



Friends, there's so much I would love to tell you if I were able to park my wheelchair next to you. I would tell you how that tragic dive into shallow water altered my life; I'd share how I struggled with depression and confusion. However, I would happily tell you about my friends and family who encouraged me to hold tightly to my hope in Christ. You and your church can come alongside children with disabilities as well. It is our hope that you will be blessed by the information in this special insert from *Joni and Friends* and that you will welcome these children to your ministries!

Joni Eareckson Tada

### **Is there a difference between a “disability and a “handicap”?**

Yes! A **handicap** is the barrier that prevents an individual from doing what they want or need to do. The lack of an elevator is a handicap for the person in a wheelchair wanting to reach the second floor of a building. Curbs without ramps, no sign language interpreter and narrow doorways are examples of handicaps.

**Disabilities**, on the other hand, cover a large range of conditions and include things like visual, hearing and speech impairments; mobility or physical impairments; developmental disabilities such as mental retardation and hidden disabilities such as learning disabilities or epilepsy.

The effects of disabilities are so vast and varied that different children with the same disability will have characteristics unique unto themselves. Children with autism, for example, will exhibit different behaviors and have different needs. Celebrate their uniqueness!

### **What are we going to do with them once they join our group?**

First, make them feel welcome by creating an atmosphere of sensitivity and acceptance. If you provide such an atmosphere during your regular program, it will be easier to continue it in special programs such as *5-Day Club*® or *Good News Club*®. Preselecting a “buddy” for any child needing one will also help.

By taking time to understand each child and his disability, you can learn how to interpret behavior. So let's get out a new pair of glasses—ones that allow us to clearly see each individual child and thereby experience the blessings children with disabilities can bring into our lives and the lives of the other children.

Remember that each child will have unique characteristics; therefore, the best place to go for information that will help you integrate a special needs child into your group is her parents. Pre-register children and if you know a child will be coming with special needs, arrange a home visit. In a home visit you will observe how the family interacts with this child, how they direct conversation and especially how they discipline and reinforce the rules of the home. Consistency between environments will greatly improve this child's chance of success and of everyone enjoying her company and friendship.

## Basic Disability Etiquette Tips

- When greeting a person who is visually impaired, tell him your name and verbalize where you are.
- If an individual is hard of hearing, lightly touch his arm to get his attention. When you speak, do so slowly and directly. Never shout or speak in his ear and be sure to face him, being careful not to cover your mouth. If you aren't sure the person understood you, write down your message.
- If you are speaking with someone whose speech has been affected by his disability, listen attentively and patiently. Don't be afraid to ask him to repeat what he said.
- Remember that a wheelchair is part of a person's personal space. Do not lean on it or use it as a foot rest! When speaking with someone in a wheelchair, get down on his level. His neck will be grateful! Don't start to push his wheelchair without asking first. By the same token, if a child uses crutches, a walker or any adaptive device, do not move it out of the way without his permission.
- People who use a wheelchair do not consider themselves "confined or bound" to the wheelchair. This is their freedom!
- Use people-first language. Instead of saying "disabled people," say "people with disabilities." Avoid the use of words such as "cripple," "retarded" or "slow" to describe someone.
- Don't assume that someone with a disability is hard of hearing. We tend to raise our voices when we see a wheelchair or walker!
- Don't assume someone with speech, hearing or physical disabilities also has cognitive problems.
- Talk directly to the person with the disability, not to his companion or caregiver.
- When referring to someone with a disability, avoid using terms like "afflicted," "poor," "suffers from" or "unfortunate." If a person with a disability is fairly independent and copes with life as well as most of us, then these words do not apply!
- Don't refer to kids with disabilities in superhuman terms such as overly courageous, exceptionally brave, etc.

