

Gospel Light's

SPECIAL NEEDS

**advice,
answers
& articles**
about ministering
to children with
special needs

SMART PAGES

Created By
Joni and Friends

- ★ *Love and teach children affected by disabilities*
- ★ *Create Bible lessons designed to meet their needs*
- ★ *Help children discover and use their unique gifts to serve in the Body of Christ*



reproducible

Guidelines for Photocopying Reproducible Pages

Permission to make photocopies of or to reproduce by any other mechanical or electronic means in whole or in part any designated* page, illustration or activity in this book is granted only to the original purchaser and is intended for non-commercial use within a church or other Christian organization. None of the material in this book, not even those pages with permission to photocopy, may be reproduced for any commercial promotion, advertising or sale of a product or service or to share with any other persons, churches or organizations. Sharing of the material in this book with other churches or organizations not owned or controlled by the original purchaser is also prohibited. All rights reserved.

* Do not make any copies from this book unless you adhere strictly to the guidelines found on this page. Only pages with the following notation can be legally reproduced:

© 2009 Gospel Light. Permission to photocopy granted to original purchaser only. *Special Needs Smart Pages*

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Other versions used are

KJV—*King James Version*. Authorized King James Version.

NCV—Scriptures quoted from *The Holy Bible, New Century Version*, copyright © 1987, 1988, 1991 by Word Publishing, Nashville, Tennessee. Used by permission.

NIRV—Scripture taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Reader's Version*®. Copyright © 1996, 1998 International Bible Society. All rights reserved throughout the world. Used by permission of International Bible Society.

NKJV—Scripture taken from the *New King James Version*. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

NLT—Scripture quotations marked (*NLT*) are taken from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

TEV—Scripture quotations are from *Today's English Version*. Copyright © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976. Used by permission.

TLB—Scripture quotations marked (*TLB*) are taken from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189. All rights reserved.

Editorial Staff

Senior Managing Editor, Sheryl Haystead • **Senior Editor**, Deborah Barber • **Contributing Editor**, Patricia Verbal • **Major Contributing Writers**, Arlyn Kantz, Barbara Newman, Rachel Olstad, Kathy Weltner • **Minor Contributing Writers**, Cynthia Berry, Debbie Salter Goodwin, Dr. Kathy McReynolds, Chonda Ralston, Linda Weddle, Amy McMullin • **Art Director**, Lenndy Pollard • **Designer**, Annette M. Chavez
Founder, Dr. Henrietta Mears • **Publisher**, William T. Greig • **Senior Consulting Publisher**, Dr. Elmer L. Towns • **Senior Consulting Editor**, Wesley Haystead, M.S.Ed. • **Senior Editor, Theology and Biblical Content**, Dr. Gary S. Greig

Legal Note: Because church liability laws are inherently complex and may not be completely free of doubtful interpretations, you are advised to verify that the legal rules you are following actually apply to your situation. By using this material you agree that Gospel Light will in no event be liable for direct, indirect, special, incidental or consequential damages arising out of the use, inability to use or inappropriate use of the text materials, forms or documentation, even if Gospel Light is advised of or aware of the possibility of such damages. You agree that in no case will Gospel Light's liability exceed the amount of the purchase price paid.

Gospel Light in no way guarantees or warrants any particular legal or other result from the use of the *Special Needs Smart Pages*.

While Gospel Light attempts to provide accurate information regarding the subject matter covered, it is sold with the understanding that Gospel Light is not engaged in rendering legal or other professional services, and is sold subject to the terms of this Legal Note. Gospel Light recommends that your church seek the assistance of a qualified attorney to provide any needed legal advice.

Forms are shown for illustrative purposes only. They should not be relied on for any legal purpose or effect until they have been reviewed by an attorney in your state who is experienced in laws relating to churches.

If you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this Legal Note, please do not use this material; rather, return this product in good condition for a full refund.

About This Book (Symbol Key)

The following symbols are used in this book as signposts to help locate various kinds of disabilities.

Autism Spectrum Disorder



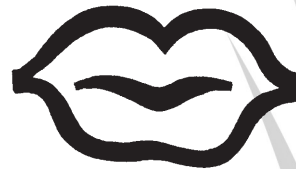
Physical Disabilities



Emotional/Behavioral Disorders



Speech and Language Impairments



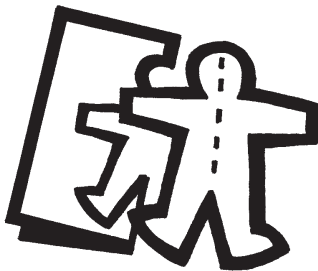
Developmental/Cognitive Disabilities



Visual and Hearing Impairments



Learning Disabilities



Quick Start to Disability Ministry

- 1) Begin with the basics. Read the articles on pages 39-40, 43, 65-66, 69 and 72.
- 2) Add these articles for more depth: pages 13, 17, 121, 151, 182 and the small-group Bible studies starting on page 234.
- 3) Use the index for extensive and specific information about disabilities and disability ministries and resources.

