



## Appendix

# Disability 101 for Pastors

### **What You Don't Know That You Need to Know**

If you're reading this section, there's a good chance it's because (1) a family in your church handed you this book and asked you to read it, but you really aren't exactly sure what to expect (and might be a bit nervous!); (2) you are a pastor and have a child with disability and want to help your church improve its disability ministry; or (3) you are a pastor and want to better understand how to reach this demographic of your church community and reach out to families who have a need.

Whichever one describes you best, our goal with this section is to give an overview of how to minister to families of kids with disability, help you gain insight on this demographic of your congregation, and give some practical tips to help improve the overall care and experience for folks in this space.

We know that being a pastor is one of the most challenging (and rewarding) jobs anyone can have. We also know there are huge demands on your time, energy, and resources. We don't want to add more to your

to-do list here, but we do want to help you get an overview of how to better prepare your leaders and laypeople to make the church an inviting place for families with special needs.

Here are a few quick stats you might find interesting:

- On average, one in six families in your community (17 percent) are impacted by disability.
- Families with special needs aren't looking for special treatment, but they do want to be welcomed and included like any other family.

I'm sure you can tell that based on that first statistic alone, welcoming families with disability into the life of your church is no longer optional—it is essential. If we really want to go into *all* the world and preach the gospel, we have to figure out how to include families of kids with special needs, just like any other demographic.

We know that the word “inclusion” has been co-opted lately and used as a weapon for guilt and coercion. But “inclusion” really is the best word for what we think the church should be trying to do, so we'll use it. Honestly, the church should be the most inclusive place on the planet, because Jesus welcomes everyone. And when the church is inclusive, Jesus becomes accessible to everyone!

In the disability community, inclusion means adapting and modifying the way things are done for people with disabilities, as needed. Inclusion doesn't mean everyone does the same thing; it just means everyone gets a chance to participate and engage.

## Knowing Where You Stand

Dan Vander Plaats has been helping churches include families with disability for many years. He has concluded that a person's understand-

ing about disability tends to go through five stages:

1. **Ignorance.** We prefer to just call this “lack of awareness.” Most people just don’t know what they don’t know about disabilities. We all tend to start with no understanding of what families and kids with special needs are like or need. It’s not because we’ve intentionally ignored or shunned them; it’s just that we haven’t been exposed to them. Unless we’ve been directly impacted by it, we just don’t know.
2. **Pity.** Folks begin to see the challenges families with special needs face. They see how hard life is and often wonder what it would be like if they were in that situation. They feel sorry for the families and want to use their resources to help in some way. They feel pity but aren’t really sure much can be done for folks in this situation.
3. **Care.** In this stage, after some ongoing interaction with folks with special needs, they begin to get a vision for their value. They may even feel a burden to begin ministering to them in a way that fits their needs.
4. **Friendship.** After spending lots of time with families of kids with disability, they come to a deeper understanding of the value this demographic has in God’s eyes and realize they have been blessed by what the person with disability brings to the relationship. They begin to see the benefit of ministering to this community.
5. **Co-laborer.** People with disability have the exact same call on their lives that I do: we are all God’s workmanship, created in Christ for good works. We are all called to do this work together. We aren’t just to minister to folks with special needs; we are called to minister with these folks.

Wherever you find yourself on this continuum, we believe that we all have the ability, and are called, to arrive at a place of co-laboring with

the disability community—which leads to the first misperception we want to clear up.

Welcoming this demographic in your church isn't about starting a new ministry; it's about creating a culture that includes kids, teens, and adults in the existing ministries, with adaptation and modification as needed. It's about taking the extra step to think about ways to include those who need extra care.

Micah attended youth life group twice a month on Sunday nights. One Sunday, the life group leader decided to ride bikes during group time. We asked how Micah could be included because he couldn't ride a bike. The youth pastor hadn't thought of that, which made my wife a little upset because we had told Micah it was life group night and he was excited to go. On the way home from church, I said, "Let's pray for God to give our youth pastor wisdom on what to do."

About an hour later, the youth minister called and said another leader was driving his truck behind the group of bikers in case someone had a flat tire. He asked if Micah would like to ride in the truck with the youth leader. It wasn't so much about riding bikes as it was about finding a way to include Micah. And honestly, Micah didn't care about riding a bike; he just wanted to hang out with his friends. By thinking about how Micah could be included instead of saying (unintentionally), "Sorry, anyone who can't ride a bike isn't welcome," the youth pastor made the outing inclusive.

Again, inclusion usually isn't about doing more. It's just about taking the time to think through how everyone can participate in one way or another. This may sound daunting, but we would *love* to help you accomplish this. That's what Ability Tree exists to do. If you don't know where to start with this process, please contact us. We would love to help you.

We also want to give you some basic understanding of the language of special needs or disability. Language matters. God spoke the world into existence with words. Language is powerful, and therefore

we should use it wisely. We never want to label a person by their disability; we want to honor and respect them as individuals made in God's image for a purpose and plan. It's okay to acknowledge the disability and have honest conversations with families who have kids with special needs. Sure, the conversation may be a bit awkward for you and them, but communicating honestly with these families can help avoid a lot of hurt and misunderstanding. Trust us on this: they won't find the conversation nearly as awkward as you will. By now, most of them are used to these kinds of conversations. And, sadly, many are used to hurt caused by lack of communication about the issues. It's okay to ask how you should refer to the child's special need or disability. It's okay to ask what the family expects and needs. It's okay to simply admit you don't know what you don't know and invite them to speak honestly with you.

That said, we pray that you and your church will embrace the mission of caring for families with special needs. Ability Tree would be happy to help you and your church include the 17 percent in your community living with special needs. We come alongside pastors and church leaders, providing strategies and training to better welcome families impacted by disability into their local church community. Let us know how we can help you welcome families impacted by disability by going to our website, [abilitytree.org/consulting](http://abilitytree.org/consulting), and completing a consultation request form.

Let's make Jesus more accessible together!

Joe and Jen Butler  
Founders of Ability Tree