

A Place for Me – Special Needs Ministry

by [Pat Verbal](#)

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My passion for investing in children like Joe began in 1992 when I became children's pastor at a church with an exciting ministry to children with special needs. Supervising that amazing Royal Hearts program of 25 children ages 2 to 15 changed my life. When their regular teachers were absent, my husband and I gladly substituted. The class met on Wednesday evenings to allow parents to enjoy a support group or Bible study at Rose Drive Friends Church in Yorba Linda, California. We quickly discovered that these special children loved doing everything a regular class did but needed a little more help...and more hugs, laughter, puppets, music, and fun!

Two years later, the special needs ministry at our church took on a new perspective for us. A precious little girl with Down syndrome became a part of our family, and Jessica won our hearts instantly. We soon realized that Joe, Jessica, and children like them don't always find a warm welcome at church.

Missed Opportunities

If Jesus walked the earth today, what would His ministry be? Some people believe it would be with children and adults who have special needs because they're so close to God's heart. In fact, think of all the times that Jesus' ministry focused on people with special needs: He healed the blind, the deaf, and the disabled. In Luke 14 Jesus said, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed."

Teachers of special needs children understand the blessing Jesus talked about. "When we open our arms to children with disabilities, we open our hearts to God," says Tami Segura of Celina, Texas. Tami left her singles class to serve in a new special needs department. She meets quarterly for training with the special needs team and attends events sponsored by Joni and Friends disability outreach. "These kids radiate Jesus and inspire me throughout my week," Tami says.

Sadly, not every children's minister feels the same way that Tami does. "We do pretty well with including those with special needs in Sunday school, but that's it," says Dr. Jim Pierson, president of the Christian Church Foundation for the Handicapped in Knoxville, Tennessee. "We don't integrate them into the life of the church."

We must integrate them! The percentages are alarming. Ninety-five percent of people with disabilities are unchurched, and four out of five marriages that produce a child with disabilities end in divorce.

Ministry to children and adults with disabilities shouldn't be optional at church, and yet many church leaders think it is. One pastor told me his church didn't need a special needs ministry because no one in their congregation was handicapped.

There are people living in his town—and your town—who care for family members who are disabled. These people have physical impairments, learning problems, or mental disabilities. They may not be in your church, but they could be. And the truth is they need to be.

One Child at a Time

Pam and Alex attended the Christian school at my church but rarely visited Sunday school. One Friday, I invited the children to Christmas services and even offered to pick them up at their house.

"I don't think we can come because of our brother, Jerry," Pam said sadly. "Dad says if we can't go as a family, we'll all just stay home."

On Saturday, I visited Pam and Alex's home where I met Jerry, one of the most beautiful children I'd ever seen. Jerry's big, dark eyes remained fixed on a colored piece of yarn as the 8-year-old rocked back and forth on the floor.

"Jerry is autistic," explained his weary mother. "He lives in his own little world and can get aggressive with strangers." She went on to tell me that she grew up in a country church and longed for her family to worship together, but she felt trapped by her child's special needs.

Our church and school worked together that Christmas to give Jerry's family the gift of one-on-one care. We found an available classroom, recruited caregivers who rotated one Sunday each month, and held a training night with Jerry's parents. As the months passed, Jerry's mom and dad often knelt at the altar for special prayer support. Pam and Alex smiled more and talked openly about Jerry with their friends. Jerry challenged his caregivers, but they all agreed that their investment was worth it.

If your church offers a special needs ministry, chances are it began with one family like this one that touched the heart of your congregation. That's what happened to Kevin Moore, the children's pastor at New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Kevin tells about a family who came to see him; the couple had questions about how their special needs daughter might fit into his children's ministry.

"When I told them we were eager to have her in our ministry, they broke down and cried," Kevin remembers. "They had never had anyone in a church receive them in that way."

Kevin says that's how their special needs ministry began. "We didn't begin some full-blown ministry; we just received one child at a time that God brought to us. Then we figured out how to meet that child's needs."

"I'm really glad that we did receive this child," Kevin remembers. "She died a few months later, and that gave us the opportunity to minister to her and her family."

Just Like Everyone Else

When special needs families are treated like typical families, they draw near to -- not away from -- God. Sometimes they need a hug. Never grow tired of listening to or praying for these brave kids and parents. Involve the whole congregation in serving people with disabilities.

"We started JOY ministry six short years ago," says director Denise Briley of Graceview Baptist Church in

Tomball, Texas. "As the mom of a child with severe disabilities, I was glad that God used me and the training that my son gave me. It has changed my life and the life of my family." Currently, Graceview serves 48 families with children, youth, and adults who have disabilities. This ministry, though, had its modest beginnings.

"We started with my son Clayton, a borrowed basket of toys, and a cassette player," says Denise. "God brought each family one by one. Families have been able to worship together, some for the first time in years. Marriages have been saved; brothers and sisters have been involved in ministry. Moms and Dads now sing in the choir and teach Sunday school, but the best thing is people are being saved and building relationships with Christ. I wouldn't have missed what I call the Joy Journey for the world."

David and Mary Russell of Plano, Texas, share Denise's enthusiasm. Their daughter, Angela, is a very charming 3-year-old regular at Stonebriar Community Church. With undiagnosed white matter disorder, Angela can't walk, sit up alone, speak, or eat, but she is a constant joy. She's progressed in ways they never anticipated. "Our child is from God," says David. "Angela has taught us true sacrificial love, and we trust God to fulfill His plan for her life in her current state."

