creating a Welcoming Children's Ministry

1. **Train your volunteers.** It's a guarantee that your ministry will include children with varied attention spans, sensory processing, mood regulation, behaviors, backgrounds, motor skills, reading and writing abilities, and much more. If volunteers are expecting trail mix rather than Pringles and have some good tools to use, you will have a more equipped team of leaders. (Invite local experts or use tools from the resource section).
2. **Physically assess your meeting areas.** Would you participate in an event if you knew you could not use the bathroom or get a drink of water? We need to make sure our area is ready to receive children with varied physical abilities. Consider completing an accessibility audit of your children's ministry area and your church building in general to help highlight some of the components that are important. There is a link to an audit in the resource section below, or you can get more information at [crcna.org/disability](http://crcna.org/disability).
3. **Design your registration form to gather information about unique areas of strength and challenge for each child.** As parents register for the year,

ask questions such as “What do you see as your child’s areas of strength? (paying attention, making friends, reading, writing, technology, athletics...)”. Then ask, “What do you see as your child’s areas of challenge? (paying attention, making friends, reading, writing, technology, athletics...)”. These questions allow you to learn more about each child and may also open a door to further conversations with parents as needed.

4. **Offer information in advance.** Consider how a hotel posts pictures, reviews, amenities, and prices that customers can see ahead of that visit. Most of us take advantage of this information. There are many children and parents who would appreciate knowing more about the schedule, people, and activities of your children’s offerings. If your website has the capacity, consider posting a video or pictures of what to expect in your programs. If that is not possible, consider writing a short booklet with pictures and words describing your offerings. Children who come equipped to know the people, order of events, and some of the expectations will have a much easier path into your ministry.
5. **Offer opportunities to visit prior to beginning.** After the rooms are arranged and the leaders are in place, consider offering an open house of sorts. Allow children to explore the area and meet the leaders without the pressure of curriculum or activity expectations.
6. **Recruit one or more volunteers for your team who are comfortable stepping in beside a child as a “coach” or “buddy” when needed.** The person or people who fill this particular role should be flexible and comfortable moving from space to space or coaching an unexpected visitor or a child having a difficult day. This is a critical role as well for short-term programs such as VBS.

## **Preparing Your Space**

1. **Always choose curriculum and activities that are built with children of all abilities in mind.** Even as you choose games or other activities to do within your children’s ministry, look for multiple access points for everyone in the room. For example, when choosing toys for a younger children’s area, consider materials for varied interests such as blocks for building, puppets for pretending, sandboxes for searching, tunnels for crawling, or easels for painting. If you are choosing a game to play, look for activities that welcome fast runners, slow movers, and children who are wheelchair users. The [Dwell curriculum](#) is an example of a curriculum that was written with all

users in mind; activities are designed so that all children can participate equally.

2. **Stock materials that match varied fine motor ability.** Often we have crayons, scissors, pencils, and other tools available for use. Consider stocking up on crayons of varied sizes, pencils that may be different sizes and shapes, scissors that are more typical along with scissors that are spring loaded to open more readily. Stock some pencil grips. By having a good selection of fine motor materials, you will increase the likelihood of children finding a good match for their own hands and fingers.
3. **Plan to use a picture/word schedule of events that is on display for the entire group.** Let the participants know what to expect. Many individuals appreciate a visual schedule. Consider using an order of events for your group. Post them on a tackboard or attach them with magnets to a board. Some group members might like to remove that icon when that activity is over. Smaller versions of the icons can be used when working with one individual. (Examples of Orders of Worship and visual schedules at [withministries.org/worship-as-one/#examples](http://withministries.org/worship-as-one/#examples))
4. **Stock equipment for children who may have differently wired sensory systems.** Order noise cancelling headphones children can wear if the room gets too loud, offer some weighted lap pads or animals for children who need to feel more stable, stock larger carpet squares for children who like to have a defined space to call their own, supply leaders with [visual timers](#) so children can see the time elapse between activities, offer a bin of quiet fidgets for each meeting area for children who listen best during quieter times with something to hold.
5. **Consider creating a space where children can experience a quiet area for some time as needed.** It may contain a rocking chair, calm lighting, books to read, bean bag chairs, a bin of rice or sand with a few objects to find, and other calming, quiet activities. Make sure this is not presented as an option for misbehavior, but a choice when someone may need a break or a quiet area for a few minutes. Some congregations have a volunteer who staffs this area during children's meeting times.

## Supports for Specific Children

Congregations that pour energy and effort into universal design options will find that many children who have an area of diagnosed disability can easily attend children's ministry offerings with no additional support. In addition, children's leaders know that there are many times when you may suspect a child has some sort of disability, but parents have not shared that information or the child has yet to be evaluated. Once again, universal design features allow you to provide for children of all abilities without singling out any specific child or knowing the specifics of their diagnosis.