What Children with Special Needs Wish You Knew

I'm Just "Me," and That's Okay

I Need Friends Along the Way

I Want to Know God's Word

I Like It When You Talk to Me

I Won't Give Up – Don't You

I'm Not Sick – I Have a Disability

I Mess Up – Like Any Other Kid

I Know God Can Use Me – No Matter What



Contents

About This Book (Symbol Key)	3
Miniposter: What Children with Special Needs Wish You Knew	4
Joni's Story	11
What Is Joni and Friends?	12
Section 1: I'm Just Me, and That's Okay! (Needs and Definitions)	13
Awareness: Children with Disabilities Are Valuable to God	14
Awareness: The Problem with Labels	15
Awareness: Exposing Myths About Special Needs	16
Awareness: Disability Is a Family Affair.....	17
Awareness: Autism Spectrum Disorder—The Growing Epidemic	19
Physical Disabilities: Discover Their Unique Strengths	21
Speech and Language Impairments: Encourage Their Efforts	23
Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: Determine Their Preferences.....	25
Developmental Disabilities: Recognize Their Challenges	27
Visual and Hearing Impairments: Adapt to Their Needs	29
Learning Disabilities: Believe in Their Abilities	31
Awareness: Common Disabilities Among Children.....	33
Miniposter: U.S. Children (Ages 3-17) Need a Hand Because	34
Miniposter: I Asked the Little Boy Who Cannot See	35
Section 2: I Need Friends Along the Way! (Recruiting and Training)	36
Director: Breaking Down Barriers to Inclusion	37
Director: How to Begin a Special Needs Ministry	39
Sample: Mission Statements	41
Form: A Church Survey of Special Needs	42
Form: Publicity Release	42
Director: Building a T.E.A.M.	43
Director: Blessing the Whole Body of Christ	44
Director: Job Description for Teachers	45
Director: Job Description for a Special Needs Buddy	46
Director: Make It Easy for Volunteers to Say Yes!	47
Director: Recruiting Ideas	48
Form: Volunteer Application	49
Director: Interviewing Volunteers	50
Director: How to Match Special Buddies with Students	51
Director: Disability Training 101 and Beyond.....	53
Director: A Special Needs Handbook	55
Teaching: Disability-Friendly Language and Manners	56
Teaching: Helping Children Accept One Another.....	57
Teaching: Disability Awareness Activities	58

Volunteers: Becoming a Child's True Friend.....	59
Volunteers: Visiting a Child's Weekday World	60
Volunteers: Serving as a Short-Term Missionary.....	61
Volunteers: Working with Local Disability Organizations.....	62
Tips: Ideas from Special Needs Leaders	63
Section 3: I Want to Know God's Word! (Teaching Strategies)	64
Director: Keys to Disability-Friendly Classrooms	65
Director: Create a Cheerful Classroom.....	67
Sample: Visuals for Special Needs Classrooms	68
Director: To Mainstream or Not to Mainstream	69
Director: Reverse Mainstreaming.....	70
Director: Choosing Curriculum.....	71
Director: A Basic Guide for Curriculum Adaptations	72
Director: Leading Children with Special Needs in Worship.....	73
Director: Why Learning Centers Work for Young Children	75
Teaching: Creating Predictable Schedules	77
Teaching: The Sensory Factor	78
Teaching: Storytelling Is More than Just Words	79
Teaching: The Magic of Music.....	81
Teaching: The Tactile Toolbox.....	83
Miniposter: Inclusive Centers Work for All Children	85
Teaching: Building Inclusive Learning Centers	86
Tips: I See; I Hear; I Touch	87
Tips: I Taste; I Smell; I Move; I Giggle	88
Teaching: Every Child for the Kingdom	89
Teaching: Assessing a Child's Understanding of Truth	90
Teaching: Four Ways to Present the Gospel.....	91
Teaching: Ten Ways to Teach Memory Verses	92
Teaching: Adapting Games for Various Abilities.....	93
Awana Clubs: Working with Special Needs Children	95
Tips: Information and Resources on the Web	98
Section 4: I Like It When You Talk to Me! (Communication Skills)	100
Communication: Six Communication Milestones	101
Communication: Sign Language	103
Activity Page: Crack the Sign Language Code	104
Communication: Visiting with Children Who Are Nonverbal.....	105
Hearing Impairments: Helping Children Tune In to Their World	107
Visual Impairments: Using Fingers to See.....	108
Activity Page: Write with Braille.....	109
Cognitive Disabilities: Simplicity Is Key	110
Physical Disabilities: The Art of Body Language.....	111

Speech and Language Impairments: Using Communication Devices	113
Emotional/Behavioral Disorders: What to Say, How to Listen	115
Communication: Helping Children Relate to One Another	117
Communication: Advances in Technology and Software	118
Section 5: I Won't Give Up—Don't You! (Family Ministry and Outreach)	119
Activity Page: God's Word on "Keeping On"	120
Faith Steps: Helping Children Deal with Fear and Pain	121
Outreach: Giving Parents a Respite	123
Form: Application for Respite Care	126
Outreach: Making Memories at Camp	129
Outreach: Ministering to Siblings	131
Sample: Sibshop Event Flyer	134
Outreach: Hosting a VBS for Children with Autism	135
Tips: Dos and Don'ts for Hosting a VBS for Children with Autism	138
Outreach: Creating a G.L.U.E. Team	139
Outreach: Breaking Bread at a Luke 14 Banquet	142
Faith Steps: Tools for Helping Children Deal with Loss	143
Faith Steps: Teaching Children About Heaven	145
Activity Page: What the Bible Says About Heaven	147
Tips: Ideas from People Who Didn't Quit	148
Miniposter: Don't Quit Poem	149
Section 6: I'm Not Sick—I Have a Disability! (Medical Concerns)	150
Health: You Can't Catch a Disability	151
Health: Interviewing Parents	152
Forms: Sunday School Special Needs Assessment and Church Intake Team Log	153
Health: Medical Policies and Procedures	154
Miniposter: Medical Policies	155
Form: Accident/Illness Report	156
Health: Caring for a Child's Restroom Needs	157
Forms: Restroom Questionnaire and Restroom Policy Checklist	158
Safety: Addressing Child Abuse	159
Form: Suspected Child Abuse Report	160
Safety: Playground Dos and Don'ts	161
Safety: What to Do When a Child Has a Seizure	163
Miniposter: In Case of a Seizure	164
Safety: Allergies and Treatment	165
Form: Allergy Action Plan	166
Safety: Addressing Repetitive Behaviors	168
Sample: Disability Ministry Inclusion Planning	169
Outreach: Special Delivery Ministry	171
Outreach: Ministering to Children in Hospitals	173

