

# SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRY IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

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*Jesus loves the little children,  
All the children of the world,  
Deaf and blind, and slow to speak,  
Some delayed and others weak,  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

**F**or many years, you could find me most Sundays helping kids gather lesson papers, Bibles, and crafts as their parents waited to pick them up from Sunday school.

One day a mom said to me, “Thanks for all you do, but I’m so sorry you missed worship. Today’s service was beautiful.” It’s funny how parents so easily assume that we who serve in children’s ministry miss out on worship.

“Oh, I don’t miss out,” I replied, “I get the joy of worshipping with our precious kids.” Don’t get me wrong, children’s ministry has its challenges, but I can honestly say I don’t feel like I’m missing out by teaching children while the other adults gather. It’s a reward to me, and in this chapter I’ll give suggestions that’ll help you make your special needs ministry an efficient and meaningful reward, as well.

## HOW CAN WE SUPPORT KIDS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

This simple question is one that you can ask about the children in your church who have special needs. We ask the question with the goal of supporting these children who learn differently, and the adults and children in your Sunday school ministry can help with this.

*At age 8, Robert hadn’t yet learned to stay in his seat during the Bible lesson. He took a hands-on approach to every object lesson, puppet show, and poster included with the curriculum. While the other children watched and giggled, Robert’s pudgy fingers grabbed each item one by one and pulled it close to his face. He often asked questions loudly, distracting the group from our lesson.*

*One Sunday when Robert was absent, I addressed his behavior with the other kids. Putting my lesson aside, I said, “Boys and girls, I’d like to talk to you about our friend Robert. Sometimes Robert’s curiosity and questions distract us during the lesson. Have you noticed that he wears very thick glasses to help him see? This weekend Robert is at a school for the blind, where he’s learning to do things for himself when he can no longer see.” The kids were very still and thoughtful for a while. Then one girl asked, “What can we do to help Robert?”*

Whether children have needs such as blindness, deafness, spina bifida, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, muscular dystrophy, or a missing limb, they all want to be accepted for themselves. They’re made in the image of God and have many things in common with all children. Many are also typical learners with the capacity to accomplish great things. They make

friends easily and want to be included when churches are willing to eliminate facility and program barriers.

What universal characteristics have you noticed about the children with special needs in your Sunday school program? Take time now to write your thoughts here: \_\_\_\_\_

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To minister to children with special needs and their families, we must strive to overcome common barriers with our facilities and programs.

**Facility Barriers** Church buildings can have significant barriers to welcoming families affected by disabilities. Here are some aspects to evaluate based on kids' needs:

- visible handicapped parking spots
- handicapped curb ramps at every entrance
- handicapped-accessible doors on at least 50 percent of entrances
- handicapped-accessible restrooms on each building level
- child-safe meeting room furnishings in every meeting room your ministry uses
- handicapped-accessible playground equipment
- soft lighting

In addition, there are some aspects that are legally required. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) says churches must be fully wheelchair accessible, meaning doorways must be wide enough, there must be ramps to access entrances, and restrooms must be handicapped-accessible. (See [ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm](http://ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm) for all specific rules and regulations.) Don't worry—there are resources out there to help you. Even today's playground contractors are prepared to guide churches in remodeling their outdoor spaces to meet the needs of children with physical disabilities. You can download an extensive church accessibility list at [joniandfriends.org/help-and-resources/downloads/church-facility-accessibility-checklist/](http://joniandfriends.org/help-and-resources/downloads/church-facility-accessibility-checklist/).

**Program Barriers** Have you ever considered that your Sunday school lesson plans could actually be a barrier to a child's participation? Often, correcting this issue is as simple as making individualized adaptations to the curriculum based on the kids you have in your group. Don't hesitate to call a parent if you're not sure how to adapt an activity to a child's special need. For most of these parents, your call will be like sweet music to their ears. They'll think, *Wow! Someone's willing to go the extra mile for my child—praise the Lord!* And that's just the first step. There's even more you can do to eliminate program barriers and create inclusive Sunday school ministries.

## WHAT'S UNIQUE ABOUT INCLUSIVE SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRIES?

Someone once said, "The question is not can these children learn, but can we teach them?"

Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities were historically classified as "mentally retarded." Today, this term is considered offensive, and people-first language is required in governmental and educational

documents. For example, we say the people-first phrase "the boy with autism" not the label-first phrase "autistic boy." This style of speech recognizes that a boy has a special need, but he also has many other qualities. All churches that embrace the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 to "therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations...Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you" can be leading examples of compassion, love, and respect to the estimated 17 to 20 percent of families affected by disabilities in America alone.

### GET THE WORD OUT

Here are tangible ways to create awareness.

- **Offer classes** in disability awareness and disability-friendly manners for volunteers as well as older children and teenagers. Invite a local special education teacher to lead the class, and include parents of children with special needs as guests.
- **Purchase books** and videos for the church library that share people's life stories about disabilities. Encourage your congregation to view them.
- **Interview a family** who's excited about the special needs ministry at your church. Publish the interview on your church website, in local newsletters, and on church invitation cards to distribute in your community.

**Inclusive Programming** Successful Sunday school ministries are well prepared but also flexible. While it's always our goal to include children in their peer groups at church, some children with developmental disabilities such as autism, Asperger's syndrome, Pervasive Development Disorder (PDD), Rett syndrome, and others may be more comfortable in a special meeting room designed for their unique needs.

Pam Baldwin, a special needs minister at a church in Glendale, Arizona, says, "We're using the reverse inclusion model, where we invite typical kids to join in our special needs class to participate in crafts and music. This prevents isolation and is a blessing to everyone, including our volunteers."

