

Ministries with Children with Disabilities in Sunday school and other Church Activities

Changing Our Questions

By Liz Moen

Often, when we find ourselves teaching a child who moves, learns, or behaves differently from his or her peers, our question becomes, "What are we going to do about Johnny?" My challenge for you is to change that question to, "What can we do for Sam?" "What gifts does Susie have that she might share with us and how can we accommodate that sharing?" and "How are we being blessed through Cara?" When we begin to understand persons with disabilities as persons who have value to contribute to our class and to our lives rather than a problem to solve, we begin to see them from Jesus' point of view.

What can we do for Sam ? This article is far too short to tell you how to accommodate for the needs of all children with learning, physical, or behavioral disabilities. Almost always, accommodations such as schedules, clear directions, and a quiet space benefit all the children in the class. A few quick pointers that may be helpful are

- rearranging the room for improved accessibility;
- developing a picture schedule to show what will happen next in the classroom;
- providing a quiet or get away space in the classroom or in another room;
- having an adult or youth buddy to accompany the child in class.

The best sources for how to meet the needs of children with disabilities are their parents who live with and care for them 24/7. Communication is important. Don't be afraid to ask questions about what works to help their child function well in a group setting. Avoid asking them to stay with their child. This is a ministry you can offer parents (as well as their children) by giving them an opportunity to pursue their own spiritual nourishment while their child is with you.

What gifts might Susie have to offer our class or church, and how can we accommodate that sharing? Each person has something to offer to God. It might be something as simple as a smile when the teacher greets each student by name or as helpful as passing out materials. Everyone wants to feel valued and valuable regardless of ability or disability. As we look for ways each child can contribute to the class, we can begin to teach that everyone has gifts to offer to God and that as Christians we are called share those gifts.

How are we being blessed through Cara? Not all lessons learned are lessons taught through the curriculum of the day. Unconditional love, perseverance, hope, joy, and enthusiastic worship are just a few of the lessons that have been learned by all involved when children with disabilities are included in all aspects of church life. To be sure, there will be difficulties and some trial and error as you work your way into ministry with persons with disabilities. Looking for the blessings -- how everyone's lives are enriched through the participation of persons with disabilities in our church -- reminds us why we persevere until we get it right.

Over and over again in Scripture, we see the Holy Spirit moving and working in unexpected ways. The same is true when churches open their hearts, minds, and doors to persons with disabilities.

For additional information about including persons with disabilities in Sunday school and all church activities you may find these websites helpful:

www.undisabilityministries.org

<http://ntcumc.org/specialneedsresourceguide>

www.keyministry.org/

www.joniandfriends.org

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