Every Child Welcome

A Ministry Handbook for Including Kids with Special Needs

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Kregel
Ministry

To those who were my students during my teaching career:
You taught me more than you will ever know.
~Jolene

To my wonderful parents, Mary and Barry Livingston,
who faithfully took me to Sunday School and who were
always certain that one day, I would write a book.
~Katie

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Greeting Your Guests: Communicating Warmth and Safety at Arrival Time

Have you ever been invited to a dinner party where you didn't know anyone well? Did you stand on the doorstep, take a deep breath, and ring the bell with a trembling finger? Then you know how parents and their children feel when they visit a church for the first time. The trembly feeling is often double strength for parents bringing a child with special needs, as thoughts race through their minds: Will my child be welcomed? Will my daughter be valued? Will she find a friend? Will someone care enough to learn my son's name? Will the environment make my child feel safe?

This chapter is all about making a good first impression, so that the fears of parents and their children are quickly dispelled. The strategies you're about to learn can help you—and everyone else in your church family—make a good impression in the parking lot, the lobby, the registration table, in the hallways of the children's ministry wing, and finally, when a child new to your children's ministry program enters your meeting space.

A Prayer for Welcoming Children to Children's Ministry Programs

Lord, right now it's quiet in this place. Soon, though, I'll hear footsteps running down the hall and murmurs between parents and kids. Children will cross the threshold, and I will have one hour to teach—and reach them. Help me to welcome them warmly, Lord, so their hearts will be ready to learn about You.

Strategy 1—Create a Gentle Entrance

We all know that moment. The magical moment when we enter a room, turn on the lights and then suddenly, without warning—*Surprise!* Our friends jump out, clapping, laughing, and racing to embrace us, all in the good fun of celebration. Once we catch our breath, we're usually quite pleased.

For many children with sensory difficulties or anxiety, our well-intentioned greetings are rather like an unexpected and unwelcome surprise party. In our efforts to make every moment of church fun and exciting, our entryways sometimes mimic carnival spaces with loud music, murals, and decorative lights. While this sets the mood for many typically developing kids, those with special needs might find this welcome quite unwelcoming. Fortunately, we can remedy this quite easily by creating a gentle entrance. Here's how:

- *Designate one door* into the church as a gentle entrance.
- *Create a sign* that informs parents of this entrance. It can say: If you or your child prefer a quiet start to church, please enter through our gentle entrance on the _____.
- *Train greeters* who staff this entrance to use quiet voices and refrain from hugs or high fives that are overwhelming or even painful for some children.
- *Turn down lights to low.* If using fluorescent lighting, remove some of the bulbs to soften the lighting.
- *Play nature sounds,* quiet instrumental music, or turn off music altogether in this entrance.

A quiet entrance will pay huge dividends for families. It's the kind of gentle welcome that can create a worshipful Sunday morning for the whole family.

Strategy 2—What's in a Name:
Why Greeting Kids by Name Makes a Difference

Picture this—a busy church hallway, full of exuberant children. As is often the case at children's ministry programs, the pace between activities is quick. Nevertheless, the volunteer leader remains placid. She checks in with her volunteers, prepares for her duties, and communicates with other staff. None of this interferes with the most important task: greeting the children. She greets every single child by name:

Good morning, Michael!
It's great to see you today, Tiara!
I'm so glad you're here, Kieran!

Every greeting—just like every child—is unique.

Why Using a Child's Name Is Important

A classroom management philosophy called "Responsive Classroom" emphasizes the importance of knowing children—and greeting them—by name. One administrator reflected, "By the end of morning meeting, every single child has heard his or her name spoken aloud. That sends a powerful message that each individual matters to the group."

What Using a Child's Name Says

Clearly, the leader described above understands this. She is modeling several things to children and the volunteers working with her:

- She knows the children in her care.
- She cares about them as individuals.
- She cares about their learning.

In addition, she is modeling something even greater for the children in her program. In John 10:2–3, we hear Jesus say,

But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

By using children's names, the children's ministry leader models Jesus' love for them. Because, like her, Jesus knows our names!

Strategy 3—Check-In and Name Tag Know-How

Names are one of the most powerful tools available to adults working with children. By making name tags an integral part of the check-in process, we accomplish two tasks at once: gathering information about those in attendance and distributing name tags. The name tags can also be used to alert all volunteers about the individual behavioral issues and safety concerns for each child, while ensuring confidentiality and promoting consistency.

