



How to ...

Welcome, include and engage children with special needs

More and more often today, church congregations are welcoming children with a range of special needs. This 'how to' guide provides basic advice for creative session planning, to enable people with responsibilities for children's work in their churches to become familiar with Diocesan safeguarding procedures and protocols.

Making families feel welcome and included:

- Welcome the whole family – children and their parents/carers (children can be often overlooked especially when they cannot speak or do not seem to respond to people.)
- If a child cannot cope with the service and is taken out by their parents, try to make it possible for someone to go with them to:
 - show them where they might go to play or sit
 - offer to fetch a drink for both child and parent /carer
 - offer to bring communion to the parent and give a blessing to the child (as appropriate) if they are missing that part of the service
 - ask the parent/carer if there is anything that could be done to help make the service more accessible next time
- Don't be afraid of asking parents/carers about a child's preferences or needs. Try to do this rather than assume.
- As you get to know a family, offer one-to-one support for the child with a disability, where appropriate and possible. A one-to-one helper can support the child during children's church, enabling the parents to go to church, and the child to develop a friendship with someone other than their family.
- Remember that a helper does not need to be an expert - they only need to be willing to learn from the child and parents/carers.
- Try to ensure that the child with special needs gets the same opportunities as other children. (They may not be so quick to come forward, although wanting to – and other children provide a lot of competition!)
- Treat parents/carers, children with special needs and siblings as individuals - they may have additional needs, but they still have other interests and varied lives.
- Ask children to take on a role which is appropriate for them, such as welcoming people at the door or taking biscuits round after the service.
- Remember that families of children with special needs are often living with high levels of stress so you may want to consider what support you can give to the family as a whole.

Ideas for Teaching and Worship

- Using a multi-sensory approach will help children and young people for whom language is difficult. It will also be appreciated by other children and adults!
- Use enough sensory input to help children focus on an activity, but not so much that you overload them.
- Be aware that some children are hyper-sensitive to noise, places, smells etc. especially if they occur suddenly and without warning.

- Put one idea across in several different ways, as different people process information in different ways.
- Remember that some children will not be able to cope with the full length of a children's service or even the children's part of the service. This is OK and probably not a reflection on you or other worship leaders. If possible and appropriate, try to arrange an alternative activity for them, perhaps with their own one-to-one helper.
- We do realise that this takes a lot of extra time, effort and energy from hard-working volunteers, and it is not always possible. However, if you are able to give it a go and try out new ideas, you may find that the rewards are well worth the extra effort that you have put in.

Specific ideas to engage the senses

Hearing

- Use simple songs, with repetitive words.
- Use instruments – shakers, tambourines etc. so that children can “make a joyful noise” in wordy songs.
- Use “echo” songs where the children/congregation repeat each line after the choir/cantor sings it.
- Try using instrumental music as a background to spoken prayers (put only the prayers on the hearing loop, not the music, so that people with hearing impairment can hear them.) Some children can be focussed and calmed by music, whereas words/speech may be difficult for them or indeed even aggravate them.
- Try telling stories using sounds, creating a “soundscape”. For example, use a recording (or live sound effects!) of the sound of the sea and the wind for the story of Jesus walking on the water.
- Ask the children to make the sounds of the story, e.g. large sheet of card for the sound of the storm, coconut shells for the sound of the donkey on the way to Bethlehem, animal noises for the animals on Noah's Ark.

Vision

- Use pictures as well as words (on paper or screen).
- Use actions to tell stories and to accompany songs. Consider using Makaton signs rather than made up actions as these may be more meaningful to the child.
- Use puppets to act out a story. You don't have to be “artistic” - simple puppets can be made from cardboard figures attached to sticks or poles.
- Use props to help tell a story, especially when the main theme is abstract: e.g. for “sharing”, something edible.
- Use acting, drama and mime - as your imagination allows.
- Use signing where appropriate, together with speech. This may be sign-supported English, British Sign Language or Makaton. Find out which signing system the children you see regularly use, and perhaps try to learn a few basic signs.
- If any of the children in your group use signing, consider whether it may be possible for a parent, carer or teacher to teach, for example, a Christmas carol to all the children in your group.
- Use symbols (simple line pictures) to enhance the meaning of words.
- Make pipe cleaner figures to help tell a story – make them move around and interact. Children can take them home with them to help them to remember the story.

Touch

Please note: touch is a healing gift which needs to be used wisely and sensitively. Some children like to be touched on the head as they are given a blessing at Communion, for example, but others will not. Some children cannot tolerate touch.

Do check with parents and ensure that all helpers are aware of children's preferences, and of safeguarding issues, so that touch is used appropriately. Remember that any physical contact should be an appropriate response to the child's needs, not the needs of the adult.

- Together make a textural banner or picture which children are allowed to touch.
- Give or make something textural for children to take home, to talk about with family and friends (e.g. planting bulbs in pots for new life, God's creation).
- Consider, for a special occasion, arranging for animals (real ones!) to illustrate stories: sheep and lambs for the Good Shepherd, a donkey on Palm Sunday, and the animals in the Christmas story; or perhaps pets for learning about caring and looking after others.

Smell

- Use flowers or scented blossom to help get across the idea of God's creation e.g. new life in Spring.
- Try using aromatherapy oil in a burner to suggest ideas and stories, for example lavender for peace, frankincense for the Wise Men.
- Oils generally considered safe for children with learning disabilities include lavender, tea tree, chamomile, neroli and frankincense. Not all oils are considered safe for all conditions, so do check first – and don't overdo it!
- Anointing with oil is used on certain occasions (Baptism, Confirmation and for healing) and may be appropriate in your church on particular occasions.
- Try a scent trail in Holy Week to enhance the story of Jesus' life, when many smells appear as part of the story – perfume, bread, wine, the Passover lamb, bitter herbs, myrrh and vinegar.

Taste

- Connect food with the seasons, e.g. Harvest, Christmas, Christingle.
- Make a birthday cake for Jesus' birthday, which everyone can share.
- Make the link between eating bread and drinking wine in church with the Last Supper. This could be an important part of preparation for Confirmation or for admission to Communion. Combine the taste and smell of bread and wine with the use of candles, incense, quiet music or silence, simple words and call each child or young person by their name.
- Try using a selection of fruits to explore the idea of the fruits of the Spirit – qualities of sweetness, softness, nourishment.

These ideas are intended to get you thinking of ways you can use all the senses, together with words, to teach and worship with children and young people with special needs. Not all of them will be possible for you or appropriate for your church or group, but it is hoped that they will help to give you ideas for the particular work you do. Try to be as creative and imaginative as possible and don't be afraid of trying things out!

Above all, remember that children and young people with special needs can only learn about the Gospel when they feel welcome and included.

Further resources:

'Multi-sensory Prayer' (2000) & 'Multi-sensory Church' (2002) by Sue Wallace

'Multi-sensory Parables' (2006) by Ian Birkinshaw (Scripture Union)

'Special Children Special Needs' (2003) by Simon Bass (Church House Publishing)

[Prospects](#) website has Makaton signs and training for churches

The Top Tips series published by Scripture Union:

'Top Tips on Welcoming Special Children' by Denise Abrahall (2005)

'Top Tips on Communicating God in Non-Book Ways' by Kathryn Copsey & Jean Elliott (2010)
'Top Tips on Handling Difficult Behaviour' by Graham Finch (2008)

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