From time to time, however, you will want to learn more about a child and perhaps about an area of challenge. This section will give you some general guidelines to complement what you already have put in place with the universal design features.

### General Tips:

1. Get to know the child as a unique person—what does that child enjoy and what areas are challenging? Eye-level contact and a warm smile can communicate an open invitation to get acquainted.
2. Use age-appropriate language and activities.
3. Don't do anything with the group that one child has no chance to do successfully.
4. Don't feel sorry for the child. Respect the child's need to develop independence; be patient and praise the child's best effort.
5. Consider what peers may need in order to best understand and accept their friend with differing abilities. Sometimes children need specific information or an intentional discussion. At times that may best be done in general terms, stressing that we all have areas of strength and challenge. Other times, in consultation with parents, it may be wise to speak specifically about that child's unique gifts and challenges to the group. Consider whether this is best done in the child's presence or absence, but stress that it's okay to talk about our differences and similarities; 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. (See [\*Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities\*](#) for specific lessons and ideas).
6. Keep communication open and honest between you and the child's family. Request information from the family and offer your support. Avoid using

parents as their child's buddy during children's gathering times. This is a chance for parents to be filled in worship, learn in adult education, or have a cup of coffee with other adults.

While the most important thing is getting to know the individual child and that child's gifts and challenges, additional information below may help you minister with young children who have specific diagnoses. Just keep in mind that each child is an individual, and that you and the child will discover together what works best.

### **Attention Disorders**

Children with attention disorders may be inattentive, easily distracted, and/or impulsive. The term AD/HD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) may be used to describe the child's difficulty with staying on task. Many of the things that help the child with an 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 from an audio format 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 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 be accepting as well.

### **Hearing Loss**

Every child with hearing differences has unique needs, and each one requires different attention to those needs. Talking to the parents will help identify those needs and how to address them. The children may also want to be part of the conversation.

- Be sensitive to how children who are hard of hearing feel. Some might be very comfortable talking about the hearing loss and others may find it difficult 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. Young children may not yet be diagnosed.
- Some children may have systems that allow the leader to wear a microphone to best facilitate the child's hearing. Make sure you understand the system and how it works so you can use it in your setting.
- 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. In a large group, ask the child who is speaking to stand. These visible cues can help direct the attention of children with a hearing loss 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?"
- 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.

### **Intellectual Disability**

Intellectual disability often describes a delay in several areas of development, including development of intellectual and social skills. Techniques suggested for the child with a learning disability will also help the child with an intellectual disability.

- 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 nonspeaking. Find other simple ways—such as pointing and nodding—to communicate with the child who is

nonspeaking, or learn some of the basic sign language the child may also be learning. The child may also have some type of communication device you could use as part of the activities in your room.

- Make sure the child is considered part of your group, not a visitor. Find the child's gifts and involve that child in activities. Consider inviting an additional adult into the group to help facilitate that child's involvement, learning, and peer relationships.
- Make adaptations as needed. Ask the right question: "What CAN the child do?" If a child is able to cut a straight line, then pre-cut part of the item, leaving the straight line for the child to cut. If a child can point to a picture to communicate, then have some pictures of characters from the Bible story and ask the child to point to his favorite person in the story. You can use picture pointing for prayer requests or song requests as well. If a child can run a stop watch, then ask the child to be the time keeper for the game. Use the child's abilities to create pathways of participation.
- Facilitate relationships with peers. Sometimes peers will need information or ideas on how to best relate to their classmate. Make sure adults serve as a bridge to peer relationships, not a wall. Allow friends to help one another and interact with one another whenever possible.

### **Learning Disability**

Learning disabilities affect a person's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, or do mathematical calculations. While a child may have some of these differences at a young age, many children are not diagnosed until grade 1 or after. No need to wait for that diagnosis. Here are some good suggestions to try with the whole group:

- 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 for one of them alone.
- Allow plenty of time for a child with a learning disability 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 board. Provide reading markers (note cards, bookmarks, or rulers) to focus on the text, and let the child read along while listening to an audio version of the story. Introduce the key points of a story and repeat these points during the summary time. Offer a choice of activities.
- 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 disorders.

### **Physical Challenges**

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

- Since physical challenges 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.
- Depending on the child's individual gifts and challenges, you may want to enlarge visuals or 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.

## Resources

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

- [Accessibility Audit](#) from DisAbility Ministries of the United Methodist Church.
- [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 differing abilities.
- [Every Child Welcome](#) by Jolene Philo and Katie Weatherbee supplies many ideas to add to the suggestions for universal design in children's ministry settings.
- [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 differing abilities.
- [10 Simple Ways to Create a Sense of Belonging for Children and Adults with Disabilities](#) by Marianne Holman Prescott from Church News.
- [Leading a Special Needs Ministry: A Practical Guide to Including Children and Loving Families](#) by Amy Fenton Lee.