

How to Guide a Family from the Front Door into the Heart of the Church

Many churches are seeing a drop in attendance, and they are eager to have visitors and love them well. We want to see churches express the same eagerness for your visiting families with disabilities. It's easy for fears to rise when a family with high needs walks into your church for the first time.

Will we be able to help?

Can we accommodate this family?

What if I say the wrong thing?

The truth is, we all have high needs. It's just that families touched by disability often demonstrate those needs more visibly than others.

Here are a few steps you can take to be ready to welcome and love a family with disabilities:



Become Comfortable in What to Say. Love, kindness, and genuine interest in others goes a long way with everyone, including those with disabilities.

- *Things to do:* Many of the same “rules” for getting to know anyone apply here: directly engage the person with a disability as much as possible (not caregivers or family), look the person in the eyes, speak to the person, learn his or her name, and ask about interests.
- *Things to avoid:* Don't ask for diagnosis details in the first conversation and refrain from offering information related to disability that you think might be helpful.

Become Comfortable in What to Do. Have an action plan for visitors on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday nights. It's a great way to become more comfortable with “what to do” when families with high needs visit your church. Your action plan should include:

- a point person, someone who is savvy with disabilities and savvy with the church.
- a quiet place to go to where you can talk, listen, and discern needs and supports.
- floater volunteers who are available and willing to jump in to support a child/teen/adult in a 1:1 capacity for a first-time visit—these volunteers should be flexible and strong in the areas of love, encouragement, and kindness.

Form a Plan After the First Visit. Follow-up with a family can be encouraging or intimidating. Every family is unique in the pace that they want to enfold into a new congregation. Let the family set the pace, and don't put unnecessary expectations on them. What to do:

- Let them know that you want to make church even easier to attend next time.
- Keep the conversation easy and light. Second visits don't require full intake forms and all the information they have about their disability.

- Focus on the next major step that the family wants to take. Listen well to discern what they want next.

Allow New Visitors Freedom to Grow. There's a fine balance between providing supports and allowing the family freedom to grow on their own. Every family you encounter may need you to strike a different balance. Allow your special-needs families to guide you. For example, providing your cell number so that the family can text if they need help would be very encouraging. On the other hand, requiring the family to text on Saturday whether they will attend, so that you can provide volunteers, might be an attempt to help but puts a great deal of pressure on the family.

Guiding Committed Visitors into the Heart of the Church. Once families begin attending consistently, it is appropriate and helpful to offer to meet with them to assess long-term supports and adaptations. This is the time to help them learn all the possibilities for their ages and stages of life, and let them decide what they might want to be involved in.

Become Comfortable with an Imperfect Process. When you are helping a family navigate your church for the first time, it might feel messy. You are learning new people who have new needs, and they are learning a new church and new people. Keep in mind that the goal is not to do things perfectly. The goal is that you all learn, grow, and show grace to each other. You may have to remind yourself to be comfortable with the process and not panic if you don't know all the answers.

This article was featured as the September 2018 Monthly of Engaging Disability With The Gospel.