**Inclusive Volunteers** Since these children are unique with mild, moderate, or severe disorders, search for volunteers who can look beyond their needs to discover their gifts and talents. Some volunteers who aren't comfortable teaching groups of children are happy to build a relationship with one child as a buddy. Older children with mild disabilities may prefer a peer buddy who draws less attention to disabilities than an adult helper.

Volunteers don't need to know everything about every disability; they just need to be aware of the characteristics and learning style of the children they're serving. Progress may seem slow, but special needs leaders will tell you there's nothing more gratifying than watching a child come to understand a biblical concept or say a heartfelt prayer for the first time.

Meet regularly with your team to share behavior management tips, discuss how to adapt lessons, and pray for kids and their families. Working so your team becomes a family will go a long way in retaining these volunteers.

**Inclusive Teaching Methods** Here are the "3 R's" of teaching children with special needs.

- **Routine** Keep schedules consistent and allow plenty of time for transitions.
- **Reinforce** Explore the same Bible passage for several weeks using a variety of activities based on the children's abilities.
- **Reminders** Introduce one prayer concept at a time and break down Bible verses into smaller portions. Make take-home reminders during craft time, preparing supplies in advance with large and small motor skills in mind.

## MUST-HAVE TOOLS FOR TODAY'S SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRIES

There are many resources out there to help you prepare for and successfully continue a special needs ministry. Here is a list of the resources I find to be the most helpful.

*Kids' Corner*, an interactive disability awareness website for kids, at [joniandfriends.org/kids-corner](http://joniandfriends.org/kids-corner).

Lee, A. F. *Leading a Special Needs Ministry: A Practical Guide to Including Children and Loving Families*. Orange.

Newman, B. *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Faith Alive.

Tada, J. E. *Special Needs Smart Pages: Advice, Answers and Articles About Teaching Children With Special Needs*. Gospel Light.

Verbal, P., General Editor *Special Needs Ministry for Children: Creating a Welcoming Place for Families Whose Children Have Special Needs*. Group Publishing.

## WHAT'S NEW IN SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES?

Special needs ministries, which were once rare in the church, are growing in number due to the increase in families coping with disabilities. What may've begun with just providing extra assistants in Sunday school is quickly becoming an expanding community of faith.

Martie Kwasny, director of Sonbeams, a special needs ministry in a Jackson, Mississippi church, says the biggest change she's seen in special needs ministry is developing relationships. "Our leadership and church family has gone from an event mentality to personal rela-

tionships with children and families touched by special needs, including them in birthday parties, sleepovers, and dinner invitations," says Martie.

Susan Galindo, the special needs director at a church in San Antonio, Texas, has also caught the vision for expanding outreach through Sunday school ministry. "Our children's ministry is providing a Kids Night Out as a respite for parents, including offering scholarships for military families' children with special needs," says Susan. "We provide trained volunteer buddies for children who need them at our VBS, music camp, and drama camp. We've also expanded the size and scope of our sensory motor playroom to accommodate multiple children who benefit from some quiet-time space."

These two churches work to avoid common pitfalls that can cause a Sunday school special needs ministry to crash and burn. Consider this letter I received from a discouraged volunteer:



*I'm ready to quit! Our church has over 1,000 members and several pastors. A steering committee was established for a disability ministry. I represented the children's ministry and worked with the children's pastor to develop a plan and create a designated sensory room. I served in the room during Sunday school with several preschoolers. Because we didn't have enough kids in our class, the pastors decided to take our room away and use it to expand the church's nursery. Now we don't have any space for special needs.*

This church began well, but viewed the ministry as a program rather than a call from God to minister to the most vulnerable. They could've taken a lesson from this next church.

*The Harper Family was looking for a church home when they visited Trinity Community Church. Trinity advertised a special needs ministry. And as April dropped off her son, she met 20-year-old Ellen. Ellen had mobility issues and appeared to be nonverbal. Yet as other volunteers cared for her, she served the toddlers. As April's family continued their search, April couldn't stop thinking about Ellen. After visiting 11 churches, the Harpers returned to Trinity Community Church where they quickly got involved and became members. Their decision wasn't so much about their son's needs as it was about Ellen. They were attracted to how the church valued this young woman and helped her to discover her gifts. God worked through a person with a disability to help this family find their church home.*

I believe churches need those with special needs as much as these people need the church. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:27, "All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it."

## **WHAT'S *NOT* NEW IN SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRIES?**

Romans 12:10-11 reminds us to love, hold on, be friends, don't burn out, be alert, pray, and be inventive! This formula for successful ministry to children with and without special needs never changes. It's the heart of God working through his people to tell the world about Jesus.



As I look over my years in special needs ministry, I've often thought of little Robert who had vision issues. I moved out of state and lost touch with his family. Yet I often prayed for Robert's sight and wondered how he was doing.

I've moved back to that area now, and when I began attending the same church where I'd worked with Robert, I was blessed with a big surprise. One day, our pastor invited a man to give his testimony in preparation for communion—and it was Robert! With his white cane in hand, Robert stepped to the podium. He shared about a life of regret, drugs, homelessness, and suicidal thoughts, but he also shared that he never forgot that God loved him. At his lowest point, he called out for God's forgiveness and found his way back to church. He reunited with old friends who still loved him. He expressed a new delight in hearing the Word of God and a fresh joy in walking with Jesus. Robert is still disabled, but his heart is free and eternity is real to him.

Who are the Roberts in your Sunday school whose special needs can potentially drive them down a painful, dark path? You can be the change agent God works through to plant an eternal message of hope in those people's hearts.



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