

# Working with Students with Special Needs

## Part 1: Overview and Theology

### Toolbox II

**Suggested Session Length:** 45 minutes

**PowerPoint Available:** “Toolbox II – Working with Students with Special Needs (Part 1)”

**Audience:** Directors and other DL leaders

**General Topic:** Why we love and serve students with special needs in Discovery Land.

**Additional Resources needed for this training:**

- Planning Worksheet: Take Inventory (one per participant) (resource included)
- Whiteboard or large piece of paper
- Dry erase markers or markers
- Writing utensils (one per participant)

**Slide 1: Welcome**

*Welcome participants to the training, “Working with Students with Special Needs”. Explain that this session is going to cover an overview of ministering to children with special needs. Part 2 of this training will cover more detailed techniques and adaptations.*

**Slide 2: Our Mission Field**

*Share the following quote from Lamar Hardwick:*

“At about twenty percent of the population, the disability community is the largest minority group in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

If people with disabilities make up 20% of the population, we will certainly encounter children with special needs in our ministry. Before we dig into how to serve these children well, we need to establish WHY we should work hard to include them in our children’s ministry.

**Slide 3: Theology and Disability: Creation**

*Read Psalm 139:13.*

When we study Scripture, we see that God has created each person with intention and love. This includes people with disabilities. Consider this quote by Emily Colson:

“First Corinthians tells us that God has arranged the parts of the church body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be, and ‘the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable’ (1 Corinthians 12:22). God places value in every life, and He calls His church to affirm that value.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Lamar Hardwick, “Diversity and Disability in the Church,” BioLogos, 14 October 2021, <https://biologos.org/articles/diversity-and-disability-in-the-church>.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Colson, “Who Said That Autistic People Are Not People?,” Focus on the Family, 29 April 2022, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/pro-life/the-value-of-every-life/>.

## **Slide 4: Theology and Disability: Old Testament**

*Read Leviticus 19:14.*

When we look at the Law, we see that honoring those with disabilities is a priority to God. Let's look at an example from the Old Testament: David and Mephibosheth.

*Read 2 Samuel 9:1-13.*

When David became king of Israel, he kept his promise to Jonathan by honoring Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, who couldn't walk because of a disability. In order to make sure he would always be taken care of, David gave him everything that had belonged to Saul. David also showed great honor to Mephibosheth by inviting him to eat at his table. At this time in history, it was common that a ruler would kill all relatives of the previous king, to eliminate any threat to the throne. With two lame feet, Mephibosheth would have been an easy target. Instead, David chose to honor him.

## **Slide 5: Theology and Disability: New Testament**

Jesus spent much of His earthly ministry honoring and caring for those with disabilities. Kathy McReynolds puts it this way:

"During Jesus' ministry on earth, often the best way to find (Him) was to seek out those society considered strange, unclean, or undesirable; Jesus often sought them out (Himself) in order to show that God's love for us does not depend on our merits or abilities, much less our outward appearance."<sup>3</sup>

**Optional Activity:** Let's see how many examples we can find of Jesus honoring, healing, or caring for those with disabilities. *Participants can use their Bibles and phones to come up with examples. Record their examples as a list on the whiteboard.*

**Here are a few verses you can suggest if participants need help:**

- *Centurion's paralyzed servant (Matthew 8:5-13)*
- *Bleeding woman (Luke 8:43-48)*
- *Blind men (Matthew 9:27-31; Matthew 20:30-34; Mark 8:22-26; John 9:1-38)*
- *Man at Pool of Bethesda who couldn't walk (John 5:1-9)*
- *Man with shriveled hand (Matthew 12:10-13)*
- *Deaf and mute man (Mark 7:31-37)*

Finally, the Great Commission includes people with disabilities.

*Read Mark 16:15 and Matthew 28:16-20.*

When Jesus says "all creation" and "all nations", that includes children with special needs! Children with disabilities need to hear the Gospel and be saved by Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>3</sup> Kathy McReynolds, "More Than Skin Deep: The Image of God in People with Disabilities," BioLogos, 29 June 2012, <https://biologos.org/articles/more-than-skin-deep-the-image-of-god-in-people-with-disabilities>.

## **Slide 6: What We Gain**

When we welcome children with disabilities into our ministries, we gain some incredible opportunities, including the chance to use and grow our spiritual gifts. What do you think we can gain when these children are included? *Invite participants to share; record answers on a whiteboard or large piece of paper.*

*Benefits include:*

- *We are able to use our gifts and abilities to build up the body of Christ.*
- *We have the opportunity to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.*
- *We can develop patience and creativity.*
- *We can gain deeper empathy and a broader perspective as we see these children participating in the family of God.*
- *Often, when we make children's ministry accessible to children with disabilities, we make church accessible for the entire family!*
- *We get to see God display His power and glory. (John 9:1-3)*

*Share the following quote from Michael Beates:*

*"When we begin to do for the least of these what David did for Mephibosheth, and what Jesus called (His) followers to do, we discover this: we are the broken and the needy. They. Are. Us. Perhaps more openly and undeniably, but all the same, they remind us of our true state before God. That is the gift they bring to God's people."*<sup>4</sup>

## **Slide 7: How to Start? Pray!**

When you are ready to begin making your ministry accessible to children with disabilities, it is essential to begin with prayer. We need to pray for the children that will come, for their families, for your team, and above all, for the Gospel to be declared.

It is wise to gather a team of people who will commit to praying intentionally for these requests. This prayer team will support both you and the ministry as you launch and as you continue to serve children with disabilities.

