

Working with Students with Special Needs

Part 2: Techniques

Toolbox II

Suggested Session Length: 45 minutes

PowerPoint Available: “Toolbox II – Working with Students with Special Needs (Part 2)”

Audience: Directors and other DL leaders

General Topic: How to help students with special needs succeed in Discovery Land.

Additional Resources needed for this training:

- Planning Worksheet: Take Inventory (if used during Part I training) (resource included)
- Behavior-Prevention Strategies handout (resource included)
- Adapting the DL Program for Children with Special Needs handout (resource included)
- “My Discovery Land Book – Preschool sample” (resource included)
- Sample intake form (resource included)

Optional Resource: <https://www.keyministry.org/churches>

Slide 1: Welcome

Welcome participants to the training – “Working with Students with Special Needs”. Explain that this session will cover more detailed techniques and adaptations. If any participant did not attend the first session, make sure they are given the previous session’s information in advance.

Slide 2: Preparing to Welcome Students

In our last session, we discussed the importance of ministering to children with special needs. We learned what Scripture says about this topic, we discussed the important role of the local church, and we introduced the first steps for preparing to welcome students with special needs into your children’s ministry. Once we have spent time in prayer and taken inventory of our needs and resources, what is our next step?

Slide 3: Know Your Students

When surveying your church’s current needs, you were able to identify individual students and their general needs. Now it is time to dig into the specifics of what it will take to successfully include them in your ministry programming.

Remember, when working with children with special needs, be sure to adhere to all of your church’s child protection policies and procedures.

Meet with each student’s parents or guardians to gather as much information about the student as you can. If the parents already have effective resources and strategies in place for helping the student be happy, successful, and safe, utilize these familiar resources and strategies in your ministry when possible.

While it is helpful to understand the strategies parents and schools use to support their students, not all strategies are helpful in the church setting. And some strategies that seem effective to the parents or schools may not be wise according to biblical standards - for example, they may condone sin or deny the child appropriate training. As you develop a plan to support a student with special needs, evaluate whether the methods follow biblical principles and whether the methods will be effective in the children’s ministry environment. If you are unsure, talk to your pastor.

Distribute the "Sample Intake Form" handout to all participants. Here are some questions you can ask the parents or guardians:

1. What is your child's diagnosed disability?
2. Does your child display any of the following?
 - a. Hearing loss
 - b. Vision loss
 - c. Other physical disabilities
 - d. Cognitive/intellectual disabilities
 - e. Global developmental delays
 - f. Autism (please provide more detail below)
 - g. ADHD (please provide more detail below)
 - h. Aggressive meltdowns (hitting, biting, kicking, etc.)
 - i. Non-aggressive meltdowns (crying, falling to floor, hiding, etc.)
 - j. Escaping (running away)
 - k. Emotional outbursts
 - l. Sensory Processing Disorder (please provide more detail below)
 - m. Other: _____
3. Does your child have a history of seizures or epilepsy?
4. Can your child safely go up and down steps without assistance?
5. If your child has a physical limitation, do they require special equipment such as a wheelchair or walker? Please explain.
6. Does your child struggle with multiple transitions and/or change?
7. What are the primary ways your child communicates?
 - a. Clear verbal communication that is easily understood
 - b. Requires prompts to initiate communication
 - c. Vocalizations not always understood
 - d. Requires prompts/cues to interact
 - e. Requires prompts/cues to carry on a conversation
 - f. Predominately non-verbal (uses a device, pictures, etc.)
 - g. Other
8. If your child experiences meltdowns, what usually causes them?
9. What is the best way to calm your child during a meltdown?
10. Does your child have any medical concerns or diagnoses not mentioned above that we should be aware of? Please explain.
11. Does your child use the bathroom without assistance? (Note: Parents are responsible for any and all assistance using the bathroom and will be contacted when needed.)
12. Does your child have any allergies?
13. What tools or strategies do you use at home to help your child?
14. If your child attends school, what does support look like while the child is at school?
15. What kind of support would be helpful for your child when they are participating at church?

When possible, spend time with the incoming student. Get to know their personality and temperament, learn about their interests and preferences, and begin to build a relationship.

Slide 4: Prepare Your Physical Space

Once you've identified specific students and their needs, you are ready to prepare your ministry space to make it accessible.

