



BE ALL IN

A Ministry Guide for Special Needs
Inclusion in Children's Ministry

By Sandra Peoples

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Our goal at Lifeway is to equip and resource churches as they seek to serve special needs kids and families. We want to provide tangible tools that will help church leaders provide a place where kids with disabilities can thrive and grow in their faith. To learn more about these resources, visit Lifeway.com/specialneeds



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Introduction

Kim noticed them on her way into the church service each week—a mother and her son sitting in the lobby together. The son was in a wheelchair and often made vocalizations, so his mom sat with him in the lobby where he wouldn't distract the service and she could still hear the music and watch the sermon playing on a TV monitor. Most Sundays, Kim typically was occupied with her own preschool-aged kids, hurrying to get them to class on time while her husband was leading worship from the stage. So, when she walked through the lobby each week, all her attention was on her own family. However, one Sunday she felt moved to say hello and to offer help to the mother in the lobby. "Hi! I'm Kim. I see you sitting here each week. I was wondering if I could help with your son while you attend the worship service? I'm happy for you to train me on anything I need to know so that you are both comfortable." Becky was surprised that someone cared enough to take this step of hospitality. She said yes to Kim's offer to stay with her son, John, and from that interaction, a ministry began at their church that would welcome more and more families who have a child with a disability. All it took was an invitation from a

fellow church member for Becky and John to feel connected and welcomed beyond the lobby of the worship center.

As you walk through your church on a Sunday morning, you might notice a family like Becky and John. You may see a preschooler hiding under a table instead of joining his friends for group time and the teacher spending more of her time convincing him to come out than she does teaching the rest of the kids. You may notice a boy standing in the back of the kids' worship room who is covering his ears while the other kids are singing and moving along to the worship music. You may see a girl with Down syndrome who is older than the rest of the kids in an elementary class because she hasn't moved up to the youth group with her same-age peers yet.

Each one of these scenarios represents the growing number of children with special needs, learning disabilities, and behavioral diagnoses who are attending our churches. We are so glad they show up each week, and we want to help them and their families feel welcome. As ministry leaders and volunteers, we can plan and prepare for experiences to help every child feel included!

In this guidebook, we will go through three steps our churches can take to be all in on inclusion: be aware, be accepting, and be accessible. We saw these three steps as Kim interacted with Becky and her son, John. She became aware of the need when she saw them sitting in the lobby week after week, she accepted them as fellow church attenders and built a friendship with them, and as she learned to meet John's needs, the church became accessible for both John and Becky. We want kids like John and their families to come to our churches so they can experience the hope we have in Christ and grow in their faith with the encouragement of a spiritual family. Let's walk through these steps together to help make that a smooth experience for everyone involved!

STEP 1: Be Aware

The first step to being all in on inclusion is to be aware of the need. This includes being aware of the needs in the culture and in your community.

A recent census found that in the United States, 2 out of every 7 families have a member with a disability. The number of students ages 3–21 receiving IDEA (special education) services in the United States increased from 6.4 million in school year 2010–11 to 7.3 million in school year 2021–22. Taken as a percentage of total public-school enrollment, this equates to an increase from 13 to 15 percent of students.¹ Unfortunately, church attendance does not reflect these statistics. Over 80% of special needs families do not attend church.

*Most special-needs families **never attend church**. They are truly an unreached people group present in all our communities!*

In a survey about how children with disabilities spent their time away from school, parents reported that fewer than one-half of their children and youth with autism, deaf-blindness, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities had participated in religious group activities at any point in the previous year.² And when more than two hundred parents of adolescents and young adults with autism were asked about their children's attendance at religious services, less than one-third reported that their child attended religious services on a weekly basis.³ Andrew Whitehead's landmark study found children with chronic health conditions are more likely to never attend religious worship services. Specifically, children with chronic health conditions that impede communication and social interaction are most likely to never attend.⁴

The question is, why don't these families attend church? Special-needs families often feel distressed and dejected. They may have

had negative experiences in the past or even been asked to leave a church. They may feel like there are too many barriers in the way. Most churches are not prepared to welcome these families. How can we change that?

Consider the actions and words of Jesus in Matthew 9:36–38:

When he saw the crowds, he felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest.”

