WHERE TO BEGIN

5 First Steps Toward an Accessible Children's Ministry

Sandra Peoples
equipping churches · encouraging families

The most important steps your church can take to welcome every child and family

1 Understand the need in your community.

1 in 5 people in the U.S. has a disability (Census 2000).

85% of parents say it is harder to attend church with a child with disabilities.

33% of churches with more than 250 members have an intentional disability ministry program.

5% of churches with fewer than 250 members have an intentional disability ministry program.

Sources: U.S. Census 2000 (1 in 5); Erik Carter (85%, 33%, 5%).

Who is missing? Families affected by:

Special needs / disabilities

- Autism
- Down syndrome
- Cerebral palsy
- Intellectual disability
- Being deaf or blind
- Other physical/cognitive disability

Learning disabilities

- Dyslexia
- Dysgraphia
- Other oral/written language disorders
- Executive function deficits
- Sensory processing disorder

Mental health / behavioral diagnosis

- ADD
- ADHD
- Oppositional defiant disorder
- Trauma
- Social anxiety
- OCD

2 Identify the ministry environments your church can offer.

Disability ministry serves anyone who needs modifications to the curriculum or environment to hear, understand, and respond to the gospel.

Inclusive

A typical children's class of same-age peers, often with a teen or adult buddy trained and prepared to meet the student's additional needs.

Specialized

A self-contained class with curriculum and a space designed for students' additional needs, often in a sensory-friendly classroom.

Determine the best environment by asking: ***"Where can this child best hear, understand, and respond to the gospel?"***

3 Review policies to be more inclusive and keep everyone safe.

COMMON AREAS FOR POLICY ADJUSTMENTS

- Toileting procedures
- Classroom safety (aggression and self-injurious behavior)
- Security for children who elope
- Support for high medical needs
- Emergency plans for mobility and communication aids
- Sexual abuse prevention

Insurance

Your insurance policy covers people with disabilities just like every other person on campus or at a church event.

Communication

The key is good communication with parents and clear expectations and boundaries. Parents agree to the level of help you offer, with the training and staff you have.

4 Communicate the available options with parents.

Add a question like this to your children's ministry intake form:

> *"Our church cares for the success and safety of each participant in our children's ministry. Does your child have any allergies, medical conditions, learning differences, special needs, or disabilities we should be aware of?"*

If the answer is yes, be prepared for an additional conversation or a more detailed intake form.

On your website

Give your disability ministry its own page, and include your options for inclusion on the children's ministry page.

For a first visit

Make it clear how families can visit for the first time with a contact form, a ministry leader's contact information, or a registration form. If certain classes are offered only at specific times or campuses, say so.

5 Focus on discipleship.

Every child is made in the image of God and has the ability to have a relationship with Him. Our goal is not just to care for children with disabilities but to help them grow as disciples of Jesus.

GIVE EVERY CHILD OPPORTUNITIES TO

Fellowship | **Worship** | **Learn** | **Serve**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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