To begin, walk through your entire ministry space, and look at it "through the eyes" of each student with special needs. Do you see anything in any room or space that will cause difficulty for a particular student?

Note: If possible, invite a parent with a child with special needs to do this with you. A parent's insight will likely be even more helpful than a medical professional's. Parents who have kids with disabilities see things nobody else can see, and they can draw our attention to what really matters to them and their kids.

Here are a few physical items to pay attention to, keeping in mind that you may not need to adjust all of these elements - keep each student's individual needs in mind as you assess your physical ministry space.

- **Lighting:** If a student experiences seizures, do you use strobe or flashing lights that might provoke a seizure? Or if a student is vision-impaired, are any of the spaces dimly lit, causing a safety issue or making it difficult for that student to read or participate?
- **Pathways/Mobility:** Are there clear and smooth pathways to all classrooms, bathrooms, entrances, etc., for students with physical disabilities? Are there ramps available wherever there are steps? Are there handrails where needed? Can doors be opened and closed easily? (Heavy doors may cause difficulties for students with physical disabilities.)
- **Signage:** Are signs easy to read? Do they use high contrast, clear fonts, and large-print letters?

Once you've walked through your ministry space and identified necessary updates, make those changes. In our previous session, we discussed finding individuals in your church family who may be able to help build ramps, handrails, or other needs. This is when you would reach out to those individuals for assistance.

If not all the changes can be made right away, make sure families are aware of physical spaces that may affect their child, such as a lack of a ramp in a certain area.

Slide 5: Prepare Your Schedule

Some students may need an adjusted schedule or a visual schedule to help them anticipate the events of the morning.

Adjusted Schedule: If a student is unable to participate in a specific portion of the morning, create a plan for what they can do during that time. The replacement activity should still connect with the morning's lesson, but may need to be less stimulating, more concrete, or shorter in time than the original activity.

Picture Schedule: Students who experience difficulty with change or transitions may benefit from knowing the routine in advance. A visual story about their experience in Discovery Land can be written for parents and/or volunteers to review with the student each week before they attend. *Refer to the "My Discovery Land Book – Preschool sample".*

Two ideas for creating a Picture Schedule:

1. To help a student stay on task, create a picture schedule that includes a photo or drawing of each one of the activities of the morning. Seeing a picture schedule of what's happening can help students feel calm because it makes their time in Discovery Land more predictable.

2. If an entire schedule of the morning is too overwhelming, try using “first/then.” Using a small dry erase board, draw two boxes side by side with the word “first” over the left box and “then” over the right box. Inside the boxes, draw pictures that represent the next two activities. Have the student erase the activity when it is finished. Once both activities are complete, draw the next two activities. Repeat until class time is over.

If a student would benefit from this accommodation, create a picture schedule or plan how to adjust their schedule. Then confirm your plan with the student’s parents or guardians to ensure it will be clear and helpful for the student.

Slide 6: Prepare Your Team

Some students will be successful on their own with a few accommodations, while others will need one-on-one support throughout portions of the morning or possibly even the entire morning.

If a student does not need one-on-one support, make sure their classroom team is aware in advance of any adaptations needed for them to be successful.

- Example: If a student is hearing impaired, make sure the classroom team knows to have that student sit near the front of the room, so they can clearly hear the teacher during the lesson.
- Example: If a student has a physical disability and uses a mobility device such as a wheelchair, make sure the classroom team knows how the Discover Time activity will be adapted so that the student can participate.

If a student has special needs that require one-on-one support during portions of the morning, or throughout the entire morning, consider using a “buddy system” with a volunteer or an older peer. When selecting this “buddy,” take the student’s specific needs into account.

- Example: Does this student escalate quickly and become physically aggressive when overwhelmed? Make sure the “buddy” is an adult that is physically prepared to manage a situation like this.
- Example: Is this student able to participate fully in all activities, but has difficulty with changes in routine or transitions and needs time to adjust? An older peer “buddy” may be a good fit for this student.
- Example: If the student has had trauma in their background, make sure their “buddy” is consistent and compassionate.
- Example: Does the student need extra support or accommodations either due to a physical disability or due to challenges caused by a hidden disability? Try to find someone to support that student who has a background working with kids with this type of disability.
- Example: Does the student have a history of running away? If so, make sure their “buddy” is physically able to run after them if needed.