How to Create a Check-In System

The development of an effective check-in and name tag system requires some planning and collaboration ahead of time. Consider meeting with other teachers and the program coordinator so you can brainstorm together. These questions can help you create a name tag protocol that will function for months and even years to come:

- How can we design one, consistent check in system to be used by typically developing children and those with special needs in a variety of children's ministry programs?
- Should our children's ministry invest in a computerized check-in/checkout program or can we manage without it?
- What codes or symbols can be added to the name tags to alert all volunteers of potential safety risks concerning children who are potential runners, have food allergies, special bathroom needs, seizures, or other safety issues?
- How can the check-in process and name tags be used to ensure children are released to the designated parent, guardian, or adult?
- How can the system help reach parents in case of an emergency?
- How will volunteers be educated concerning the check-in process and name tag system?

How to Create a Simple Name Tag System

Choosing the simplest answer to those questions is key to creating an uncomplicated name tag system. Here are some ideas to help you accomplish that goal:

- Create a central check-in station where volunteers sign in all children and issue name tags. That way teachers and leaders can concentrate on completing activities with kids.

- Use the same kind of name tag for all children. Choose tags big enough for a child's name and any codes or visual cues necessary for children with special needs.
- Order colored wristbands or add colored sticker dots (from an office supply or discount store) as safety alerts: blue for food allergies, red for kids who run, green for special bathroom needs, and so on. If your church uses a computerized name tag system, printed symbols can be added to the tag instead.
- Add a wristband for circumstances not addressed by the normal system. Special needs ministry expert Denise Briley uses wristbands to alert volunteers that a child may be prone to running and may try to leave the building. This strategy provides communication without stigmatizing the child.
- Ask parents to sign in at the check-in station and sign out when their children are released. Or put a number on each name tag and give parents an ID tag with the same number. They can present the ID tag to the ministry worker, who will check it against the name tag before a child is released.

When Your Children's Ministry Goes on the Road

Try these ideas when the situation demands more than wristbands and name tags:

- **T-shirts.** These can be a helpful identification tool for retreats and outreach events. Children can be quickly identified when they're wearing the same brightly colored shirts. T-shirts can also be a helpful way to keep small groups and leaders together. Assign each grade level or small group a certain color shirt to make it easy to find a leader and peers.
- **USB bracelets.** Leaders need quick access to emergency medical information when traveling to church camp or on mission trips. One convenient way to manage this is by loading information onto a USB drive that attaches to a bracelet. The information remains with the child, eliminating the need to find a file or safety card. Information on these drives should be shared only with parental permission, only when absolutely necessary, and in strict confidence.

- Ask parents to list a cell phone number and indicate where they will be in the building, and where they sit during worship, in case of an emergency.
- Provide training for new volunteers and communicate changes as they occur, or annually.

Once you have a check-in system in place and volunteers know how to use it, it will become an integral part of your children's ministry. But like any tool, it needs regular maintenance to function best. Once a year, ask parents and volunteers for input about what they like and for ways to improve the system. If changes are made, educate everyone so the power of each child's name can be used to keep them safe and to communicate the care and compassion of Christ.

Strategy 4—Peer Greeters: Helping Children Welcome Each Other

Often, children with special needs struggle socially. Making and keeping friends at school and in the neighborhood is incredibly difficult. We can increase the likelihood that kids with disabilities will find friends at children's ministry activities by training their typically developing peers.

How to Recruit Peer Greeters

One way to accomplish this is to recruit peer greeters. How can this be done?

- Observe children who attend children's ministry events frequently. Those who demonstrate a calm demeanor, the ability to follow directions, and an accepting, understanding spirit make excellent candidates for this role.
- Once potential peer greeters have been identified, talk with their parent or guardian to be sure that they may volunteer in this capacity. Taking on the role of greeter means arriving a bit early, and therefore, requires the chauffeur skills of an adult. In addition, it will be important to discuss the expectations for this role with the parents so they can reinforce these ideas with their child.