Sample: Hospital Gift Bag.....	175
Attendance: Babies and Toddlers with Disabilities.....	176
Attendance: Medically Frail Children.....	177
Tips: Adaptive Products and Product Resources.....	178
Miniposter: Joey’s Poem	179
Section 7: I Mess Up—Like Any Other Kid! (Behavior Issues)	180
Behavior: What to Expect.....	181
Behavior: Hidden Messages in a Child’s Behavior	182
Behavior: Treating Children Fairly, Not Equally	183
Behavior: How to Help a Biter	184
Behavior: Getting a Picture of AD/HD.....	185
Behavior: Helping Children Deal with Anger.....	187
Behavior: Dealing with Meltdowns	189
Solutions: Creating a Small, Safe Space	191
Solutions: Using Visual Behavior Plans	193
Form: My Good Behavior Record	195
Solutions: Calling People to Pray for Special Needs.....	196
Solutions: A Prescription for Praise.....	197
Sample: Praise Cards	198
Solutions: Coming Alongside Parents and Counselors.....	199
Miniposter: Can-Dos for Frazzled Teachers	201
Tips: How to Use “Can-Dos for Frazzled Teachers”	202
Miniposter: Can-Dos for Children.....	203
Miniposter: Teachers Encourage Others.....	204
Section 8: I Know God Can Use Me—No Matter What! (Spiritual Growth and Service)	205
Discipleship: Creating a Faith-Journey Scrapbook	206
Sample: Faith-Journey Scrapbook.....	207
Sample: My Faith Is Growing!	208
Discipleship: Sharing in the Lord’s Supper and Baptism	209
Form: Lord’s Supper/Baptism Participation Record	210
Discipleship: Talking and Listening to God.....	211
Discipleship: Discovering Each Child’s Unique Gift	213
Discipleship: Creating an Individual Christian Educational Plan.....	215
Form: Evaluation for an Individual Christian Educational Plan	216
Service: Wheels for the World.....	217
Service: Wheels for the World Projects.....	218
Activity Page: Color Wheels for the World.....	220
Service: Preteens On a Roll for Jesus	221
Service: Hosting a Disability Talent Show	222
Service: Sharing Joni’s Story	223
Awana Clubs: Projects for Cubbies (Preschoolers) with Special Needs.....	225

Awana Clubs: Projects for Sparks (Kindergarten-Grade 2) with Special Needs.....	226
Awana Clubs: Projects for T&Ters (Grades 3-6) with Special Needs.....	227
Service: Hosting a Disability Fair	229
Sample: Service Award.....	230
Miniposter: Willson Shares God’s Promise	231
Activity Page: Be a Good Servant.....	232
Moments That Inspire a Lifetime.....	233
Section 9: Hearts in Motion (Bible Studies on Disability Awareness)	234
How to Use the Bible Studies	235
Lesson Overview Chart	236
Lesson 1: Open Our Eyes	
A. Know God’s View of Disability.....	237
B. Learn the Attitude of Jesus	238
C. Exhibit the Proper Motivation for Service.....	239
Group Activity Guide	240
Lesson 2: Lend a Hand	
A. Learn How to Minister	241
B. Build Genuine Relationships.....	242
C. Show True Compassion	243
Group Activity Guide	244
Lesson 3: Help at Home	
A. Understand the Impact on Families	245
B. Be Sensitive to Feelings	246
C. Take the Initiative	247
Group Activity Guide	248
Lesson 4: Spread the Word	
A. Know Your Church’s Role.....	249
B. Identify Your Primary Goal	250
C. Learn the Benefits of Disability Ministry	251
Group Activity Guide	252
Section 10: Real Kids (Read Aloud Stories)	253
How to Use the Real Stories to Read Aloud.....	254
Story 1: Madison Atwood Makes Her Father Proud.....	255
Story 2: Bryce Makes Friends.....	257
Story 3: Devon’s Winning Smile	259
Story 4: My Brother, Willson by Molly Kantz	261
Story 5: I Just Needed a Chance by Sizwe David Mabowe	263
Story 6: God’s Design for Me by Rachel Yonker.....	265
Story 7: Wakeland Is On the Go.....	267
Story 8: Keiler’s New Wheelchair	269

