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Reaching Families with Special Needs

After a set of articles I wrote several years ago on the topic of reaching out to people in crisis, a church asked me to speak to their monthly women’s ministry meeting. Towards the end of the talk on relational etiquette I touched on my upcoming writing topic, reaching out to families with special needs. I felt compelled to share some common themes that were emerging from my interviews with mothers of children with autism, Down syndrome, various developmental obstacles and other life-altering diagnoses.

I relayed my sense that these parents felt largely unheard and misunderstood. Many wanted to educate their peers – parents of typically developing children. For parents of children with special needs, their experiences with friends or other parents inside the church were no different or better than with those outside their congregation. The mothers of children with special needs all longed for greater connection and desired for their children to be known and loved.

The mothers I had interviewed offered pointers, which I shared, for appropriate questions and comforting responses as they yearned to be engaged by their peers. Every parent I interviewed shared at least one disappointing experience inside their church or Bible study group. I shared these insights with what were mostly mothers of typical children during my talk that day.

Based on feedback I received after my time with that church’s women’s group, the audience of mostly young moms was surprised by and appreciative of the time I devoted in my topic to special needs education. One of the ladies in the audience wrote me after the speaking engagement: “My sister has a child that recently received a devastating and life-changing diagnosis. I have never known what to say so I avoided the topic. Thank you for giving me the words to start conversations with my own sister.”

Congregations may do their greatest service in giving a voice to families with special needs. While some parents choose to remain private regarding their child’s diagnosis, most are candid and welcome the opportunity to educate. Creating occasions during worship services
and in smaller-setting Bible studies for these members to share their stories may be life-changing for those listening.

Churches can also help educate their congregation by bringing in outside professionals to address special needs topics. Inviting a local pediatric therapist to address a group of young women about developmental milestones may educate a curious set of mothers about their own children while making them better informed and more caring friends to their peers receiving a special needs diagnosis for their child. Find appropriate church forums to tackle the myths of various diagnoses and to encourage both outreach and inclusion in life-on-life relationships.

My interviews revealed that families of a child with autism repeatedly shared their battles of public misperceptions. Most people aren’t aware of the incredible capabilities of children who have high-functioning forms of most diagnoses. Proactively planning opportunities to educate the broader church membership in special needs issues nearly always yields acceptance and better integration between typical families and those affected by disability.

**Additional resources suggested by Building Faith**

- *Let All the Children Come to Me* by Malesa Breeding and Dana Hood (2006: David C. Cook)

**A sampling of organizations to tap into:**

- The Autism Society
- National Center for Learning Disabilities
- Federation for Children with Special Needs (Boston, Massachusetts)
- Council for Exceptional Children
- Parents Helping Parents
Amy Fenton Lee enjoys equipping churches for successful special needs inclusion. Amy administers The Inclusive Church blog.