

Ministering to the Special-Needs Family

by *Marci Campbell*

Coming to church is often difficult for the family of a child with special needs. I recently heard of a family turned away by 54 churches due to their son's disabilities.

Let's face it. Most parents are not going to be that persistent. They wonder: "Will my child be accepted? How will the other children react to my child? Will the teachers think it is an inconvenience for my child to be in their Sunday School class?" Let your attitude be one of understanding and acceptance. You may never know the kind of difference you could make in a child's life and in the life of his family.

Here are some other concrete suggestions for helping special-needs families:

- Try to meet with the child's parents before the new church year begins and get to know the child. Parents will appreciate your interest. Find out what works for their child. Discover his or her likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. As the year progresses, keep the lines of communication open. Be vigilant of changes and special needs.
- Having an extra helper in the classroom can be a tremendous help in modifying activities so the child will feel successful.
- Often the feedback received by this child is negative. Find a way to protect the child and build self-esteem. This child may need a positive word and a sense of success and accomplishment more than you will ever know.
- Try to regularly say something positive to the parents about their child. This family may have come to your church as a last resort. They may be tired and hurting. Don't add to their pain and frustration by complaining about trivial things. If there is a significant concern, share it in a gentle, loving way.
- Tell the parents that you are genuinely happy to have this child in your class, and offer to work with the parents to solve any problems.
- When parents of children with special needs are asked, "What is the number one way the church can minister to you?" the answer is almost always respite care. For many families, caring for their family member is constant. A short break could mean so much. However, they will probably not ask for a break. A trusting relationship must first be built before most will be comfortable asking for the help they really need.

For those times when you don't know what do, the Lord has said to pray for wisdom and He will grant it. He will supply all of your needs. As a parent of a child with special needs, I want my child to learn about Jesus in a safe, loving environment. I want my child to be accepted and feel God's unconditional love shown to him through others. What better place for this than Sunday School?