Section 11: Disability Awareness (Resource Information)	271
Awareness: United States Disability Statistics	272
Culture: Divorce Threatens Families Affected by Disability	273
Culture: Whatever Happened to the Sanctity of Life?	275
Culture: Understanding Bioethics	277
Culture: God’s Word on Embryonic Stem-Cell Research	279
Culture: How Other Cultures View Disability	281
Caregivers: Caregiver Burnout	283
Hope: Calling Church Leaders to Disability Ministry	285
Hope: Advocating for Children with Special Needs.....	287
Caregivers: Loving Mothers of Children with Special Needs	289
Caregivers: Encouraging Fathers of Children with Special Needs	291
Caregivers: Supporting Grandparents Raising Children with Disabilities	293
Caregivers: Organizations That Can Help.....	295
Hope: Becoming a Disability-Friendly Church.....	297
Hope: The Christian Institute on Disability	299
Hope: Creating Movies for Inspiration.....	302
Hope: <i>Joni and Friends</i> TV Series Trains and Inspires	303
Sample: Goals for Disability Ministry	304
Sample: Disability Planning Calendar.....	305
Section 12: Visual Bible Stories, Songs, Verses and Prayers (Teaching Resources)	306
How to Use Visual Bible Stories, Songs, Verses and Prayers	307
Song: Jesus Loves Me.....	308
Story: The Ten Commandments.....	310
Verses: The 23rd Psalm—The Lord Is My Shepherd.....	312
Story: The Christmas Story.....	314
Prayer: The Lord’s Prayer.....	316
Verse: John 3:16	318
Story: The Plan of Salvation: Becoming a Child of God.....	319
Story: Through the Roof.....	320
Story: The Easter Story.....	322
Index	324
Joni and Friends Resources	329

Joni's Story

For years, my family and I enjoyed playing tennis, riding horses and hiking. That changed one hot afternoon in July 1967 when my sister, Kathy, and I went swimming in Chesapeake Bay. I didn't bother to check the depth of the water when I hoisted myself onto a raft anchored offshore. Positioning my feet on the edge, I took a deep breath and plunged into the murky water. To my surprise, my head hit the hard bottom and snapped back. A strange electric shock zapped the back of my neck. Floating underwater, I felt myself drifting and unable to surface.

My lungs screamed for air! As I gasped for breath, I felt my sister's arms around me, pulling me upward. Looking at my lifeless arm slung over her shoulder, I sputtered, "Kathy, I can't feel my body!"

A sunbather nearby rushed into the water with his raft. Another called an ambulance. Within the hour, ER nurses were cutting off my wet bathing suit, my necklace and my rings. As I began losing consciousness, I heard the sound of a drill buzzing above my head.

My diving accident thrust me into a strange and frightening world filled with antiseptic smells, plastic tubes and life-giving machines. For months, I lay on a Stryker frame, facing up for hours in the canvas sandwich-type sling. Then I was flipped facedown to prevent pressure sores. It didn't help. I lost so much weight those first months that my bones literally began sticking to my flesh, which resulted in more operations and more time in the Stryker frame.

A deep, dark depression came over me, and I questioned my faith. "God, how could You have allowed this to happen to me?" I asked. "I'm a Christian. I prayed for a closer walk with You, and if this is Your answer, how can I ever trust You again?"

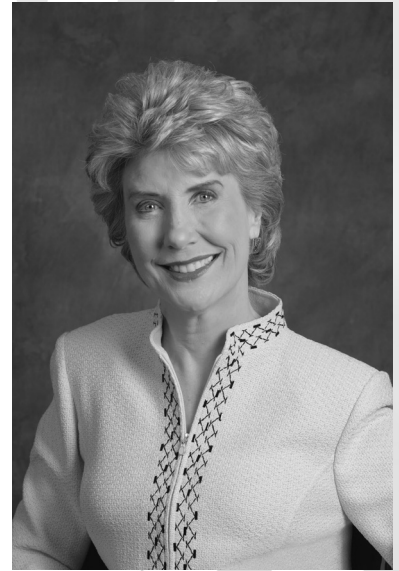
Little did I realize that people were praying for me around the clock. As the weeks passed, I began to sense a difference. My anger subsided, and my depression

slowly lifted. God was lovingly wearing down my resistance through the precious prayer covering of my church family and friends.

I soon noticed a change in my occupational therapy. Weeks earlier, I had stubbornly refused to learn how to write with a pencil clenched between my teeth. That was before I met Tom, a young ventilator-dependent quadriplegic, who was more paralyzed than I was. When he enthusiastically asked the therapist to put the pen in his mouth, I stopped grumbling and complaining.

God used the prayers of my friends and Tom's example to show me the truth of Romans 8:28: "In all things God works for the good of those who love him." God's idea of my "good" seemed not to include getting me back on my feet. Perhaps it included a flexible attitude, an appreciation for small things, and a character that reflected the kind of joy that did not depend on circumstances.

I can't say that the past 40 years have been easy, but I *have* experienced my Savior's power and strength along the way. Jesus always knew exactly how I felt because He suffered, too. He turned His cross into a symbol of hope and freedom. When I realized that, I could do no less. My wheelchair has become the prison God used to set my spirit free.



What Is Joni and Friends?

For over a quarter of a century, Joni and Friends (JAF) has been dedicated to extending the love of Christ to children and adults with special needs and their families. Through the mission of Joni and Friends, the gospel has been communicated worldwide, and Christ-honoring churches are now equipped to evangelize and disciple all those affected by disability.

A diving accident in 1967 left founder, Joni Eareckson Tada, with quadriplegia and confined to a wheelchair. After two years of rehabilitation, Joni emerged with new skills and a fresh determination to help others in similar situations. Mrs. Tada wrote of her experiences in her best-selling biography, *Joni*. With the book's distribution in many languages, Joni's name soon became recognized around the world and was followed by her full-length feature film, *Joni*.