Let’s pray that we will be those workers in the harvest, that we will be churches where these families feel comfortable so they can hear the good news of the gospel and be a part of a church body that welcomes them.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Have you noticed families like Becky and John who are missing church programs to avoid being a distraction?
2. How can your church be aware of the special needs of the population in the neighborhood and community it serves?

STEP 2: Be Accepting

Once your church is aware of the need, you can take steps of acceptance. In this section, we'll walk through the steps of acceptance for special-needs families, starting from the very beginning of their journey when parents receive a diagnosis for their child.

It can be a challenging time for the family when a child is diagnosed with a disability of any kind. There are immediate questions about the child's future and how they will need to adjust to the world around them. They are also asking what God is doing through this unexpected event in their lives and how their church will respond to them now. Churches must seek to understand what the family needs and how they can meet those needs. There are five important actions that a church can take to show their support for special-needs families through their presence, provision, promise, prayers, and partnership.

*Churches show their acceptance of special-needs families through their **presence, provision, promise, prayers, and partnership.***

SHOW PRESENCE:

How the church responds when a family in your church receives a diagnosis is important. When a child is diagnosed with a disability at birth or soon after, the first response of a church can be to celebrate the child's life, believing God made everyone in His image on purpose and with a purpose (Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:13-14, and John 9:3). When you see the family, you don't have to know exactly what words to say. What is most important is your presence by being there and communicating the love of Christ and the love your church family has for them and their child.

Many children are diagnosed later, with autism being most often diagnosed between the ages of 2-5 and those with learning disabilities and behavioral diagnoses being identified between the ages of 5-10. Parents will need support through this process as well. And again, your presence is more important than saying all the right things. Take the initiative to spend time with the mom and/or dad by taking them out to coffee or lunch to listen as they process their feelings. Be patient as they vent or grieve, reminding the family of God's love for them and the love of their church family.

START HERE:

As a family adjusts to a new normal after receiving a diagnosis, they will need the church to help with practical needs. This may be dinner dropped off after a long day of therapy, a ride to youth group activities for their older children, or building a ramp at their home for wheelchair access. However, we don't want to overwhelm them with too many questions and decisions to make, and we don't want to neglect them if they have ongoing needs. One way to avoid both temptations is to have a designated go-to person to communicate with the family, then share their needs to those who will help meet them. This could be a staff person, a small group leader, or a close friend at church. Think of how the deacons were raised up in Acts 6 to meet the needs of the Hellenistic Jewish widows who felt like they were being left out of the food distribution. The deacons were the connectors between those in need and the resources available for those needs. The designated go-to person fills the same important role.

OFFER THE PROMISE OF SUPPORT:

Once the family gets into a good routine and rhythm at home, they will be ready to plug back into church. At this stage, they need a promise from their church—a promise that they will have the support of the staff, teachers, and volunteers to meet the needs of the family member with a disability. There may currently be barriers that a church staff isn't aware of that would keep a special-needs family from attending church.

Talk to the family about any barriers they see that might keep their family from being able to attend church. And then take steps to eliminate those barriers. (More ideas on how to do that in section 3!)

PRAY CONTINUOUSLY:

As the child with a disability grows, one crucial way churches can help the family is through their prayers. A caregiving family faces unique needs through the years, from mourning missing milestones (like their child not being able to drive a car) to feeling like the typical siblings aren't getting the time and attention they need to accepting they will never be empty nesters. Each age and stage can bring new opportunities for God to work in their lives and show Himself to be sufficient for all their needs.

If you don't know what to pray, you can use Colossians 1:9-10 as a guide, "For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God" (CSB). You can also take a minute to write a card or send a text to let the family know how you are praying for them. It will likely come exactly when they need it most.

PARTNER WITH PARENTS:

The final essential thing a special-needs family needs from their church is partnership to fulfill the mission God has given them. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (CSB). That means that each family member was created for the good work God has planned for them. Families need a church that sees their value and gives them opportunities to use their gifts and live out their calling. Help them think of it as living like a missionary!

You can empower special-needs families to live like missionaries when they sit in waiting rooms or hang out at Special Olympics practices. You can remind them of the power of their testimony as they comfort others with the comfort they have received through Christ. "He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God." (2 Cor. 1:4)

And you can support their efforts for expanded care and opportunities in your community. Your church's partnership and

empowerment will benefit the family, your church, and your community.