Note: Elementary-aged students should be paired with a buddy of the same gender if possible.

In our previous session, we identified resources in our church family. If you need someone who knows sign language, or if you have any special education teachers in your church, this is a great opportunity to invite those individuals to serve as a “buddy” or as a coach or trainer for a “buddy.”

Slide 7: Tips for Managing Behavior

All challenging behavior is sinful behavior. For example, when we get frightened, sometimes we lash out at others in fear. Sin is sin, and kids with disabilities need their sins forgiven just like the rest of us.

The difference is that kids who demonstrate challenging behavior related to their disability lack the crucial cognitive skills (impulse control, frustration tolerance, problem solving, etc.) needed to maintain self control. For kids with disabilities, when we can identify the source of their challenging behavior, we can help them be more successful by providing the tools, strategies, and accommodations they need.

Slide 8: Types of Challenging Behavior

Deterioration of behavior has a progression. When we are aware of the signs for each type of challenging behavior, we can respond appropriately and provide the support the child needs.

Levels of behavior deterioration:

1. Distracting behavior

Types of behavior: making noises, wiggling, fidgeting, self-talk, pacing.

Support: Provide proactive support to prevent further deterioration. This could include verbal reminders, incentives, sensory tools, etc.

2. Disruptive behavior

Types of behavior: crying, screaming... anything that disrupts the learning process for your student or others.

Support: Remove the student from the situation and provide the opportunity for a break to help them reset.

3. Dangerous behavior

Types of behavior: aggression, self-harm, running away. Note: the goal is that by providing support during the distracting and disruptive phases, behavior will not deteriorate to this level.

Support: When behavior becomes dangerous, parents need to be called immediately.

Slide 9: Preventing Challenging Behavior

There are many strategies we can use to prevent challenging behavior issues. Remember, some of these strategies will work well with most students, while others will not be as effective with some students. It is very important that you know the student you're working with and understand how best to support them.

The most important strategy for successful support of kids with disabilities is relationship building. Often children with special needs struggle to develop and maintain relationships, sometimes even within their families. When you build a relationship with a child who demonstrates challenging behaviors, you are showing them the unconditional love of Jesus and communicating that they are significant and of value. When they are with a leader they feel they can trust, they have an easier time learning and developing the skills they need to do what's right.

Distribute "Challenging Behavior Prevention Strategies" handout to all participants.

Optional: *If time allows, read through the entire handout and discuss it together. If time is limited, pick a few strategies to highlight.*

We can use the following strategies to prevent challenging behavior issues:

1. Build relationships! The student should know that they are safe, known, and cared for.
2. Provide clear, simple rules and expectations.
3. Use clear language when communicating (do not use sarcasm, idioms, lots of words, etc.).
4. Be aware of your surroundings (exits, distractions, potential triggers) and how they affect the student you're working with. Be sure the student is physically safe. Always be ready with a backup plan in case the environment for a specific activity is not suited to the student's needs.
5. Be calm and have patience. If you stay calm, the student you are supporting will be more likely to stay calm.
6. Maintain an arm's-length distance from the student you are supporting at all times. Keeping an arm's-length distance keeps you safer when a student escalates, and it keeps your student safe if you need to stop them to protect them. When you maintain an arm's-length distance, you can use your body to block students who try to run away, rather than reaching out to grab them, which can injure both of you. *Note: "Buddies" should always dress for success. Wear clothes that are appropriate for the church setting but also comfortable, allowing you to move around easily, including sensible shoes that allow you to run. Do not wear high heels or flip flops.*
7. Always try to be proactive instead of reactive. Have strategies in place and ready to use to help keep your student regulated.
8. Have a predictable routine.
9. Prepare for transitions using verbal reminders and transition tools such as visual schedules, first/then pictures, timers, etc.
10. Provide choices when possible; choices should be your preferred choices (only offer two choices).
11. Pay attention to the student's position in the room. Does the student do better in the front, in the back, or to the side? Sitting in the back of the room or on the end of a row of seats makes it easier to leave if a break is needed.
12. Provide incentives. Some students who are struggling need an incentive to motivate them to work through a successful morning. Remember, some children who struggle with behavior challenges have to work extra hard to keep their bodies in control. Providing an incentive to work for can be the extra motivation needed to maintain control.
13. Use sensory tools and strategies. Have a "sensory break box" available for students who need it. Items in the box should include a variety of fidget tools, weighted objects (weighted stuffed animal, small blanket, or lap pad), visual timers (sand timers, liquid timers), noise-reducing headphones, and supplies for breathing activities (bubbles to blow after taking deep breaths, written "belly breathing" tips, etc.).