Having been propelled onto an international stage, Mrs. Tada launched Joni and Friends in 1979. In 2006, Joni and Friends grew to become the Joni and Friends International Disability Center, which ministers to thousands affected by disability around the globe through four flagship programs:

- **Joni and Friends Radio Ministry**—A daily five-minute radio program broadcast over 1,000 outlets and heard every week by a million listeners. In 2002, it received the Radio Program of the Year award from National Religious Broadcasters.
- **JAF Family Retreats**—Five-day summer programs provided for families affected by disability. In 2007, Joni and Friends served over 1,000 special needs families in 19 family retreats hosted across the United States.
- **Wheels for the World Wheelchair Outreach**—A program designed to provide wheelchairs to the disabled throughout the world and to share Jesus' love. To date, over 35,000 wheelchairs have been collected nationwide, refurbished by inmates in over 15 correctional facilities and donated and custom fit to a needy child or adult with a physical disability in a developing nation.
- **Disability Ministry**—A movement to equip churches to include people with disabilities and their families. The Joni and Friends' Field Service's staff and volunteers provide training and resources to equip churches in ministry to those affected by disability, and they also host regional Disability Ministry summits.

In 2007, the Joni and Friends International Disability Center took two giant steps of faith. First, the Christian Institute on Disability was established as a communications and training center to address disability-related issues in our culture. Second, a new TV series, *Joni and Friends*, was produced to proclaim God's victorious plan for all families affected by suffering and disability. This unique program is broadcast nationwide and internationally (see www.joniandfriendstv.org for your local broadcast schedule).

While JAF focuses on influencing the church on disability-related issues, Mrs. Tada's impact is felt beyond the Christian community. Her role as a disability advocate led to a presidential appointment to the National Council on Disability for three and a half years, during which time the Americans with Disabilities Act became law. In 2005, Mrs. Tada was appointed to the Disability Advisory Committee of the United States Department of State to advise Dr. Condoleezza Rice on policies and programs that affect disabled persons in the State Department and around the world.

Mrs. Tada and her husband, Ken, married in 1982 and minister together around the world. Both are permanent members of the International Board of Directors of Joni and Friends.

A Word from Joni

We're all richer when we recognize our poverty, we're stronger when we see our weaknesses, and we're recipients of God's grace when we understand our desperate need for Him. I'm confident that as you partner with us to love and serve families affected by disability, you, too, will be blessed.

The logo features the name "Joni and Friends" in a stylized font, with "Joni" in a larger, more decorative script and "and Friends" in a simpler font. Below the name, the words "INTERNATIONAL DISABILITY CENTER" are written in a smaller, all-caps font. A decorative flourish is positioned to the left of the text.

I'm Just Me, and That's Okay!

This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.

This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.

This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,

Let it shine,

Let it shine,

Let it shine.



Awareness: Children with Disabilities Are Valuable to God

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28

In the beginning when God separated the light from the darkness and created day, how bright that first light must have been. The contrast of an early sunrise against a black backdrop can still take one's breath away. We witness this same sort of contrast in the lives of children with disabilities. The depths of their struggles can make their smallest success glow with heavenly light. And those of us who are fortunate enough to know these amazing children experience the warm rays of God's love shining through their smiles.

All children remind us that **God is good**. According to Romans 8:28, He promised to share that goodness with us. Yet when Katie was born with a neurobiological disorder, the doctors said she would be mentally retarded, with all that such a pronouncement implies. One day, however, the toddler looked out of the car window and read a street sign. Then her parents gave her a book, which she also read. Katie was hyperlexic, meaning she had an exceptional, untaught reading ability at a very young age. As a fourth grader, Katie, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, taught herself Japanese. She continued to amaze her family and friends with God's perfect plan for her life.

Children remind us that **God is faithful**. From his wheelchair, Cole feared the rough neighborhood where he and his mom lived. He often cried himself to sleep because bullies made fun of him. But through his faith in Jesus, Cole learned to pray for bad people and to trust God for protection. He even requested prayer at church for his neighborhood, leading members to faithfully reach out to the bullies and share Christ with them.

These children show us that the image of **God is within us**—not outside us. Christy discovered this concept when she cared for Elliot at camp. Locked in a twisted body racked by multiple physical and mental disabilities, Elliot sat almost motionless in his wheelchair. He never spoke, made eye contact or responded to her touch. Early in the week, Christy watched with Elliot as the other campers swam, made crafts and giggled. By

midweek, she felt content to push Elliot's chair down quiet paths under the trees, where she would stop and read poems to him or sing simple songs. She came to appreciate the serenity of their times together and was sad to say good-bye. When that time came, Christy patted Elliot's right hand, which lay in his lap. To her surprise, he slowly lifted her hand with his, drew it to his mouth and gave it a soft kiss. Christy's eyes filled with tears. Later, she described it as a kiss from God's own heart—the sweetest she'd ever felt and one she would never forget.

The Bible speaks of our need for childlike faith—a faith that surrenders our grown-up efforts to fix things. As you minister to these extraordinary children, you'll slam head-on into Romans 8:28. You may even question God's goodness and power to make all things work for good for children like Katie, Cole or Elliot. And that's when children with special needs will become your teachers!