Joni Eareckson Tada writes, "When we pray for a child with a disability, we wrestle not against the flesh and blood of cystic fibrosis or muscular dystrophy. We wrestle against powers and principalities who would relish nothing more than to keep that child in despair. That's why, when it comes to reaching disabled children with the (Gospel), we must first pray for them with Christ's perspective and heart of compassion. God will prepare the heart of the disabled child..."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Michael Beates, quote from *Disability and the Gospel*, retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/13542220-disability-and-the-gospel>. 29 August 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Joni Eareckson Tada, "How to Develop a Ministry for Kids with Disabilities," [childrensministry.com](https://childrensministry.com/develop-ministry-disabilities/), 24 May 2023, <https://childrensministry.com/develop-ministry-disabilities/>.

## **Slide 8: How to Start? Take Inventory!**

There are many things we can do, adjust, and add to make our ministry a welcoming place for children with disabilities. Knowing what to do first can be overwhelming. Before making any changes, take inventory.

First, take inventory of your needs. What disabilities are present in your church family at this moment? In addition to your current needs, keep in mind that you may have different needs in the future. We never know when a child with a disability will enter our churches.

1. You may encounter the following types of disabilities:
  - a. Physical (Examples: muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, some forms of arthritis, vision impairment, hearing impairment, etc.)
  - b. Intellectual (Examples: Down syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, genetic conditions, birth defects, etc.)
  - c. Hidden (Examples: Autism, ADHD, emotional/behavioral). *Note: As of 2020, the rate of Autism diagnosis for 8-year-olds in the U.S. was 1 in 36, which was an increase from the rate of 1 in 42 just a few years before. As Autism rates continue to increase, so will the number of kids with Autism present in churches.*<sup>6</sup>
2. It is very important that we NOT diagnose children. If a volunteer suspects that a child has a disability, they should speak with the Discovery Land Director, not the family. Directors must use wisdom in talking with parents about a suspected disability.

Directors, if you suspect that a child in your ministry has special needs, it may not be wise to come right out and ask the parents. Instead, you can begin the conversation with, "I notice that Johnny struggles with listening, staying in his seat, getting upset during worship, etc. Do you see the same thing at home or school? Do you have suggestions, tools, or strategies that we can use to help him be successful when he is in DL?" Oftentimes this type of conversation will open the door for parents to talk about additional support their child receives, including whether or not it is related to a disability.

Next, take inventory of your current resources: Is there anyone in your congregation who is uniquely qualified or passionate about ministering to people with disabilities?

- a. Are there any special education teachers or parents of children with special needs who may be willing to get involved?
- b. Is there someone in your congregation who knows sign language?
- c. Is there someone who is skilled in carpentry or construction who might be able to help you add physical accommodations (such as ramps or railings) to your ministry space?
- d. Are there any teens or young adults who may be called to serve with this group of people?
- e. Is there someone with a medical background, such as a doctor, nurse, or therapist, who has experience working with kids?
- f. Are there any nurses, CNAs, or other caregivers who care for children with special needs?

**Optional Activity:** *Hand out Planning Worksheet to each participant. Using the worksheet's prompts, have participants come up with a list of their current needs and resources. Note: If this option is used, participants should save their completed worksheet for the corresponding optional activity in Part 2 of this training.*

---

<sup>6</sup> Matthew J. Maenner et al., "Prevalence and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years," CDC, 24 March 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/ss/ss7202a1.htm>.

Once you have spent time in concentrated prayer, established a prayer team, and taken inventory, you are ready to begin making changes to your ministry to make it more accessible. In our next session, we will dig into some specific types of adaptations and accommodations, but before we close, I would like to share a few reminders with you.

### **Slide 9: As you prepare, remember...**

As you work toward building a church community that welcomes and cares for people with disabilities, it can be easy to lose your focus on the reason behind it all. Outside the church, the motivation for including people with disabilities doesn't have anything to do with Jesus Christ.

**Simply “including people” isn't our reason for welcoming children with special needs.** Ray Chumbler and Derek Stine write, “It is through the (Gospel) alone that we experience true life, given to us by the Son of God (John 3:16-17, 10:10). It is the only proper backdrop for effectively integrating people with disabilities in local churches. The message of salvation – that Jesus came to live and die for sinners and that (He) rose again from the grave – is good news. With this in mind, we should not seek to integrate people with disabilities merely because we want to include them.”<sup>7</sup>

**We don't welcome children with disabilities because we want to “set an example” either.** They continue, “Nor should we seek integration just so we can show our local community how to best serve people with disabilities. We integrate precisely because we know God redeems people from every tribe (Revelation 5:9-10) and will dwell with them at the end of the age (Revelation 21:1-4). Our churches should echo this coming reality, and one effective means to that end is including people with disabilities into (Gospel)-shaped church life.”<sup>8</sup>

So how do we build a Gospel-shaped church community, welcoming and caring for all people? Ray Chumbler and Derek Stine answer, “Building this type of community begins when we start having genuine conversations with one another. Do not approach people with disabilities as merely a goal to fulfill; see them as fellow image bearers with dreams, fears, and passions like yourself. All it takes to begin is just one conversation.”<sup>9</sup>

**When we are motivated by the Gospel and are committed to honoring all people as image-bearers of our incredible God, we are ready to shape our children's ministry into a place where all children are welcome and are able to experience Christ's love.**

As we end Part 1 of this training, let's pray for God to equip us with wisdom and love as we undertake this important work.

*Close in prayer.*

---

<sup>7</sup> Ray Chumbler and Derek Stine, “Taking Steps To Better Integrate People With Disabilities In Church Life,” Joni & Friends, 4 April 2023, <https://joniandfriends.org/disability-in-mission/taking-steps-to-better-integrate-people-with-disabilities-in-church-life/>.

<sup>8</sup> Chumbler and Stine, “Taking Steps to Better Integrate...”.

<sup>9</sup> Chumbler and Stine, “Taking Steps to Better Integrate...”.