How to Train Peer Greeters

Once you've recruited peer greeters, they need training. These tips can help:

- Work with peer greeters to help them understand the importance of their role in welcoming new children.
- Talk about how it feels to be new to Sunday school, club night, VBS, or children's church and how we want to show God's love to all of the children who visit the church.
- Discuss similarities and differences as well, and emphasize that while we all have strengths and difficulties, we're all loved by Jesus.
- Finally, role play with the kids, allowing them to practice welcoming a new child.

By training children to welcome and understand those with disabilities, we not only allow them to serve the church, but we also help them form friendships that can make a lasting impact on the kingdom.

Strategy 5—Schedules: Helping Kids Know What to Expect

Think about what we do each week before we enter the sanctuary: we greet the usher and take our bulletin, which gives us the order of worship, the hymns we'll sing, and other important information. Why? Because we like to know what to expect. So do our kids.

Why to Tell Kids What to Expect

Children with disabilities often have a heightened need to know the schedule ahead of time. This need exists for several reasons:

- Separating from parents can be frightening for children who have anxiety; they will want to know when they will be reunited with Mom or Dad.
- Understanding new rules and procedures can be overwhelming for children who have autism spectrum disorders.
- Children with attention issues benefit from the structure a schedule provides.

How to Tell Kids What to Expect

Therefore, having a routine that involves reviewing the schedule can be a critical component to any children's ministry activity. To accomplish this, simply write out the plans for your time together on a whiteboard or a piece of chart paper. The schedule might look something like this:

Today is Sunday, January 17, 2015
We will write our Weekly News and talk about our week.
We will pray together.
After we pray, we will read our Bible story.
We will go to the big room and sing worship songs.
We will work on a craft.
We will go home.

To help children better understand this schedule, include icons or pictures of each activity. Many children with special needs fare best with these kinds of visuals. When all of the children have arrived, take time to read the schedule together so that everyone knows what to expect. This short routine will enhance your time together because it meets the needs of children who easily become anxious, overwhelmed, or benefit from structure.

Strategy 6—Visual Schedules: The Eyes Have It

Visual schedule is a new name for an idea that's been around for a long time. Visual schedules display the steps of an activity in the order in which they will occur using words, pictures, photographs, icons, and sometimes actual objects. They are effective tools for kids with special needs who respond much better to what they see than what they hear. These kids may not understand verbal instructions or may be unable to recall the steps or correct sequence for multi-step processes. A visual schedule allows them to see the directions, step-by-step and in the proper sequence.

When to Use Visual Schedules

The schedules can be used in a multitude of situations, from listing every activity on Sunday morning to the steps of one specific activity, such as hand-washing in the bathroom or completing a project and cleaning up the craft table. Generally, the length of the visual schedule should increase with a child's chronological or developmental age. Fewer steps, shorter time spans, and more concrete symbols are appropriate for young children and those with developmental levels. More steps, a

> **Visual Symbols:**
> **From Concrete to Abstract**
>
> - Actual Objects
> - Photographs
> - Colored Line Drawings
> - Black and White Line Drawings
> - Text

broader time span, and more abstract symbols can be used for children who are older or at a higher developmental level.

Components of Visual Schedules

Simple visual schedules need only two components:

- A visual symbol for each step (line drawings, clip art, photographs, pictures, words)
- A medium for displaying the symbols in sequence (tag board, construction paper, pocket chart, manila folder, chalkboard, whiteboard, laminated paper, photo album, etc.)

Some activities may also require a means for the child to indicate the process has been completed—perhaps a folder for finished assignments, or a box for completed projects.

How to Use Visual Schedules

Once the visual schedule has been completed, you or a volunteer can review it with the child and allow time for practice. The child may also want to practice storing the schedule so it can be easily accessed when it's needed again. Wait until the child is familiar and comfortable with one visual schedule before introducing a new one. To find more examples of visual schedules and learn more about how to use them, check out the resources below.

Visual Schedule Resources and Ideas

Boardmaker Software: http://www.mayer-johnson.com/boardmaker-software

Downloadable Visuals: http://connectability.ca/visuals-engine/

Tips and Ideas for Making Visual Schedules: http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/explore/pbs_docs/tips_for_visuals.pdf

Visual Schedule Ideas on Pinterest: http://www.pinterest.com/aacandat/visual-schedules/

Visual Schedules: http://www.gvsu.edu/cms3/assets/2CF6CA25-D6C6-F19E-339DC5CD2EB1B543/secondarylevellinkprograms/visual_schedules.docx