

Inclusion, Family Style

BY KATHLEEN DEYER BOLDUC

As newlyweds, my husband and I spent many weekends camping in a cozy two-man tent. Along came three sons. Suddenly, we needed a family-size tent. As the boys grew, our campsite expanded further to include the tents of their friends.

Did you know no command appears more often in the Old Testament than the command to show hospitality to the stranger?

My youngest son, Joel, has autism. Joel is now 28 years of age. Throughout the years I've often felt like a stranger, so different was my family's lifestyle from that of the typical family. This is true for many parents of children with disabilities. Care-giving is exhaust-ing. Doctor and therapy visits replace trips to the playground and zoo. School becomes a maze of meetings. Marriages experience tremendous pressure. Siblings often struggle to find their place in the family constellation when one child's needs take priority.

Parenting a child with a disability is an enormous challenge. What better reason to expand the tents of our inclusion ministries to cover the entire family of the child with special needs?

When I speak at disability conferences I often ask parents what they most desire from their churches. Here are a few responses:

"It's the little things that count. I want people to smile instead of looking the other way when they see my daughter."

"Don't tell me everything is going to be okay. Our son is medically fragile. He's constantly in and out of the hospital, and it's taking a toll on our marriage."

"Because of our son's behaviors, we don't have a social life. We're new here, and I would love to get matched up with another family with kids the same ages as ours."

From my research, personal experience, and work with families that live with disability, I've found a few tent-enlarging tools:

1. Acknowledge

Acknowledge the family's unique set of circumstances. Ask to hear their story. Ask Mom and Dad to tell you about their child – his abilities, his disability, what she likes to do, what she's afraid of. Ask how the siblings are doing. Expect to hear about, and listen to, the family's struggles as well as joys. The lessons they have learned in Kingdom living may inspire your entire congregation.

2. Include

Train volunteers to buddy up with children with special needs so they may participate successfully in Sunday school. For resources, check out <http://theinclusivechurch.wordpress.com/category/resources/> Ask about the interests and passions of each family member. Is it music? Small group? Youth group? Mission work? Help them plug in to appropriate ministry areas.

In cases of severe disability, families may not have much free time outside of work and care-giving. Such parents often express a

need for help with transportation to doctor appointments, special Sunday school classes for children who are medically fragile, respite care so Mom and Dad can spend time together, counseling, and help navigating the disability system. Find volunteers to cover each area of need.

3. Accept

Acceptance entails celebrating individuals for their unique gifts and empowering them to use those gifts. One way to do this is by teaching children in the church that we are all more alike than we are different, and that disabilities are nothing to be afraid of. A great curriculum is available at www.everybodycounts.net Training Sunday school teachers in inclusion is another way of celebrating differences. Setting up consistent behavior plans, learning how to use a multi-sensory teaching approach, and working closely with parents are keys to making kids feel accepted. Again, The Inclusive Church (see above) is a good resource, as is Barbara Newman's book, *Autism and Your Church* <http://www.clcnetwork.org/clc-store>

One important pathway to acceptance is to make sure Mom and Dad can recharge their spiritual batteries in worship each week. One way to do this, along with using the buddy system and trained Sunday school teachers, is to assist in putting together a brochure that introduces their child – strengths, needs, likes, dislikes, behavioral plan, etc. – to each year's new teacher.

Finally, all children flourish when asked to lend a hand and all parents thrive on knowing their children's gifts are appreciated. All children can contribute. Perhaps they can pass out bulletins, be responsible for getting the pastor a drink of water, or help out as greeters.

4. Embrace

Physical hugs are great, but another way of embracing families that live with disability is to offer the gift of prayer. Anointing with oil, laying on of hands, prayers lifted up by the prayer ministry, short prayers over the phone, e-mails and notes letting the family know you are praying for them—these acts of prayer are a visible sign of caring, compassion, and faith in a God who walks alongside us, even in the storms of life.

It's time to put away the one-man tent. We need a bigger tent – a family-sized tent. And while you're at it, don't forget the longer cords and stronger stakes!

Originally published in the 2008 issue of "The Children's Corner," a newsletter from The American Baptist Church. It has been updated. Reprinted with permission from the author.



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