

Special Needs Volunteer Orientation Guide



LEADERS & STAFF



Orientation Guide: Special Needs Volunteer

Leader's Guide.....2

Understanding the Role

EXTEND "THE SACRED GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP"
by the editors of Christianity Today3

HOW WOULD JESUS MINISTER?
by Amy Julia Becker.....4

MEETING NEEDS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW
by Tony Welty6

SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION: CHILDREN'S SPECIAL NEEDS VOLUNTEER
developed by the United Methodist Church of North Texas7

SAMPLE DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: SPECIAL NEEDS BUDDY
developed by Key Ministry9

SAMPLE SPECIAL NEEDS PRIVACY COVENANT
developed by Key Ministry10

Embracing the Skills

IDENTIFYING SPECIAL NEEDS
by Shannon Dingle.....11

EMPHASIZE WORTH AND ABILITIES
by Jackie Mills-Fernald.....13

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF A CHILD ... ?
by Shannon Dingle.....14

CHECKLIST FOR TEACHERS
by Jackie Mills-Fernald.....16

Resources

FURTHER EXPLORATION18

Leader's Guide

How to use "Orientation Guides" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders and volunteers who can think strategically and biblically about the church and ministry. Selected by the editors of Building Church Leaders, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Orientation Guides" are easy-to-use tools that help prepare people to take on new roles with greater confidence. Each guide focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

This specific guide is designed to help you provide orientation and basic training to the men or women who are planning to volunteer in special needs ministry or who are exploring the possibilities. It has also been created to provide you with helpful tools. For instance, use the sample job description (pp. 7–8) and the sample list of responsibilities for the special needs buddies (p. 9) as templates for your own job description and list of ministry responsibilities. Also, check out the privacy covenant (p. 10); it will provide a model for your own similar covenant.

To help your new volunteers and candidates for volunteer ministry explore what special needs ministry is all about, point them to "Extend the 'Sacred Gift of Friendship'" (p. 3), "How Would Jesus Minister?" (pp. 4–5), and "Meeting Needs: A Brief Overview" (p. 6).

"Identifying Special Needs" (pp. 11–12) offers a brief overview of common disabilities volunteers may see in the classroom. "Emphasize Worth and Abilities" (p. 13) will help them communicate sensitively and appropriately with both students and their families. Volunteers will receive guidance for handling difficulties related to a child's disability in "What Should I Do if a Child ... ?" (pp. 14–15). Your new teachers will receive input for creating positive classroom experiences in "Checklist for Teachers" (pp. 16–17).

We hope your new volunteers, and those exploring the possibilities, will receive inspiration and helpful information that will confirm their call to this important ministry.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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Extend “the Sacred Gift of Friendship”

You have the unique and wonderful privilege of fully embracing people with disabilities.

John 17:20–26

Ginny Thornburgh, director of the Interfaith Initiative at the American Association of People with Disabilities, told *Christianity Today* that “too many churches have barriers to the full participation and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities—physical, sensory, psychiatric, and intellectual.”

Many congregations are aware that their buildings are not as disabled-friendly as they could be. But when it comes to the estimated 54 million Americans with a disability, Thornburgh has something more fundamental than the church building in mind: “The barriers of attitude are the most difficult to address.”

It’s not as if churches do not try to extend compassion to people with disabilities. But we tend to think of those with disabilities as people we minister *to*, by offering worship and other opportunities to them. Thornburgh reminds us that “those of us with disabilities have enormous gifts and talents to bring to the church. We are not a project. We are on this earth for a unique reason.” Churches would be wise to remember that people with disabilities are like the rest of the congregation: They can contribute mightily to the work, witness, and leadership of the church and community.

Harold Wilke, the late United Church of Christ pastor and seminary professor who was born without arms, is one such example. Famous for sipping tea from a cup held with his toes, Wilke became a powerful advocate for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). After President George H. W. Bush signed the bill into law, he handed the pen to Wilke, who received it with his foot.