Helping a special-needs family feel accepted just takes the steps of presence, provision, promise, prayers, and partnership. And then praise God together for what He will do in the family and in your church!

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS:

1. What are some ways a church can be present for the family after a child receives a diagnosis at birth?
2. How can ministry leaders walk with parents who receive a diagnosis later into childhood?

STEP 3: Be Accessible

After taking steps to be aware and to be accepting, there's one more stage to "be all in" on inclusion—being accessible. This especially applies to children's ministry. Planning for accessibility in our children's ministry is a lot like planning a dinner party in our homes. There are steps we take to prepare our homes, get to know our guests, and meet their needs during the meal so that they feel comfortable and enjoy their time with us. We can view accessibility a lot like hospitality.

In this section, we will get very practical about what your children's ministry can do to show hospitality to kids with disabilities. We will look at the specific kinds of kids we are serving through this ministry, how we prepare for them, how we get to know them, how we can help them feel comfortable, how we connect them to God's Word, how we can support positive behavior choices, how we keep them connected to Christ and the church as they grow, and how we reach even more special-needs families. As you read, remember that Jesus had a heart for inclusion, and He will be with you as you take these steps.

→ What kids are we serving?

Special-needs and disability inclusion can feel intimidating because there are so many different diagnoses and different needs even within the spectrum of people with each diagnosis. A child who is dyslexic will navigate your ministry differently than a child with Down syndrome. A child with ADHD will have different needs than a child with cerebral palsy. Parents don't expect you to be an expert in special education, medical care, or behavioral therapy. They just hope you are willing to get to know their child and meet his or her needs while they are at church.

*You don't need to be an expert to start a special-needs ministry. **You just need to be willing to learn.***

The goal is to include every child in your children's ministry. Therefore, modifications are necessary for some kids to be included. As you get to know each child as an individual, you can then make a plan for inclusion, which will provide modifications. These will vary from child to child. For example, a child with low vision will need different modifications than a child with intellectual disabilities. The adjustments a child who uses a wheelchair for mobility will need are different from the adjustments a child with sensory processing disorder will need. It is important to know common types of special needs and disabilities kids may have in order to prepare properly.

The following are common categories and diagnoses for children that your ministry could support:

- Special needs/disabilities: autism (levels 1, 2, and 3), Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, deafness, blindness, other physical/cognitive disabilities
- Learning disabilities: dyslexia, dysgraphia, other oral/written language disorders, executive function deficits
- Mental health/behavioral diagnosis: ADD, ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, trauma, social anxiety, OCD

While we may be tempted to tell parents that we think their child may have a special need or disability, we must defer those judgments to healthcare professionals. We may share behavioral observations with parents without using labels and ask them if they have made the same observations. A professional diagnosis is simply a label that communicates an idea of what a child's needs are and helps them get those needs met. It doesn't tell you everything there is to know about that child, but it's a helpful place to start!

→ *How do we prepare?*

As different as kids with disabilities and special needs can be from one another, they are all children! They have the same needs every child has—the need to feel safe and connected to those around them. Security and belonging are needs we all have in common. We want all our kids to feel safe and connected while they are at church by setting up spaces that meet their needs and recruiting people they can rely on.

There are three common options for special-needs ministry:

- 1 INCLUSIVE**
An inclusive setting is in a typical children's ministry class of same-age peers, often with help from a teen or adult buddy trained and prepared to meet the child's additional needs.
- 2 SPECIALIZED**
A specialized setting is a self-contained class designed for students who benefit from having curriculum and a space that meets their additional needs. This is often in a sensory-friendly classroom.
- 3 HYBRID**
A hybrid model combines both options for kids who benefit from time with their typical peers but can sometimes need to take a break in a sensory room.

The spaces you need to provide depend on the kids you currently have at your church and the kids you hope to have. Many churches start with buddies in the typical classroom and add a sensory corner for kids who need a calm space and/or sensory experiences to the hallway for kids with extra energy. For example, a church may have a tent with pillows in the room and tiles to play "The Floor is Lava!" in the hallway. If you have a room you can dedicate to

making into a specialized classroom that is sensory friendly, you'll be able to welcome even more children and their families. This is an opportunity to be creative with the spaces you have and pray for provision as you grow. It is important to note that no buddy should ever be alone with a child—even in a hallway.