Awareness: The Problem with Labels

Walking into a high school, a person might be strongly tempted to sort the students as “athlete,” “brain,” “geek,” “loser” or “cheerleader”—all terms one may use to describe teens. These descriptors, or labels, however, are often misleading. They categorize students by emphasizing only one aspect of complex individuals. At a 25-year high-school reunion, how many of those descriptors would still be true?

Psalms 139:13 refers to God as a crafter and states, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” With God as our master designer, only God’s labels and designations should hold legitimacy and truth. The Bible is rich with descriptors that each one of us displays. “Handmade by God,” “image-bearer of God,” “significant,” “honored,” “dearly loved child” and “secure in God’s hand” are just some of the words that describe us, God’s handiwork.

There are no problems with God’s labels for us; His words are declarations that honor and bless. Some of us, however, acquire man-given labels that are less than complimentary. For example, a child with an identifiable disability often wears some sort of limiting, derogatory descriptor that can obscure the vision of God’s words for that child. While it may be true that a child has cerebral palsy, autism or Down syndrome, it is also true that an onlooker may mistakenly see only that characteristic. A child with a disability may appear to be “deficient,” “incompetent,” “unpresentable”

or “totally incapable.” Covering up God’s labels for a child with these words that limit, degrade and hurt is sinful and offensive to the Creator.

Ephesians 2:10 affirms that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The Bible is clear that each child who attends your church is hand-knit with an individualized pattern by God. That pattern beautifully displays God’s image in some form. Each child is created specifically to be able to fill a prepared spot in God’s kingdom and an honored place in the Body of Christ. First Corinthians 12:12 declares, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.”

Make it clear to peers, parents and volunteers that your church rejects all hurtful labels. While disability labels are needed for communicating useful information, always remember that God’s perspective is much truer. Aggressively peel away the negative labels associated with disabilities. Focus on children’s gifts, and give *all* children an honored place in your church community. While some children may require specialized equipment or techniques in order to meet their needs, you have the joy of seeing the participation of those children enrich the lives of others. “And this is his command: . . . to love one another” (1 John 3:23).

Join God’s line of sight!

People may see	God sees
Cerebral Palsy Cindy	Cindy, handcrafted by Himself before she was even born. Part of her unique knitting pattern is her love for animals and gifted singing voice. She also happens to have cerebral palsy.
Down Syndrome Adam	Adam, image-bearer of Himself, who displays passion for prayer and care for the people in his life. He also happens to have Down syndrome.
Autistic Sam	Sam, honored and significant member of the Body of Christ, who is a gifted servant as he joyfully organizes the toy shelves at church. He also happens to have autism.

Awareness: Exposing Myths About Special Needs

"I can't serve children with disabilities because I don't have any formal training."

Have you considered that children with disabilities are born into families with no training? Parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles do what comes naturally. First they love these children; then they get to know them. God simply asks their church family to do the same. As a new volunteer, you'll be trained and educated and maybe even partnered with an experienced "buddy," and you'll be surprised by how quickly your confidence grows.

"Aren't children with mental retardation spiritually innocent before God?"

While some children with special needs may not understand God's grace, they can all experience His love in amazing ways. Many churches are confused about how to meet these children's spiritual needs and often wonder, *Are these children sinners? Or do they have a free ticket to heaven?* What we believe concerning their salvation is not critical to how we minister to them. And we don't need to figure out their age of accountability or their mental capacity to introduce them to Jesus.

"We don't need a disability ministry because the church downtown has one and does a great job."

Do your own research. For example, there are about 2,600 churches listed in the *Dallas Yellow Pages*. Bible studies, youth ministries, recovery programs and outstanding choirs are featured in many of the ads. And in some ads, churches brag about their sports ministry, and one even offers a "cappuccino ministry"; but not one ad lists a disability ministry. Yet school districts nationwide estimate that children with special needs make up from 15 to 25 percent of their student body. Your church should exist to serve your community.

"I guess I should volunteer because God sent these children to teach me to count my blessings."

"This myth defines a person's life solely in terms of his or her effect on others," says Rev. Dennis D. Schurter, retired chaplain at the Denton State School in Denton, Texas. "It is a rationalization in the face of a negative experience

that says the person is 'sent' by God to test one's faith or teach one to love, etc. To place one on a pedestal is to dehumanize. Each person has equal value. . . . Each person can be a blessing to others, whether handicapped or not."*

"Aren't parents the best caregivers? Can't they just take turns at church?"

Sure, parents could take turns, but *you* would miss God's blessings. *You* would miss building wonderful relationships with some of the most terrific children you'll ever meet. And the fruit of the Spirit in *your* life will be less ripe on the vine. Why should parents have all the fun?

"I'm afraid of the legal responsibility of caring for someone with a disability."

There are legal responsibilities involved in serving in the nursery, in youth activities, in the church kitchen and on the parking lot. But we don't neglect those ministries. The church carries insurance for accidents. On occasion, a child with a disability may experience a medical condition that requires the intervention of a parent or a call to 9-1-1. But you can rest assured that you will always have a supervisor for support.

*Dennis D. Schurter, D. Min., *A Ministry Manual* (Denton, TX 2003), p. 16.

Ministry Is Messy!

God plops people with disabilities in the midst of a congregation—a hand grenade that blows apart the picture-perfectness of the church . . . The "uncomely" parts are critical to the life of the body. . . . We want the church to see some of these disenfranchised folks as the "indispensable" part of the body.