Slide 10: Adapting the DL Program for Children with Special Needs

Distribute "Adapting the DL Program for Children with Special Needs" handout to all participants.

Optional: *If time allows, read through and discuss the entire handout together. If time is limited, spend the rest of the session briefly highlighting just a few of the possible adaptations. Then skip to the last slide to conclude the session.*

Remind participants to keep their own church context in mind. Some churches may have other adaptations to make that aren't listed on the handout, and some may not need to make any of these adaptations right now (but should keep these in mind for the future if a need arises at that time).

Slide 11: Adapting the Pre-service Review Game & Worship

1. Do you need to emphasize hand motions for worship that are bigger, simpler, or done at a slower pace for the student you are working with?
2. For those who have a hard time with loud noises, how can you adapt worship time? First, make sure the sound system is not louder than necessary. If further adaptations are needed, could the student wear noise-reducing headphones or move towards the back of the worship area?
3. If you use PowerPoint slides for lyrics, are they easy to read? Is the font large enough? Is the font color easy to read against the background (contrasting colors)?
4. If you use bright or colorful lights in your worship area, are they safe for students who have seizures? (If you're not sure, ask the parent/guardian of the child who experiences seizures.)

Slide 12: Adapting Discover Time

Children with physical limitations may need accommodations, so they can participate successfully and safely in the Discover Time activity. Consider the following examples:

1. Working at a high counter:
 - a. If your student is unable to climb onto a stool, allow them to stand. Do not lift elementary- or preschool-age children who are too large to be lifted safely.
 - b. If your student can access the stool but has a difficult time keeping their balance, stand directly behind them.
 - c. If any student is unable to access stools at all, an alternate location nearby should be provided.
2. Activities that require balance and movement:
 - a. If your student has balance issues, hold their hand or stand directly behind them.
 - b. If your student experiences mobility challenges, they can observe the DT activity and cheer for their team instead of participating directly.
 - c. Make arrangements with the DT Leader in advance, so your student can assist with judging or handing out Tracker Tickets.
3. Activities that require ascending and descending stairs:
 - a. If your student has difficulty keeping their balance or other safety concerns, ALWAYS hold their hand on stairs.
 - b. Stay directly next to ALL children on stairs.
 - c. If your student is unable to safely climb up and down steps, provide an alternate location for the student to participate in an alternative DT activity.
4. Activities that require students getting up and down from the floor/ground:
 - a. If your student may experience loss of balance, hold their hands to help them get up and down.
 - b. Maintain close proximity if they need support.
 - c. If your student experiences mobility challenges, they can observe the DT activity and cheer for their team instead of participating directly.
 - d. Make arrangements with the DT Leader in advance, so your student can assist with judging or handing out Tracker Tickets.
 - e. If possible, provide a modified version of the DT at a tabletop level.
5. Activities involving the use of water:
 - a. Always proceed with caution as floors can be wet, which is a hazard.
 - b. If your student has a difficult time keeping their balance, hold their hand or stand directly behind them.

- c. If your student experiences mobility challenges, they can observe the DT activity and cheer for their team instead of participating directly.
- d. Make arrangements with the DT Leader in advance, so your student can assist with judging or handing out Tracker Tickets.

Slide 13: Adapting the Bible Lesson

1. If using a Buddy System with volunteers, make sure volunteers have thoroughly read the lesson, in case the student is unable to stay with the group; then the volunteer can still discuss what the rest of the group is learning in the lesson.
2. Do you need to help find the Bible passage during the lesson?
3. Does the student need encouragement to answer questions? Prep them ahead of time for the answer and prep the teacher that your student has the next answer and to call on them.
4. If attention is a problem, or if the activity is too much for them, can the student do a quiet activity alongside the class that relates to the lesson/activity?

Slide 14: Q&A

Take time to address participants' questions, then close in prayer.