→ *Who is going to support these students?*

Once we have equipped our spaces to better serve kids with disabilities, we will certainly need to identify and train people to help support them when they attend. This requires building a team of leaders and volunteers.

Your team will include:

- Age-group ministry leaders (preschool, children, students, family, NextGen)
- Ministry leaders for the disability ministry
- Adult volunteers in the specialized classroom(s)
- Supervised teen and adult buddies in the typical classes

*Disability is not a silo ministry because
everyone has a role in inclusion!*

To make your ministry truly inclusive, everyone will be involved! (Even your lead pastor!) The roles and responsibilities for each person will depend on your church size and needs, so let's focus on the one role you'll most likely add to your existing structure: supervised teen and adult buddies.

Buddies help children connect to their peers and to the material being taught. They can help navigate social situations and assist with academic work and activities. They can be one-on-one with a child in a group setting or be available in the classroom to help any child.

The buddies in your church need two things to feel prepared and successful: they need training, and they need tools. To train buddies who will serve, you'll start with the steps you take for all your children's ministry volunteers, like running background

checks and going over your church's policies. You'll also want to be clear on what their role is in the classroom and who they should communicate with if they have a question. You can share this guidebook with them, emphasizing the section on supporting positive behavior choices. Talk about privacy for the kids they will buddy with, reminding them not to take pictures to share on social media or talk about diagnosis or behavior details with friends. Remember, no buddy should ever be alone with a child, so it is essential to include that in the policy training.

One of the most helpful tools you can give to your volunteer is a buddy bag with sensory items and tools that kids might need to adapt lessons or activities. There's a list of items to include in the buddy bag in the section below on helping kids with disabilities feel comfortable.

→ *How do we get to know the families?*

There are two entry points for your ministry: your church website and in person.

Utilize your church website:

Many special-needs families will visit your website before they come on a Sunday morning. They want to know if your church has a plan for inclusion and what steps they should take to communicate their child's needs with the staff ahead of time. Here are details to include on your website to help parents take these steps:

- Provide information on your children's ministry page about the options for inclusion and a page that focuses on the disability ministry. This will help parents who may not consider their child to need the disability ministry (like parents of kids with ADHD or learning disabilities) see the information on the main children's ministry page.
- Include real pictures of your church (not stock photos) so they know what to expect. You can help even more by having a welcome video that shows families exactly where to go when they visit on a Sunday morning and what the rooms and spaces look like. If you'd like the families to register their children or contact a staff member before they visit, make it clear how to do that.

Use a registration form to get to know the child and family:

- On the registration form (both online and in-person) have a statement such as: “In order to meet the needs of all our students, please let us know if your child has any allergies, special needs, or learning disabilities.” Or you could ask, “Does your child have an IEP or 504 plan at school?”
- Follow-up about allergies and medical needs (like seizures), toileting needs, and how the child communicates (verbally, sign language, with help from a device, or with gestures). If you get nothing else on a busy Sunday morning, get that information. You can also ask questions about likes, dislikes, abilities, communication, and triggers either on the form or in follow up conversations.

Welcome the child to your children’s ministry:

- Start with what we refer to as the “least restrictive environment,” which is the typical classroom with support from a buddy.
- Look for signs of cognitive, behavioral, social, and physical challenges. The teachers and buddies can take notes on these challenges, or you could have an experienced staff member or volunteer observe the student.
- Think about adjustments that could be made to help the child be successful after you’ve gathered information from those who observed him in the classroom:
 - How do we adjust our environment?
 - How do we adjust our goals?
 - How do we adjust our lessons?

→ *How do we help them feel comfortable?*

We can make adjustments in the typical classroom and use tools to help children feel safe and successful.

In the classroom, you can:

- Use a visual schedule to decrease anxiety about what’s next
- Use a visual timer to count down during transitions
- Communicate clear expectations
- Let the children know how to ask for a break if they need one
- Create a calm corner in the classroom that a child can visit when he/she gets overwhelmed or frustrated

- Incorporate a variety of activities for different types of learners
- Invite them to share their understanding of the Bible content in a variety of ways

Tools for buddy bags or classroom bins:

- Fidgets
- Noise reducing headphones
- Items of special interest for the kids (toy car, train, stuffed animal etc.)
- Adaptation tools like bingo markers that a child with low fine motor skills can use instead of circling the answer on an activity sheet or an overlay that will help a child with dyslexia be able to read better
- A small visual timer
- A personal visual schedule or first/then schedule

These adjustments to the environment and the tools offered can help not only the child who is struggling, but all the children in the classroom! For example, having a visual schedule shows everyone there's a plan, and when it's repeated week after week, the kids understand the routine and expectations. Think of the universal design of a ramp in place of stairs: people with limited mobility cannot use stairs, but everyone can use a ramp. These changes are making the environment easier for everyone to navigate!