—Joni Eareckson Tada

Awareness: Disability Is a Family Affair

Same Morning, Different Households

Sunday Morning in the Browns' Home

It was 5:00 A.M., and Dylan Brown was up. *How is this possible?* thought his mom, Madge. She had spent half the night giving her three-year-old breathing treatments. Madge rolled over to poke her husband, indicating it was his turn to check on Dylan; but when she extended her arm, she found nothing. She wondered if he had fallen asleep on the downstairs couch or if he had bothered to come home at all.

After their son had been diagnosed with autism six months ago, Paul started going out with his friends, drinking heavily. He began missing work and, with his wages being docked, money was tight. The stress only caused Paul to drink more in spite of Dylan's escalating treatment costs. Madge worried about how they were going to survive. That morning, she tried deep breathing to calm her nerves and prevent another panic attack. It was hard to control her fear and rage. Marge felt trapped, with no one to turn to for help. She had little hope for her marriage, her son's life or her own dreams.

Sunday Morning in the Smiths' Home

It was 5:00 A.M., and Sarah needed to be "burped." To support her weight gain and growth, she was on a feeding pump most of the night. Melody looked at her husband sleeping peacefully beside her. Stan had taken the first shift to care for Sarah last night. He was happy to do it. He loved his daughter but didn't get to see her much due to his working overtime. Melody softly hummed a praise tune as she opened the G-button attached to Sarah's stomach, connected the appropriate tubing and gently pressed on her tummy. Melody smiled to herself, thinking about the many changes in their lives in the last year, including their new church.

The Smiths left their last church because people acted as if they didn't have enough faith to heal Sarah. But Stan insisted that church was a part of their lives, so when a neighbor invited them to visit her church, they went. They were good neighbors with strong family values, who drove the Smiths to church and sat with them

during worship. Over the next few Sundays, Melody and Stan made new friends and felt accepted for who they were: parents of a child with special needs.

Unique Family Challenges

The diagnosis of a child with a special need can be a challenging and life-changing event for a family. It raises a multitude of difficult questions, many of which cannot be answered. The diagnosis impacts immediate family members as well as the extended family. When a congregation acknowledges these challenges and extends grace to these families, it is a tremendous blessing.

Impact on Parents

Parents of children with special needs may walk through your church doors with a variety of church experiences—some good, some heartbreaking. Their basic question is, "Are we welcome, just as we are?" Many parents are looking for a much-needed break, while others seek a religious education for their children or they feel the need for friends and fellowship. These are the most basic ministries every church should offer. But if your church is willing to learn, grow and make a few correctable mistakes, you can embark on a journey together that will reap rich rewards.

Impact on Siblings

Not all siblings handle having a brother or sister with special needs in the same manner. Some siblings compensate well and actually become more well-rounded, caring individuals. Others experience embarrassment or frustration, or they begin to initiate aggressive behaviors. The support and reaction of the Church can greatly influence these often-fragile sibling relationships.

Impact on Grandparents

Besides grieving the loss of not having a typical grandchild, grandparents often have great concern about the predicament their children are experiencing. Most grandparents do not have the training, physical strength and agility necessary to help care for a child with special needs. Support and understanding from the Body of Christ will make a world of difference.

Church-Family Support

In addition to simply understanding a family's stress and their child's unique difficulties, churches can provide support in a number of areas.

Provide Financial Aid

Having a child with special needs can drain a family's resources. Medical treatments and various therapies can be costly. Often at least one parent quits his or her job or sharply cuts back on work hours to become the child's primary caregiver. Church members can help relieve this stress by becoming a safety net when an occasional financial emergency occurs.

Supplement Needed Care

Parents work to provide exceptional care but fear that no one else would be willing to take care of their child as they do. Parents also realize their child with a disability may never become an independent, self-sufficient adult. This can cause enormous concerns about what the future may hold. As these families build strong relationships within the Body of Christ, however, their fears are alleviated because they see that people outside their family can love and enjoy their children.

Show Unconditional Love

Taking a child with special needs out into the community can be challenging. People may stare, make cruel comments or fail to understand obvious physical differences or strange behaviors. This stress can prevent a family from accepting an invitation for dinner at a friend's home after church or staying for a church social. By showing unconditional love, church members can help families overcome fears of embarrassment or rejection.

Some children may not be able to clearly express their basic wants or needs. This frustration may lead to aggressive or self-injurious behaviors that threaten

a child's safety and the safety of others. Language differences like volume, pitch and unintelligible noises can draw misunderstanding and unwanted attention. A loving hand from a friend can keep a family from feeling isolated in their church community.

Share Grief

Although raising children with special needs brings many joyful experiences, parents must accept grief and sorrow as their companions along the way. They grieve over developmental milestones that their children miss, failed treatment plans, and dreams that will never come true. The success they hoped for is mixed with the powerful emotions of denial, anger, fear and shame.

Promise Hope

While the world might focus on cost, inconvenience and wasted energy and lay blame at the feet of parents or the medical establishment, the Church must speak out with an alternative message:

But [God] knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold (Job 23:10).

[God] was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering (Isaiah 53:3).

All your sons [and daughters] will be taught by the Lord, and great will be your children's peace (Isaiah 54:13).

God calls His people to proclaim hope to families affected by disability.

As Christians, we must commit to accept and help families dealing with special needs. Each child's differences must be understood and his or her strengths and gifts celebrated. As insight is gained into each unique situation, we discover how remarkable these children are and how easy they are to love.

