

Journeying in Faith with Children & Families

Considering Children with Special Needs

What is our Goal?

For me, it's that the children come to know Jesus, His love, forgiveness and the life we have in Him. To be filled with the Holy Spirit so that we know and experience the presence of Christ and that the children are gifted with all that they need as they follow Him. I believe it is the same for us as it is for the children; to be people of the Kingdom, reflecting the character of the King, to know His power, at work in our lives.

We have an amazing God who can use us. I cannot stress enough that God is God, not me and not you. I say this as a warning; don't carry a load beyond your ability, talk to Him about your concerns, ask Him to help you understand the challenge, ask the Holy Spirit to enable you in wisdom and discernment, giving you the gifts you need, seek help.

Let us pray:

I thank you Father, for the joy of sharing some of the things we learn from You. Father we pray that what we do today will be shaped by You, for Your glory. In all we do may Your purposes be our purposes. Amen.

The way we shape our ministry to children will be reflected by the way we see God; whether we know the presence of Jesus and seek the empowering of the Spirit; whether we are inclusive or exclusive; whether we reflect the values of the Kingdom or the world.

There are 2 questions I want you to consider, and they are particularly important when we consider children with special needs.

The first is: In our ministry to children, what is our agenda - school, entertainment, childminding, the world or the Kingdom?

What are some of the negatives from these categories?

All those negatives create a difficult place for children to flourish (even more so if they have special needs), but at the same time there are resources we can learn from and use.

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What are the strengths of the Kingdom?

Love, acceptance, encouragement, praise, sharing, respecting and valuing each person and the contribution they bring; failure, risk taking, trying, forgiveness AND boundaries to care for and create a safe and loving place for each other. We are people of the kingdom who delight in God and what He is doing in us. In the time we are together we want the children to experience this, to be a part of this, to contribute to this.

The stories, music, creative movement, drama, creative activities and games help the children learn about themselves and how each contributes to the others' learning and understanding of themselves. The Gospel is exciting, life giving. If we don't know this, the children will struggle to know it. We have a creative God who gifts us all. We need to share, encourage and enrich each other with what God has given us.

The second question is: How do we view God in the light of children with special needs?

Which of these theologies have you heard expressed before?

1. Who has sinned? God has visited punishment on this family, so that its shame can be seen by all.
2. These people are so good, they can be trusted with one of my special ones.
3. Some children are seen by God to be more precious, so some how we have to treat them differently.
4. God created the world, saw it was good. The fall came. He loves us, but will wait until Jesus comes again and then He will fix everything, don't expect anything now.
5. The Kingdom is here, God is actively working through Jesus and the empowering of the Holy Spirit bringing this about. God is actively using us. With God amazing things happen, often in ways we don't anticipate. The work is done in part and we will be completed when Jesus comes again.

We are called to see what God sees, where He wants to go, how He will do it. This often means a change in us. With God's help we can all grow and change.

Read: Welcome to Holland - See appendix.

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Five things have helped me:

1. God is amazing and He can work through us.
2. We all want the best for the children and so do their families.
3. Don't compare the children. They are all different and have something special to offer. Look for the strengths.
4. Where is each child in their growing and learning? By re-aging you move forward step by step and are not faced with 'can't do this', 'can't do that' and constant failure.
5. All children have needs. What you do for the one with a special need is often a blessing for someone else.

What are some of the challenges we face?

Restless, short attention span, wild and undisciplined, rough, unaware of others, unaware of sharing and taking turns, verbally unhelpful, destructive, negative or attention seeking and major or minor physical disability.

Around your table:

1. Share what makes you feel more nervous about children with special needs or what makes you feel vulnerable.
2. Share an experience with a child with special needs, something that worked in that situation, something you learned.

We are more likely to be faced with children with difficult behaviours, that have been learned often over years. Setting clear boundaries are so important.

Some keys are:

1. Be positive and confidently expectant that this is going to be a great time.
2. Make eye contact when talking.
3. When setting a boundary, be clear and concise.
4. Be consistent.
5. Model behaviour you are seeking.
6. Affirm quietly.
7. Teach a desired behaviour through storytelling.
8. Be prepared with a range of material, so that you have room to move according to the childrens' needs on the day.

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9. Focus on the children and the agenda - not on parents, helpers or visitors, unless they are part of the group.
10. Leaders know and agree on strategies to be followed.
11. Know the strengths and weaknesses of the children.

How can we plan to meet the needs of the children?

1. Enrolment forms that will give us helpful information.
2. Gathering information from past leader.
3. Seeking information from the internet.
4. Reach out to the family - how can we work as a team? Support strategies already in place at home or at school.
5. Help build a support group for community and home life.
6. Understand how the child is compromised by the need and how we can help them.
7. Developing the strengths of the child, so that he/she is a contributor.
8. Building safety and care.

What happens when?

1. We don't have people to help?
 2. The session is swamped by the need?
 3. If we feel it's beyond us, we are not coping and we are left feeling a failure?
- To have a **Children & Families' ministry team** is important for everyone working in this area. A body to support, advocate and set guidelines for the ministry. To have support from this group for advice and help, so that you are not alone with a challenge and that the situation is understood by the leadership.
 - Leaders working together, supporting each other and being resourced and being given training opportunities.
 - Building community - between children, parents, the church community as a whole and church leadership.
 - Securing resources needed to support the child. This is a whole church responsibility.

Let us pray...

Appendix:

WELCOME TO HOLLAND

by Emily Perl Kingsley

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I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability - to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel.

It's like this.....

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip - to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Colosseum. The Michelangelo David. The gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, "Welcome to Holland."

"**Holland?!?**" you say. "What do you mean Holland?? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy."

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met otherwise.

It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around.... and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills....and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy... and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned." And the pain of that will never, ever, ever, ever go away... because the loss of that dream is a very, very significant loss.

But... if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things ... about Holland.

