

# Teaching Children and Youth with Special Needs\*



Including a child or youth with special needs can cause some teachers to cringe inwardly, unsure of how to react or what to say. But the student who has a physical, mental, or developmental disability is as loved by God as any other! Including a student with special needs provides a tremendous opportunity for other members of the class to put God's love into action. If you are unfamiliar with the challenges of a child-specific disability, you may be uncertain about how to best help the child. Here are a few general guidelines and strategies to help you become prayerfully prepared.

## THE FOUNDATION

Provide space on your ministry registration form for parents (or caregivers) to indicate their child's special needs or medical concerns (including food intolerances or allergies). If a need is indicated, set up a meeting with the parents to learn more about the student's situation and how best to meet his or her needs. Take notes and share the information only with those who need to know. If the student is enrolled in school, it might be appropriate to ask parents to share their child's IEP (the Individualized Education Program decided with teachers and counselors in order to help their child learn best at school).

Invite the parent to attend class with the child the first few times. The parent can demonstrate the most effective ways to help the child. Then your help will be understood by the child and as well as being consistent with help the parent gives at home.

## THE CHALLENGE

When a student with different abilities enters a classroom, distraction may occur. A child's disability or behavior may cause others to focus on that person to the exclusion of everything else. Treat that student with the same amount of God's love and acceptance as the rest of the group. If needed and to prevent distraction, some churches train and assign an aide (a buddy) to a child with a disability. The aide works one-on-one with the child during the class session, helping the student participate as fully as possible while keeping distraction to a minimum.

## THE STRUCTURE

For many students with disabilities, a consistent routine provides structure that will help them function best. During the first few class sessions, establish a routine and follow it consistently. As you get to know the student, you can adjust the routine to accommodate his or her strengths and learning styles.

Expect to be greatly blessed as you discover the gifts God sends through a student with different abilities! With skill and understanding, you can minister effectively to all the students in your class.

\* Special needs can be defined as specific educational requirements resulting from learning abilities (both difficulties and gifted/talented abilities), physical disability, or emotional and behavioral difficulties.