Thornburgh says that extending “the sacred gift of friendship” is the most important accommodation that Christian congregations can make. “We can have a church building that is perfectly ADA-compliant. But that sacred gift of friendship—the body of Christ, one on one”—is the key to creating a community where all people are embraced as brothers and sisters in Christ.

—adapted from an editorial in our sister publication *Christianity Today*, © 2010 by Christianity Today/*Christianity Today* magazine. For more articles like this, visit www.ChristianityToday.com.

Reflect

1. Why do I want to be involved in ministry to people with disabilities?
2. Ginny Thornburgh says that “those of us with disabilities have enormous gifts and talents to bring to the church. We are not a project. We are on this earth for a unique reason.” How do I respond to those words? How should these words shape the way I relate to adults and children with special needs?
3. What does it mean to extend “the sacred gift of friendship” to people with disabilities? How might this be different from simply ministering to people with special needs?

How Would Jesus Minister?

Don't look at the "problem to be solved" but the life to be loved.

John 9

The Special Olympics has created a campaign called R-Word: Spread the Word to End the Word—seeking to bring awareness about the hurtful and inappropriate ways the word “retarded” is used.

It's great to draw attention to a hurtful word. But the problems within our culture go far deeper than the use of the word *retarded* as a slur. When it comes to talking about disability in general, even those of us who want to be sensitive, just, and kind often don't know what to say or how to say it.

I write as the mother of a child with Down syndrome, yet I'll be the first to admit that I also struggle with language here. Do I call it “disability”? “Special needs”? “Developmental delays”?

The most telling example of my own loss for words came a few months ago. My daughter Penny and I went to a birthday party, and I met another mom. She said, “I have a child with special needs, too.” She pointed out the window. “My daughter is 10. She's the one with the walker.”

Over the course of the afternoon, I found myself watching this woman's daughter, whom I'll call Abigail. Abigail fed herself pizza. Abigail's body looked like spaghetti. She could crawl and walk with the walker, but she couldn't navigate the stairs. I didn't hear her speak more than one syllable, and the meaning of her utterances was often unclear to me. Abigail was thin and tall and beautiful, with smooth skin and kind eyes and a gorgeous smile.

And I didn't know what to say. I wanted to get to know Abigail and her mom, yet all I could do was watch. I thought about asking, “What is her diagnosis?” Or, “Where is she in school?” Or, “Do you like your therapists?” But all those questions seemed wrong, somehow, focused on figuring out Abigail's “problem.”

And I wondered, how would Jesus have talked to Abigail's mother? How would Jesus have interacted with Abigail?

There are plenty of examples in the Gospels of Jesus ministering to people with disabilities of both the mental and physical variety. But John 9 serves as a particularly telling instance of the way Jesus both talks about disability and interacts with people with disabilities. It is here that the disciples ask the winning question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (v. 2). They reveal their assumptions immediately: Blindness is the result of someone's personal sin. They also reveal their own blindness. They fail to see the man who is standing right in front of them. Instead they see a problem, a theological conundrum for Jesus to solve.

Jesus answers, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life” (v. 3). He goes on to spit on the ground and apply a poultice of mud to the man's eyes. He instructs the man to wash himself, and the man finds that he can see. Jesus overturns assumptions immediately, not only in his answer but also in his refusal to reduce the man to a problem and his insistence on seeing the man as a human being. Jesus touches him. He allows the man to participate in his own healing. And the man becomes a witness to Jesus. He coins the phrase, “I was blind, but now I see!” (v. 25).

SPECIAL NEEDS VOLUNTEER

The scene ends with the man coming to faith in Christ, and with Jesus confounding the Pharisees: “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains” (v. 41). Back to the disciples’ original question: It is not the blind man who can’t see. It’s the rest of us.

This passage in John 9 teaches us at least three things. One, people with disabilities provoke questions, and often the questions are spiritual in nature. Two, Jesus overturns easy assumptions about the nature and cause of disability. Three, Jesus affirms the full humanity of persons with disabilities, while at the same time demonstrating the brokenness of everyone, with or without disabilities.