→ *How do we teach them the Bible?*

Lifeway curriculum makes it easy to teach kids with varying levels of abilities and learning needs. Bible Studies for Life includes suggestions for modified activities for kids in inclusive ministry settings. For children in a specialized environment (like a sensory-friendly classroom), Lifeway offers the Special Buddies leader guide and activity pages that follows along with Bible Studies for Life.

Getting to know each child's strengths and abilities will help teachers adjust the Bible study sessions. Children in the inclusive setting and the specialized setting both benefit when teachers:

- Incorporate the five senses
- Focus on one main idea
- Make the lesson applicable to their lives

For children with no or very limited verbal ability, the temptation can be for their time with us at church to look more like childcare than a discipleship class. But we can speak simple truths of Scripture over them and remind them they are loved by God and their church family. Let's be faithful to do everything we can to present the gospel and trust the Holy Spirit to work in their lives.

In order to disciple children with disabilities, many churches borrow a concept from special education and apply it in our context. For the kids who need adjustments to the curriculum and the environment, the ministry team can create what we call Individualized Discipleship Plans (IDPs). Similar to what schools use for students with disabilities—an individualized education plan or IEP—an IDP takes into consideration a child's strengths, challenges, and potential to set goals for growing in Christlikeness. As the child grows and develops more skills, we can adjust the expectations to grow as well! IDPs are a helpful tool for remembering that children with disabilities can be disciplined by keeping in mind how they learn best and being creative in how we meet their needs!

→ *How do we support positive behavior choices?*

One of the most challenging aspects of inclusive classrooms can be supporting the behavior choices we want the kids to make. The first step to classroom management is to remember that behavior is communication. When kids are unable to communicate their needs verbally (either because of language difficulties or because they are overwhelmed), they will communicate with their actions.

Teachers and buddies can become behavior investigators to figure out what the child is trying to communicate with their actions. To do that, we need to know the ABCs of behavior:

A—Antecedent: *What happened before?*

B—Behavior: *What was the behavior?*

C—Consequences: *What happened after?*

When we can identify the ABCs of behavior, then we can figure out the core need that is driving the behavior, meet the need and come up with a plan to keep the problem behavior from occurring again, and work with the child and his/her parents on the expectations and plan to support positive behavior.

For example, let's say there's a 9-year-old in your class who responds to every question by shouting out before you have called on anyone. You have written out the ABCs of behavior and noticed that his peers at the table snicker when he answers loudly and the Bible storytelling goes faster, so they can get back to the game they were playing. What steps can we take to decrease this behavior?

- Analyze the motivation: He likes attention from peers, and he wants to get back to the preferred activity of playing a game.
- Set a clear expectation of behavior: Before you ask a question, you can remind the kids to raise their hands if they want to answer a question and to wait to be called on. Then reward the behavior you want to see when they follow these instructions.
- Offer alternatives: Instead of shouting out, you can have the child whisper his answer to his buddy or write down his answer, you can have all the kids talk about their answers at their tables and pick a spokesperson to share with the group, or you can have the child who often shouts out be the one who stands before the class and writes the answers on the dry erase board for everyone to see.
- Adjust the environment: You can use a visual timer to show how much time is left for the small group time and a visual schedule so he sees that after the story, he will still have time to play the game with his friends before it's time to clean up.

Being a behavior investigator and figuring out the core need and how to meet it can help keep disrupting behavior from occurring in the first place.

→ *How do we keep them connected to the church and to Christ as they grow?*

The hope is that children with disabilities will move up in ministry classes with their typical peers of the same age. In the youth group or NextGen ministry, those who have buddies can continue to have buddies who can often fade their support as the students mature and are comfortable with their peers and the environment. For those who are in the specialized setting, your church can have a reverse inclusion class for teenagers. This class is similar to the specialized setting, with sensory needs in mind and age-appropriate Bible teaching. Typical peers are invited into this setting with the goal of friendship.

