

## Starting a Special Needs Ministry

*Amy Fenton Lee*

**QUESTION: Our church is in the early stages of developing a special needs ministry for children. As a staff leader, I am nervous. Should I be concerned about launching the ministry too soon?**

After talking with dozens of church leaders (including senior pastors) and special needs ministry volunteers, let me answer this question two ways:

### **At some point you will just have to take leap of faith.**

Formally launching a special needs ministry always requires faith. And regardless of the amount of upfront planning a church does, some unforeseen issue will inevitably arise that requires the ministry team to rethink their approach and to make a change. Because the effects of special needs diagnoses vary so dramatically and because each family is unique, many challenges have to be tackled on a case-by-case basis. So at some point, a church just has to start the ministry while still feeling underprepared.

In addition, churches should act with a greater sense of urgency to accommodate families already participating yet needing assistance in order to remain engaged. While it may not be possible to offer buddies and/or alternate environments for every hour of programming, the ministry team should do their best to provide an option for immediate accommodation. Churches with thriving special needs ministries will share stories from the early days of their inclusion efforts when they accepted a student with complex needs while silently praying God would work out the details.

### **A church should prepare before publicizing.**

Having said all the above, I believe that a church can begin publicizing a special needs ministry too soon. Let me explain. What a church does in the early days of the ministry will establish its reputation for the next two or three years. First impressions are lasting impressions. News of early successes or failures will disseminate quickly. And because special needs accommodation is not a fad but poised to become a permanent fixture on every church's ministry menu, early decisions may have long term consequences (good or bad).

Failure in a special needs ministry can take many forms:

1. A child is hurt because the right questions were not asked at check-in.
2. Untrained buddies react poorly to "unexpected" behaviors.
3. Volunteers quit because of unreasonable expectations.
4. Parents feel disconnected with rather than supported by church staff.



Hurt feelings, let alone hurt bodies, can generate negativity that spreads like wildfire. As a result, it is important for a church to do their homework by assigning staff ownership and creating appropriate **safety procedures, intake processes, and volunteer training** before making big statements about the ministry. The church owes it to families and to volunteers to set them both up for success. And keep in mind that a new leader and a fresh set of volunteers will have a learning curve.

If mistakes are made, relational cleanup is easier in the first few months when expectations are more easily tempered. After the special needs team has a handful of ministry wins under its belt, God will nudge leadership to take the next leap of faith and to publicly declare, “All are Welcome!”