After my experience at the birthday party, I finally hit upon what I wish I had said. I realized I didn’t really want to know Abigail’s diagnosis. What I wished I had asked was, “What do you and Abigail enjoy doing together?” “What are the things you love most about your daughter?” “What makes Abigail special?”

I identify with the disciples, but I want to be more like Jesus. I want to reach out to those who are different from me. I want to understand our common humanity. I want to see the places in my heart and soul that leave me far less able to worship God than any physical or mental limitation ever could.

—AMY JULIA BECKER is author of *A Good and Perfect Gift: Faith, Expectations, and a Little Girl Named Penny* (Bethany House, 2011); adapted from Her.meneutics, Christianity Today’s news and culture blog for women, © 2010 by Christianity Today/Her.meneutics or the author. For more articles like this, visit Her.meneutics.com.

Reflect

1. What concerns me the most about working with people with disabilities?
2. What was wrong with the disciples’ understanding of the blind man? How did Jesus relate to the blind man? What does John 9 teach me about how I should relate to people with disabilities?
3. While my words matter, what is the most important principle to keep in mind when ministering to those with disabilities?

Meeting Needs: A Brief Overview

Three ways to show you care for disabled people and their families.

1 John 4:7

As the Spanish proverb says, “The beginning of health is to know the disease.” Likewise, the most effective ministry to someone with a disability will greatly depend on the nature and degree of the person’s disability. However, in general I think there are three practical steps we can take in order to best meet a person’s spiritual, emotional, and physical needs:

1. We can be assertive in reaching out toward someone. People with disabilities will often shy away from asking for particular types of less obvious need, such as nurturing and emotional support. If we fail to ask, we may never discover a person’s greatest unmet need and may instead offer them help they’ve already received from someone else.
2. We can also be proactive in learning as much as we can about a specific disability. By developing our understanding with accurate knowledge, we can more readily offer a compassionate response to a person in need and may be in a better position to reach out to the person’s family.
3. We can support a person with a disability by raising the level of awareness and understanding of a particular disability within our congregation. In doing so, we can help well-intentioned members of our congregation overcome any relational fears they may experience in the presence of someone with a disability. Since people with severe physical or mental disabilities can at times appear frightening to the unaccustomed, providing resources for the congregation can also help them interact in a life-giving way with those who are disabled.

Above all and in all things, the best way to care for any member of our congregation, disabled or not, is to learn how to love them deeply. For as members of Christ’s body, we know that “love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). We may be painfully awkward in our approach to a person with a disability, but if they know we love them they’ll usually be slow to anger and quick to forgive.

—TONY WELTY is an adviser for BuildingChurchLeaders.com and serves as an associate rector at St. George’s Episcopal Church in Nashville, Tennessee, where he is engaged in young adult and family ministry, and where he serves as chaplain to the St. George’s Kindergarten; © 2011 Christianity Today/BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

Discuss with Your Ministry Director or Lead Teacher

1. What do we do to educate our congregation about disabilities?
2. How do we incorporate both adults and children with disabilities into the overall life of our church?
3. How does our church minister to families of children and adults with disabilities?

SAMPLE

Job Description:

Children's Special Needs Volunteer

YOUR CHURCH

123 Main Street
City, State, Zip
Phone: (555) 123-4567
[website address]

Jane Smith
Director of Special Needs Ministry
[e-mail]

POSITION: Children's Special Needs Volunteer

POSITION PURPOSE:

- A) To offer support to a child with special needs during the Sunday school hour, helping the child to grow in his/her relationship with God, teachers, and other children.
- B) To assist the regular classroom teacher in mainstreaming or making any necessary modifications for the special needs child.