Awareness: Autism Spectrum Disorder— The Growing Epidemic

Merriam-Webster defines the word “epidemic” as “affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time.”* When one compares current numbers to past trends and statistics, it is clear that there is an epidemic in the area of autism spectrum disorders (ASD).

According to a report by the Centers for Disease Control Prevention in 2007, “autism is the most common of the Pervasive Developmental Disorders, affecting an estimated 1 in 150 births. Roughly translated, this means as many as 1.5 million Americans today are believed to have some form of autism. And this number is on the rise.”** Twenty-five years ago approximately 1 child in 10,000 was diagnosed with autism; it was known as a relatively rare condition. Twenty-five years ago, a church would not expect to have a child with autism in Sunday School. Today, a church should expect to have multiple children with ASD in children’s programs. Volunteers must have basic information and strategies to support the needs and to value the gifts of children on the autism spectrum.

What is autism spectrum disorder?

When attending a family reunion, it soon becomes apparent that people resemble one another in physical features, personalities, reactions and actions. When psychologists classify different conditions, they group similar disorders into families. Autism is currently under a family category called pervasive developmental disorders (PDD). Autism is one of five relatives in this category that also includes Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, autistic disorder, Asperger’s syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). While the current heading for these five related conditions is PDD, many professionals suggest using the term ASD. Some professionals think of all five relatives as ASD; others would include only autism, Asperger’s syndrome and PDD-NOS in that category.

While researchers can describe ASD and note neurological differences on the spectrum, vast amounts of effort and study still have not shown what causes a person to develop ASD. Without a cause, a cure is difficult to discover. Professionals have, however, developed many techniques and strategies to support children with ASD.

What should a church know about ASD?

While professionals continue to think about categories, causes and possible cures, church volunteers should know how to support and include a child with ASD. If a parent brings a child to Sunday School and says, “My child has Asperger’s syndrome,” the leader should be able to recognize that name. That name recognition should link to a set of differences that may be seen in this child. Knowing those differences will allow the leader to support that child’s needs while also understanding that child’s strengths.

(Note: While knowing basic information about ASD is helpful, remember that each child is a uniquely crafted being of God. No two children are alike. It is far more important to become an expert on Johnny or Sue than it is to become an expert on ASD.)

What differences might you notice in a child with ASD?

Areas of difference are important because they point us to strategies and techniques we can use within our children’s ministry programs. Although each child is an individual with unique gifts and needs, a child with ASD will typically show differences in the following areas: social skills, language, and range of interests or behaviors.

Social Skills

Social interactions can be a challenge. Many instant and simple social decisions that you make are often laborious and mystifying for a child with ASD. While typical children understand when to be quiet and when to speak, a child with ASD might need individualized instruction in this area. For children with ASD, reading facial expressions, understanding another person’s point of view and accurately estimating another person’s emotions can be difficult. Some children prefer to avoid the confusion of multiple people in one place. Others enjoy being with a group but may make social errors. Instead of knowing, for example, when to ask a question, a child with ASD may interrupt a large group and talk to the pastor in the middle of a sermon. This is not intended to be rude; it is simply unknown territory for that child.

Language

Some children with ASD develop speech at 1 to 2 years of age, and then speech disappears. Those children may never regain the ability to use spoken words while others develop speech in later childhood. You may encounter a child who will use pictures to communicate, while others may be able to use some sign language.

Some children need to practice patterned speech before using original words or phrases. Some children who are unable to crack the speaking code may borrow speech from movies or books. These children might have a difficult time answering a question, but reciting large amounts of text from memory is an effortless task.

Other children with ASD speak very well with impressive vocabularies but struggle to comprehend conversations or figures of speech. The interpretation of a question or phrase might be very literal. For example, singing a worship song that speaks about Jesus "living in my heart" could be very confusing or upsetting for a child with ASD, because the child may interpret those words literally.

Range of Interests or Behaviors

"Repetitive" or "restricted" themes and behaviors can also be a unique area for a child with ASD. A girl with ASD may have a motion or phrase that she repeats frequently. A boy may have a topic that consumes his thoughts and conversations. Although such a narrow focus might look like an obsession, such an action or thought often calms and brings pleasure to a child with ASD. Rocking, lining up toys, talking about trains or reciting portions of movies can make life seem more comfortable and predictable. Although many times these actions and topics can bump into your lesson plan or activity for the day, there are ways to turn those bumps into a good situation for all involved.

Why "differences" and not "deficits"?

It seems most appropriate to call these areas "differences" instead of "deficits". As you work with a child with ASD, you will notice that sometimes an area of difference becomes an area of strength. A child who can focus on one topic often becomes very proficient in that area. For example, if a boy with ASD thinks exclusively about computers, he can develop amazing technology skills. If a girl with ASD cares passionately about telling other people about Jesus, she can become a powerful evangelist. God specializes in making individual patterns as He creates and builds children before they are even born. Remember to delight in that unique pattern for the children with ASD. God does. "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:14).

Want to learn more?

Make sure you read about these and other sensory differences in "The Sensory Factor" (p. 78). To understand this topic in depth and to read about many strategies to try at church, read *Autism and Your Church* by Barbara J. Newman.

**Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. "epidemic"; www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epidemic.

**"What Are Autism Spectrum Disorders?" *Autism Society of America*, January 23, 2008. http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_what (accessed May 24, 2008).