## **Avoiding Inclusion Confusion**

### **A Few Tips for a Disability Friendly Program**

#### **Physical Disabilities**

- If children are physically unable to create a craft or participate in an activity, allow them to borrow your hands. But make them active participants by encouraging them to direct your actions. Ask questions such as, “Should we make a bird or an elephant? Big ears or little ears? A tail or no tail? What color is the bird?” Encourage them to use their imaginations.
- Provide larger toys, crayons, utensils or dolls for children who have difficulty grasping items.
- Some children will have an easier time painting or coloring if the paper is taped to the table surface. Others may be more successful (and have more fun) at toe painting than finger painting.
- When singing, tap the rhythm lightly on child’s hand or leg. Engage the children in lots of motions or sign language to praise God. Jingle bells, drums, flags, scarves or streamers are fun for those with less fine motor control who may have difficulty with the motions.
- For children whose grasp is weak, bring strips of Velcro to fasten everything from paint brushes to rhythm instruments to their hands or wrists. This will help stabilize the object as they hold it.
- Objects (craft supplies, etc.) can be placed on a Rubbermaid non-slip pad to hold them in place.
- During playtime position children in a comfortable and safe way that will allow them to have maximum range of motion.

#### **Blind and Visually Impaired**

- Avoid using vague words when giving instructions, especially words associated with visual space; e.g., “the glue is over there.” Instead use a familiar point of reference—“The glue is just above your paper by your right hand.”
- Allow child time to feel the props, stage, craft materials or game pieces before beginning.
- Use sound cues, musical toys and interesting textures or sounds to enhance the child’s play experience.
- Use vivid, bright colors for children with limited visual ability. They can enjoy and respond to colors, even if they can’t clearly see objects.
- If a child has some vision, place craft or lesson materials on a larger sheet of black paper. This helps bring the materials into focus.
- If a child is to color on paper, place craft paper on a larger piece of sandpaper. This will help the child know where the edges of the paper are.
- Describe and talk about colors, lights, shapes and sizes of objects in the child’s surroundings.
- During music, ask if you can gently guide the child’s hands or arms to teach them the motions.

### **Deaf or Hearing Impaired**

- Compensate for loss of hearing by making the most of the senses of sight and touch. Use visual and physical examples as you explain directions.
- Remember body language and facial expressions are part of communication. Be animated so that what they cannot hear from your voice they can read in your posture and face. But remember that over-exaggerating may actually make it more difficult to understand.
- As often as possible, get to the child's eye level so he can comfortably see your face when you speak.
- Encourage the child to communicate about his surroundings and experiences if he is able. Ask open-ended questions such as, "Tell me about what you are making" or "What was your favorite part of the drama?"

### **Mental Disabilities**

- Avoid long lists of instructions. Allow a child to finish one step before explaining the next.
- Repeat instructions frequently, using the same words or phrases.
- When necessary, gently turn the child's head to face you or the activity to help focus attention.
- Limit choices. Too many choices are confusing or distracting.
- Allow child to make a simpler version of craft. Keep rules less complicated for games and activities.
- Provide well-marked boundaries for physical activity.
- If you know or suspect that a child is capable of a task, don't do it for him.
- When possible avoid seating child near distractions (high traffic areas, an air conditioner, loud children, etc.).

### **Learning Disabilities and ADD/ADHD**

- Break instructions into short segments. If necessary, give one instruction at a time.
- Get the child's attention before talking to him.
- Expect that you will need to repeat instructions. Stay calm and patient. Be a safe person they can go to for help.
- As much as possible, maintain eye contact with the ones who have difficulties comprehending during verbal instruction.
- Whenever possible, demonstrate instructions visually. The more ways you give input, the easier it is for children to understand and remember.
- Limit choices. Too many options are confusing and distracting.
- Allow for movement during activities if possible (lie on the floor, sit with legs out or crossed, kneel, stand to do craft, etc.).
- Provide reminders about time when necessary. Give 10 minute, 5-minute, 1-minute warnings towards the end of an activity. Help the child start to wrap up a little early to aid in transitions.

### **Autistic and Sensory-Sensitive**

- Eliminate as many nonessential distractions as possible. It may help some children to face a plain wall rather than sitting in the middle of the room or in the midst of a flurry of activity.
- Be aware of environmental factors to which the child is most sensitive (noises, lights, motion, personal space violations, etc.). Think through the program and be prepared to remove the child to a nearby spot that is less stimulating before anxiety escalates.
- Keep “escape” toys handy that can be used in a repetitive way (objects that roll, spin, rock, etc.). These allow the child to tune out distractions that may be disturbing by concentrating on the objects.
- A headset to block out noises may calm some children at stressful times.

Used by permission from *Joni and Friends*.

For further resources concerning ministering to children and families with disabilities contact:

Joni and Friends  
PO Box 3333  
Agoura Hills, CA 91376

[www.joniandfriends.org](http://www.joniandfriends.org)