RESPONSIBILITIES:

- A) Work with the Director of Special Needs Ministry to become familiar with the disorder/difference of the child or children with whom you will be working.
- B) Choose at least one Sunday a month to work with a special needs child, scheduling dates with the Special Needs Director.
- C) Have realistic expectations for behavior, being gentle but firm in correcting actions (biting, kicking, screaming) that are not acceptable for church. In the case of tantrums: separate the child from the other children to prevent injury, say "No," do not give in on any demands that brought on the tantrum (otherwise we reinforce the tantrum), let the tantrum run its course, stay in close proximity, attempt to distract, and give a reward/praise when the child has regrouped. Do not attempt to physically restrain an autistic tantrum, as it may cause injury to both you and the child.
- D) Encourage participation in the lesson, even if it is for a few minutes at a time; e.g., sitting with group during circle time, making the craft or art project. Let the child have breaks, and reward any participation.
- E) Work with parents to assess what will best motivate each child to participate.
- F) Stay in close proximity to the child, allowing for help if the need arises; always remain between the door and the child.
- G) Wear comfortable clothing and shoes.
- H) For children with cerebral palsy or other physically limiting differences, modify classroom tasks to encourage participation; e.g., pushing a wheelchair around the room during active classroom games, allowing child to hold book for story time or supplies for projects for other children to come and get.
- I) Arrive at least 10 minutes prior to class start time.
- J) Greet children and parents with a smile as they enter the room.
- K) Alert the Director of Special Needs if you cannot make your assigned Sunday, and try to switch with another special needs team member.

SPECIAL NEEDS VOLUNTEER

L) Encourage and pray for other members of the special needs team, the children and their parents, teachers, and children's ministry team.

REQUIREMENTS:

- A) A familiarity with the developmental abilities of the children with whom you are working.
- B) A desire to be a contributing member of a dynamic ministry team, a love for children, and an ability to interact well with others.
- C) Participation in annual Special Needs Ministry training and other scheduled meetings.
- D). Membership in this church for at least 6 months.
- E) Completion of Child Protection Program.
- F) Completion and return of required forms: background check release, child protection policy agreement (signed).
- G) Clear background check.

—developed by the UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF NORTH TEXAS; adapted and used with permission from the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

SAMPLE

Duties and Responsibilities: Special Needs Buddy

Prior to Start of Program Year

Contact your assigned child's parent(s). Some key questions might be:

- a) What is the nature and extent of your child's special need?
- b) Are there specific tactics or guidelines that work best in keeping your child engaged and cooperative?
- c) Does your child need time away from the group for quiet, a rest, or snack?
- d) Does your child have any dietary restrictions or allergies?
- e) What are your child's favorite activities?
- f) How can I make this experience positive for your child?

Give the parent(s) your phone number and e-mail address. Perhaps offer to meet with the child in their home prior to the first Sunday of the new ministry season.

All Year

- a) Plan to come in 15 minutes early for a prayer and team meeting time in the [INSERT ROOM NAME HERE].
- b) If you are not able to make it to Sunday school, contact [INSERT NAME HERE] *as soon as possible*, so that a back-up plan can be put into place.
- c) When in class with your child, monitor how they are doing:
 - If the child is cooperative and attentive, don't feel like you have to always be by their side.
 - If the child is quiet but not really paying attention, redirect their attention back to the teacher.
 - If the child is scared, angry, or agitated, and cannot be settled down within the classroom, take them to a quiet, *public area* of the church; keep the door open, or go for a walk inside the public areas of the church.
- d) If your child needs to use the restroom, find another adult to stand with you while the child uses the facilities. (Note: For this and other similar situations, always follow the church's child protection policy.)
- e) *Never leave your assigned child alone.*
- f) Focus on the child's positive behaviors. Avoid words like "don't" and "no" or "stop that," if possible.
- g) Don't release the child to anyone but the parent(s), unless they have made a specific arrangement with you beforehand.
- h) Try to focus on positives when discussing the child with the parent at the end of class. If something happened that is a major concern, *discuss it with the ministry leader first.*
- i) If your child hasn't come to church for a couple of weeks, call them or send them a note letting them know you miss them and wanted to see how they are doing.