→ *How do we grow our ministry?*

Special-needs and disability ministry can feel like it's growing slowly, even when you have all the support in place. We need to be patient with families as they learn to trust us with their children. We also need to be sensitive to the extra challenges they face to get to church each week. But we want our ministries to grow because we want more people to hear and respond to the gospel. There are a few ways you can reach special-needs families in your community so they can learn about what your church offers:

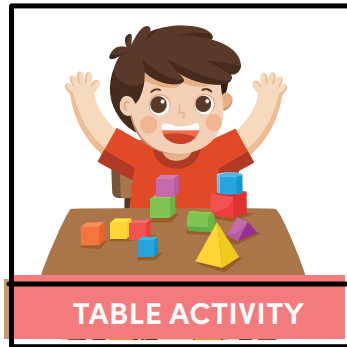
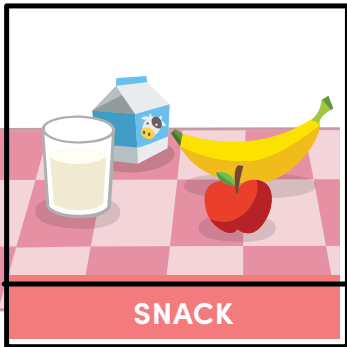
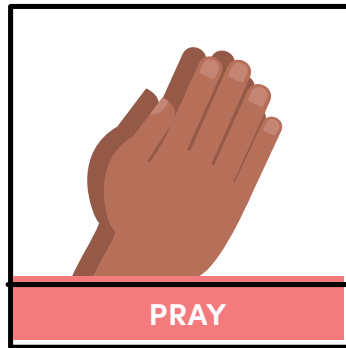
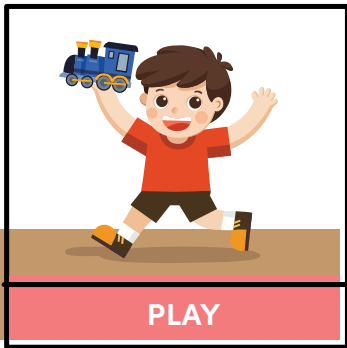
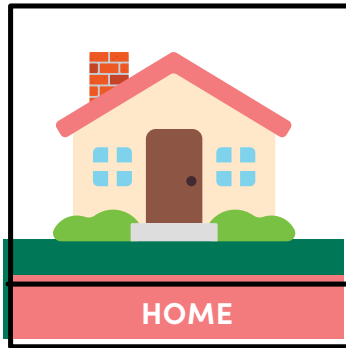
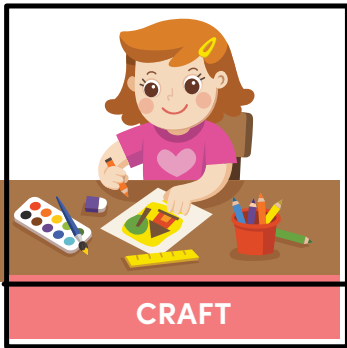
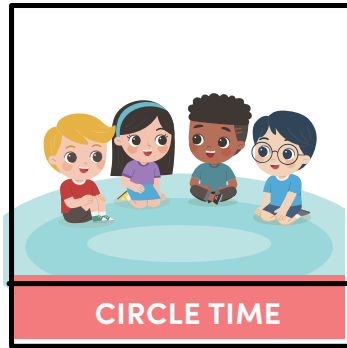
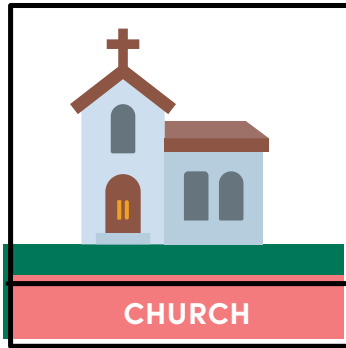
- Offer respite events at your church for kids with special needs and their siblings. This would allow parents to have some time to themselves away while knowing their children are being cared for at the church.
- Host a sensory-friendly movie or other event (like at a bounce house or bowling alley) in the community.
- Communicate that your children's ministry events (like VBS) are inclusive and accessible to all kids.
- Host a community support group or start a Bible study for special-needs parents.
- Connect with service providers in your area (like therapy clinics) who you can share as a resource to your families and who can recommend your church and advertise your events.
- Empower the parents who are currently in your church to live like missionaries—inviting special-needs families they know to your church.