Not everyone, though, is as fortunate as these people have been at church. When Doug and Cindy discovered that their bright, articulate child's repeated seizures signaled the onset of epilepsy, they were devastated. Their strong faith in God led them to ask for prayer at church -- and to cry out to God themselves. They researched every cure available.

Eight years later—and no cure in sight—Doug and Cindy were exhausted by their daughter's condition. They questioned why God would allow such a debilitating condition and not hear their prayers for their daughter. Their crisis of faith caused them to drop out of church.

"I did try to go back without Doug several times," Cindy remembers, "but it was always the same. I could see the terror on the teacher's face as I explained what she needed to do in the case of a seizure."

Cindy is quick to not blame the teacher. "I mean, she's a volunteer. I would probably be freaked out too if she weren't my daughter."

Trying to worship after these encounters was impossible, Cindy says. "I sat there worrying about how it was going and if everything was okay. Finally, I would get up and go get her. I haven't been back to church since."

The tragic result? Doug and Cindy have begun to doubt that there really is a loving God who's concerned about them.

No, ministering to families who have children with special needs is not an option.

Getting Started

Just as special needs children have varied needs, the ministries to them can be just as varied. Here's how to get started.

Pray. Encourage church prayer groups to include those with disabilities as part of their weekly prayer requests. Pray for a compassionate director who'll feel called to lead the ministry.

Provide leadership. Recruit a special needs council to research and set policies, create an annual calendar, and plan a budget.

Create a purpose statement. The Golden Hills Community Church of Brentwood, California, has a powerful purpose statement for their disability ministry: "To make disciples within the disabled community by demonstrating Christ's love and equipping the congregation to minister to their special needs so that all might fellowship, worship, and serve."

Build awareness. Every church can build awareness about people with special needs. Adults and children must be taught compassion for those with disabilities. Leaders such as Carol Tolson, the director of Count Me In! Ministries in Akron, Ohio, understand that their toughest job is getting their message out. "Accessibility begins in the heart," Carol says. That sounds like a great theme for a Disability Awareness Sunday.

Involve children. During vacation Bible school last summer at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas, special needs coordinator Sue Lindahl decorated two wheelchairs with pink and blue streamers and balloons. On the first day of VBS, children saw a video about children and adults who don't have the gift of mobility. The boys and girls cheered when they raised \$1,600 for Wheels for the World -- a recycling program that collects, restores, and distributes wheelchairs to needy people around the world.

"God touched the children's hearts," says Sue. "They began bringing piggy banks, soda bottles, and envelopes full of money."

Build friendships. Another way to build awareness is to build friendships. Many children and adults with disabilities prefer to be in a regular class. When that isn't possible, Cheri Fuller and Louise Tucker Jones, in their book *Extraordinary Kids*, suggest reverse mainstreaming. Simply invite a couple of children from an age-appropriate class to join the child in his or her special needs class. This can be an opportunity to build great friendships.

The Friendship Class at Bay Presbyterian Church of Bay Village, Ohio, offers ministry to children whose needs are best met outside of a typical classroom setting. The Friendship Class is staffed by a team of volunteers, with a one-to-one ratio. A nurse is also present whenever there's a student enrolled whose medical needs call for this. When children are mainstreamed in regular classes, a Buddy is provided. The church also offers a special needs support group for parents.

"This group is open to mothers of children with hidden disabilities," says Libby Peterson, the director of Family Life Ministries at Bay Presbyterian Church. "Parents of children with hidden disabilities face some unique challenges. Many people who observe a child with hidden disabilities (no wheelchair) assume that bad behavior is the result of bad parenting." These parents need support.

Adapt your facility. New church buildings and playgrounds are required by law to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act regulations. Check with your city government to discover if your building needs an upgrade.

Provide respite. Because parents long for support, churches have found that families of people with special needs cling to one another at retreats and camps. "Parents described our Family Retreat as a bit of heaven," says Margaret Matasic, director of Joni and Friends in Northern Ohio. The success of such retreats is due to many people from area churches giving back to God their time, talents, and treasures.

Margaret's team plans campfire sing-alongs, activities, ladies' and men's groups, youth concerts, ropes courses, and wonderful worship times.

"Unless you have someone close to you affected by disabilities, it may be difficult to imagine the enormity of the additional strain this puts families under," Margaret says. Families who come together can provide immense emotional support for one another.

Train caregivers. Pierson suggests five ways to train caregivers to serve people with special needs.

1. Encourage caregivers to talk with people about their disabilities. It won't offend people with disabilities, and it'll break down any walls of fear.
2. Teach proper etiquette. For example, when guiding a blind child to a chair, direct the child to the side and simply tell him that the chair is on his left. The child will feel for it with his leg and slide into the seat. You don't need to be trained in many kinds of disabilities, just the ones that exist in your church.
3. Provide a way for caregivers to observe qualified teachers at other churches or community centers.
4. Have each caregiver get to know one child and his or her family. Encourage caregivers to follow their students through a daily routine. This will give marvelous insights into each child's needs.
5. Set up practice teaching events. Team caregivers together and let one pretend to be a person with a special need. After people spend time in a wheelchair or blindfold, ask them to critique their experiences.

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