Always remember that giving your time to a special child may be considered by his or her family one of the greatest acts of kindness they have ever received. You are greatly appreciated! May God bless you as you minister!

—developed by KEY MINISTRY, an organization committed to equipping churches to welcome and include children and families affected by disabilities in all aspects of the life of the church; all Key Ministry services are offered free of charge. Adapted and used with permission from Key Ministry.

SAMPLE

Special Needs Privacy Covenant

For the Volunteers of the [INSERT YOUR MINISTRY NAME HERE] Team

In order to respect our families with children involved in our special needs ministry, it is important that we keep information shared by families confidential. Information provided by parents will be shared among volunteers working with their children in order to improve services provided to these children. This information will not be used for any other purpose. Volunteers outside of this team will not have access to information shared by families about the specific needs and/or diagnoses of their children. Information gathered will consistently be handled in a professional manner. It is important to avoid discussions outside of [YOUR CHURCH NAME HERE] about specific children, especially when discussing identifying information.

Please contact any of the team leaders or members of the disability ministries staff for more information regarding a particular child and how to better meet that child's needs while at [YOUR CHURCH NAME HERE].

I have read, understand, and agree with the Privacy Covenant regarding privacy issues and confidentiality of information involved with working with children who have disabilities.

Volunteer Signature

Date

—provided by KEY MINISTRY, an organization committed to equipping churches to welcome and include children and families affected by disabilities in all aspects of the life of the church; all Key Ministry services are offered free of charge. Adapted and used with permission from Key Ministry.

Identifying Special Needs

Information about common disabilities.

Mark 10:13–14

Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Includes a several disorders: autism, Asperger syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorders
- May have deficits in (a) social interaction and (b) communication (could be nonverbal), and (c) may have a repetitive behavior (called a “stim”) or unusual fixation on a specific topic
- May have difficulty with over-stimulating environments
- More common in boys than girls

Developmental and Cognitive Disabilities

- Both are broad categories that include multiple disabilities
- Developmental disabilities begin before age 22, are life-long, and impact self-care, learning, language, and mobility
- Cognitive disabilities include individuals with traumatic brain injuries, intellectual disabilities, and organic brain syndromes caused by infection

Learning Disability

- May have difficulty with one or more of the following: listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, math
- May have difficulty with executive function (*the ability to connect past experience with present action, learn from mistakes, and apply prior knowledge to new learning experiences*)
- May act out or shut down if learning activities become too frustrating

AD/HD

- Demonstrates difficulties with one or more of the following: staying focused, paying attention, controlling impulses, delaying gratification, making decisions, processing information, using executive function (see definition in Learning Disability), and being overly active or restless
- More common in boys than girls
- In girls, symptoms of inattention are more common, while in boys, hyperactivity and restlessness are more likely

Physical Impairment

- A broad category encompassing disabilities that affect movement
- Common physical disabilities include spina bifida (a neural tube defect occurring in early pregnancy), cerebral palsy (a group of conditions affecting body movement and muscle coordination due to damage to the brain in the womb, during birth, or as a baby), and muscular dystrophy (a genetic disease characterized by progressive deterioration and wasting of muscle fibers, causing difficulty in walking)

Allergies

- Range from causing mild discomfort to endangering life
- Most common non-food allergies: pollen, dust, insect stings, animal dander, mold, medications, and latex
- Most common food allergies: cow’s milk, eggs, fish, peanuts, shellfish, soy, tree nuts, and wheat
- May be at risk for anaphylaxis

Down Syndrome

- This genetic condition occurs when a person has three copies—instead of just two—of the 21st chromosome
- Often causes delays in physical and intellectual development, including intellectual disabilities
- May have a heart condition, may have difficulty using tongue when eating

Intellectual Disability

- Used to be called “mental retardation” (a phrase no longer used because of the negative connotation)
- Defined by an IQ that is at least two standard deviations below the norm (70 or below)
- May have difficulties with conceptual, social, and practical life skills

SPECIAL NEEDS VOLUNTEER

Mental Illness

- A disease classified by mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, causing an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands
- More than 200 types exist, but the most common include depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and anxiety disorders

—SHANNON DINGLE is special needs coordinator for Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, and creator of TheWorksofGodDisplayed.com, a site offering help for starting and running a special needs ministry; adapted from content created for Providence Baptist Church, © 2012 by the author. Used with permission from the author.