Conclusion

We began this guide with the story of Kim and Becky and her son, John. Because of the awareness and acceptance that Kim had to help a mom attend worship, the church was able to build and grow to “be all in” on inclusion, providing the kind of environment where John could thrive. This simple action affected two generations of a family—the parent and the child. If churches everywhere could “be all in,” more lives could be changed, and more families could be made whole through the provision of a special-needs ministry.

We hope by reading this guide, you feel ready to be all in on inclusion! Being aware, being accepting, and being accessible are ways to change attitudes and take action. When we see children with disabilities and additional needs as being made in the image of God with a purpose designed by their Creator, we are empowered to make our ministries accessible to each one.

Lifeway is ready to support you and your ministry with curriculum options, podcast interviews, articles, and training videos. In every community, the harvest is plentiful with special-needs families who need to hear the gospel and be connected to a welcoming church. We want to help equip you to reach and support them.



Possible IDP Goals for Students:

- Repeat a Bible memory verse each week
 - Fill in the blanks of a Bible memory verse using words or pictures/PECS
 - Use communication device/sign language to complete memory verse

 - Pray with prompting
 - Repeat a simple prayer (like at snack time)
 - Sit quietly during prayer time
 - Share prayer requests (when appropriate)
 - Lead group prayer
 - Pray for friend who shares a request

 - Identify by name friends and helpers at church
 - Participate in class discussion with respect (taking turns to let everyone talk)
 - Speak kindly to friends and helpers
 - Participate in game time on a team or with friends (remembering to follow the rules and have good sportsmanship especially when frustrated or disappointed)
- Keep hands to self
 - Play appropriately with toys and objects in the room (no throwing)

 - Listen to the music
 - Play instruments during song time
 - Learn the words and motions to the songs
 - Be a leader during song time

 - Look at books and pictures that go along with the Bible story
 - Identify people in the stories by pointing (with or without assistance)
 - Put together puzzles that go along with the Bible story (with or without assistance)
 - Complete a modified activity sheet (examples—has a word bank when filling in blanks or shares answers verbally instead of writing them out)
 - Tell buddy or parent the main idea of the lesson or one thing learned

SPECIAL NEEDS INTAKE FORM

CHILD'S NAME (AND NICKNAME IF APPLICABLE)

CHILD'S DATE OF BIRTH

CHILD'S PRIMARY DIAGNOSIS

OTHER RELEVANT DIAGNOSES/SUSPECTED DIAGNOSES

RELATIONSHIP TO CHILD

YOUR NAME AND CELL PHONE NUMBER

HELP US GET TO KNOW YOUR CHILD:

STRENGTHS

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTERESTS

COMMUNICATION

- Verbal (Words, Phrases, etc...)
- Verbal, but not always with words or phrases (sounds, etc...)
- Sign Language
- Uses Device for Communication
- Non-Verbal
- Other: _____

TOILETING STATUS

- Toilets Independently
- Potty Trained, but may need assistance
- Potty Trained, but wears pull-ups
- Frequent Accidents
- Wears a Diaper
- Other: (If different please be specific)

Specific Toileting Instructions: *(If needed)*

LIST ANY AND ALL ALLERGIES: *(May list food aversions)*

About the Author

Sandra Peoples (M. Div, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) has been part of a special-needs family her entire life—she grew up with a sister with Down syndrome and has a son with level 3 autism. These relationships are the inspiration and motivation for her advocacy work. She is the author of three books, including, [*Unexpected Blessings: The Joys and Possibilities of Life in a Special-Needs Family*](#). Her next book, *Accessible Church*, will release in 2025 from Crossway Publishers.



Sandra is currently a PhD student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the area of family ministry with an emphasis on inclusion for special needs families. She serves the [Southern Baptists of Texas Convention](#) as their special-needs ministry consultant, helping churches around the state start and strengthen their disability ministries. She is also an adjunct professor in Liberty University's School of Divinity, teaching classes in the area of disability ministry. Sandra is a monthly cohost for [Key Ministry: The Podcast](#), where she shares her perspective on family aspects of disability ministry and inclusion.