

# INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

So, you want to create a space where all children feel included.

Sometimes, when we have children within our ministry who have special needs, it can feel daunting and difficult to know how to include them and integrate them into our programme. However, it is so important to create a space where all children can feel involved in the programme that we are running.

So here's a few things to keep in mind.

The first thing is to say hello.

Get to know the child and their family and start by simply saying hello. Find out what their abilities are and then it's important to include them in a group with children their own age. Having a child with special needs in our group is a reminder that being a child of God is not a matter of what we can do as individuals but of God's grace in our lives.

The second thing is to keep it simple.

90% of children with special needs have communication difficulties. What we often see as a failure to behave properly is often a failure on our part to communicate properly. Start where the child is at and find out what communication they can succeed with. Make your worksheets and activities simpler but not different and also ensure that you have something worth the effort of communicating about.

The third thing is to draw on expertise.

Use some Makaton signs in your children's ministry to help with communication. There may even be someone in your congregation who could teach this to some of your leaders.

Gestures or signs can be used to help those who have difficulties understanding spoken language as it gives visual information alongside speech.

The fourth thing is to love the family.

The support of parents within your children's ministry is vital in helping any child to feel a part of the ministry that you are doing. Build and develop relationships with the parents and other members of the family. Accept their advice on their child because they are the experts! Spend time with them, get to know them and think through how to help them interact with the ministry you are involved in.

The fifth thing is to consider a buddy system.

Think about whether or not you can set up a one-on-one buddy system for children with special needs in your ministry. This person can focus on helping the child to engage with the activities in your children's ministry.

The sixth thing is to consider physical issues.

Be aware of any hygiene or medication issues that a child with special needs may have within your children's ministry. Ensure that all necessary equipment is available and that all Taking Care guidelines are followed and adhered to.

The seventh thing is to consider the environment.

Think about the space you use for your children's ministry and whether it is restrictive for children who have either physical or intellectual limitations. Look at your space and consider creating different zones for activities, keeping exits secure if necessary.

The eighth thing is to use visuals to support what you are doing.

Visual schedules help all children to understand the order of the activities within your ministry. Removing pictures once an activity is complete allows them to understand where you are in the plan. Communication in children's ministry can happen very quickly. Speech is transient and only lasts for a short period of time. A spoken message may be finished before a child has the time to focus enough to receive the information. Visual aids are concrete however and stay with the child to aid understanding of what is expected of them.

The last thing is to remember communication.

At the end of your children's ministry session, debrief parents on how their child took part in all the activities that you did. And also debrief the team on how the programme went.

And if it all goes wrong? Communicate with everyone necessary and don't be disheartened.

Many congregations within our denomination include families with children with special needs and it is so important that we take time and effort to think about how we include these families and these children within the children's ministries that we run. And remember, keep your expectations high, you may be surprised. God has created all children in His image and He reveals Himself to everyone in the way that they understand.