Sources for this article: American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities; National Down Syndrome Society; Spina Bifida Association; U.S. Administration on Developmental Disabilities; National Mental Health Association; United Cerebral Palsy; National Center for Learning Disabilities; American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology; Administration on Developmental Disabilities; Attention Deficit Disorder Association.

Emphasize Worth and Abilities

What to say and not to say when talking to people with disabilities and their families.

Proverbs 16:24

Let your words emphasize the person's worth and abilities, not the disabling condition. Here are several do's and don'ts when relating to those with special needs and their families or caregivers.

Do Use Affirmative Phrases

Child with disability
Person with cerebral palsy
Person who has ...
Without speech, nonverbal
Developmental delay
Intellectual disability
Emotional disorder or mental illness
Deaf or hard of hearing and communicates with sign
Uses a wheelchair
Person with seizure disorder
Child with Down syndrome
Has a learning disability or learning difference
Has a physical disability
Congenital disability
Condition or syndrome
Seizures
Cleft lip
Facial difference or body difference
Mobility impaired
Medically involved, or has a chronic illness
Paralyzed
Has hemiplegia (paralysis of one side of the body)
Has paraplegia or quadriplegia
Of short stature
Successful, productive, hard working
Person without a disability, nondisabled, typical

Don't Use Negative Phrases/Words

Disabled or handicapped child
Palsied, CP, or spastic
Afflicted by, suffers from, victim of
Mute or dumb
Slow
Retard, retarded, retardation
Crazy or insane
Deaf and dumb, suffers a hearing loss, hearing impaired
Restricted to a wheelchair
Epileptic
Downs Child, Mongoloid
Learning disabled, impaired

Crippled, feeble, lame, deformed
Birth defect
Disease (unless truly a disease)
Fits
Hair lip
Deformed, disfigured
Lame
Sickly, unhealthy

Invalid or paralytic
Hemiplegic

Paraplegic or quadriplegic
Dwarf or midget
Courageous (hero or martyr)
Normal, healthy (implies people with a disability are not normal, not healthy)

—JACKIE MILLS-FERNALD is director of Access Ministry, the special needs ministry of McLean Bible Church/Tyson Campus in Vienna, Virginia; adapted from "Welcoming Those with Disabilities," a brochure created for volunteers and ushers at Mills-Fernald's church. Used with permission from the author.

What Should I Do if a Child ... ?

Suggestions for handling difficulties related to a child's disability.

Matthew 7:12

What to Do If ...

... a child is hyperactive/inattentive:

- Plan teaching activities in several smaller chunks with activity breaks in between less active chunks.
- Allow children to have a “fidget toy” (something to hold to help them focus) or chew gum.
- Use attention-grabbing screens (PowerPoint, video clips, etc).
- Offer calm, low-key reminders of appropriate behaviors.
- Understand that they may be learning in a different way even if they don't appear to be paying attention.

... is impulsive:

- Make expectations clear, stick to routines, and offer praise and encouragement in response to wise choices.
- Have a special cue (word, gesture) you can use to remind the child to focus without calling him or her out.

... has a physical impairment:

- Make needed modifications to include the child in the classroom environment and think through activities so the child isn't excluded.
- Allow extra time in transitions if mobility is limited.

... has reading difficulties:

- Don't ask child to read aloud, or give child advance notice so she can practice the text before class.
- Give instructions verbally and not just in writing.
- Incorporate learning tasks that don't require reading.

... has a seizure:

- Keep child safe (move anything away that might hurt him or her if it's a grand mal seizure).
- Remain calm so that you don't scare the other children, and send one teacher immediately to get someone on staff.

... has a hearing impairment:

- Ask parents if sign language is used and, if so, ask them to teach you a few basic signs.
- Make sure you are close enough for the child to hear you (if he can hear a little) and see your lips.

has limitations or aversion in one sensory area (like sight or hearing or touch):

- Use other senses—hearing or touch or visuals, for example—in lessons and in nonverbal communication.

... has sensory issues:

- Provide a quiet area—like a corner with noise-blocking headphones, a beanbag chair, and some books.
- Have sensory items, like stress balls, textured toys, and Velcro.
- Agree on a sign/signal the child can give you if she's getting overwhelmed.

... doesn't seem to understand:

- Know and emphasize the main point for *all children* to grasp, even if some children don't understand everything else.
- Adjust pacing of lesson, use repetition, use shorter words and phrases, avoid abstract language (using concrete examples instead), use visual aids, set reasonable learning goals if original goals are out of reach.

has an assistive device (wheelchair, splints, communication device, hearing aids, etc):

- Learn about the device from the child's parents.
- Make it clear that the device is only for the intended child, not for other kids to try or play with.

... has allergies:

SPECIAL NEEDS VOLUNTEER

- Check with the parents about what snacks and treats are okay, and check with your ministry for ingredients' lists for the snacks that are available on Sunday mornings.
- Allow parents to provide safe snacks from home.
- Learn about the severity of a child's allergy, preventative measures for avoiding a reaction, and how to respond should the child have an allergic reaction.

Note: When working with children with special needs, remember: (1) that every child is uniquely created by God and every child is different, so the same thing won't work for every child; (2) a child communicates with his or her behavior—if a child is behaving in a disruptive, unusual, or distracting way, consider what could be underlying it and what changes could help the situation. If you need further and specific guidance, never hesitate to ask your director, lead teacher, or another ministry leader.

—SHANNON DINGLE is special needs coordinator for Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, and creator of TheWorksofGodDisplayed.com, a site offering help for starting and running a special needs ministry; adapted from content created for Providence Baptist Church, © 2012 by the author. Used with permission from the author.

Discuss with Your Ministry Director or Lead Teacher

1. What additional suggestions and/or guidelines would you add to those given here?
2. Are there legal issues you should consider if you encounter any of the above situations?
3. From your own experience, what are the most common issues you might face related to a child's disability? What have you learned over the years about dealing with difficulties like those listed in this article?

Checklist for Teachers

What to consider as you strive to create positive classroom experiences for your students.

Titus 2:7–8

Consider These Potential Challenges for Special Needs Students

- Easily frustrated (this could be sensory issues, communication challenges, boredom, etc.)
- Insecurity or poor self-image
- Short attention span, tendency to wander from what is being taught (may need more than one prompt to stay on task)
- Poor organization skills, tendency to frequently lose or misplace things
- High impulsivity
- Trouble socializing or interacting with others
- Restlessness and frequent movement (these students may be kinesthetic learners)
- Has one area of academic weakness

Make Curriculum Changes and Adaptations

- Size: adapt group sizes or items to be completed
- Time: adapt times for learning or task completions
- Level of support: increase the number of personal assistants (assign peer buddies, teaching assistants, or cross-age tutors)
- Input: adapt the way instruction is delivered ... vary learning modalities; design lessons to be more interactive
- Difficulty: adapt skill levels, simplify instructions, or change rules
- Output: offer students multiple ways to respond other than verbally (eye gazes, pointing, augmented communication devices)
- Participation: adapt the extent to which the learner is involved; assign tasks of responsibilities and duties
- Individualize goals: adapt the goals or outcome expectations while using the same materials; provide different instructions and materials to meet each student's goals

Create Classroom Community

- Help students feel connected to a caring, loving community in which they are valued as a member and participant
- Foster warm, supportive relationships: student to teacher, student to student
- Provide regular opportunities for students to collaborate with one another through team building or cooperative learning experiences
- Provide opportunities for students to exercise voice and choice
- Articulate and discuss core values and ideas of community
- Communicate that every student is unique and capable
- Look for opportunities for children to shine and share their God-given gifts and talents

Last but Not Least...

- Praise progress, no matter how small
- Carefully evaluate ability levels of students, and then adapt accordingly
- Focus on students' strengths, not their weaknesses
- Be loving; firm, but flexible
- Be yourself; your students need genuine, authentic people
- Be understanding: express empathy, not sympathy
- Keep people first, disabilities second
- Avoid stereotyping; never say "all people with this disability ..."
- Believe that all students can succeed
- Create independence, not dependence

SPECIAL NEEDS VOLUNTEER

—JACKIE MILLS-FERNALD is director of Access Ministry, the special needs ministry of McLean Bible Church/Tyson Campus in Vienna, Virginia; adapted from “Keys to Setting up a Specialized Classroom,” a booklet developed for Access Ministry. Used with permission from the author.

Discuss with Your Ministry Director or Lead Teacher

1. Which items on these four checklists should be most important to my classroom? Least important?
2. Which items on these four checklists would be easiest to adapt to my classroom? Most difficult to adapt? Simply don't apply?
3. How can I learn more about items on the checklist that are confusing or unclear to me?

Further Exploration

Downloads, websites, and books to equip your volunteer.

📖 **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today.

- “Develop an Inclusive Ministry” (Children’s Ministry)
- “Reaching Out to Families with Special Needs” (Children's Ministry)
- “Shepherd Children with Special Needs” (Children's Ministry)
- “Special-Needs Ministry” (Children's Ministry)
- “Ministry to People with Disabilities” (Practical Ministry Skills)
- “Disabilities” (Urgent Care)

📖 **YourChurchResource.com**: Resources for managing ministry from Christianity Today

- “Accommodating Special Needs at Your Church”

📖 **LeadershipJournal.net**: Practical advice and articles for church leaders from Christianity Today

📖 **TheInclusiveChurch.com**: A blog to help churches successfully include children with special needs

📖 **JoniandFriends.org**: Dedicated to advancing Christian ministry in the disability community

📖 **KeyMinistry.org**: Provides free resources for ministry to children and families affected by disabilities

📖 **TheWorksofGodDisplayed.com**: A blog encouraging and advocating for special needs ministry

Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities by Benjamin T. Conner. Drawn from author’s experiences with befriending and discipling adolescents with developmental disabilities, this book shows how churches exclude the developmentally disabled in various structural and even theological ways, stresses the intrinsic value of kids with developmental disabilities, and emphasizes hospitality and friendship when evangelizing adolescents with developmental disabilities. (Eerdmans, 2012; ISBN: 9780802867216)

The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God by Amos Yong. Revealing and dismantling the underlying stigma of disability that exists in the church, the author shows how the Bible offers good news to people of all abilities, and he challenges churches to reorganize their practices as they strive to become more inviting, healing, and reconciling communities of faith. (Eerdmans, 2011; ISBN 9780802866080)

Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace by Michael S. Beates. This book explores key Bible passages on brokenness and disability to develop helpful principles for believers and churches, teaching them first to embrace their own brokenness and then to embrace those who are more physically and visibly broken. (Crossway, 2012; ISBN: 9781433530456)

Same Lake, Different Boat by Stephanie O. Hubach. Written by the special needs ministries director of the Presbyterian Church in America, this book presents a convincing apologetic for special needs ministry. Supplement this book with the DVD by the same name (sold separately) and you’ll have a powerful and inspiring package for group training. (P&R, 2006; ISBN 9781596380516)

Special Needs Smart Pages by Joni & Friends. This comprehensive resource with dozens of reproducible pages includes Bible lessons, inspiring real-life stories, teacher devotions, training articles, and a bonus DVD. (Gospel Light, 2008; ISBN 9780830747191)