

# Ministering to Teens with Special Needs

*By Julie M. Keith, D.Min.*

Today is Sunday, a day of rest and a day when many families in the United States are about the hustle and bustle of getting ready to attend worship services. These families may have children of various ages, and those with teens are all too familiar with the struggle to motivate them to attend services. However, for the Cline family, whose 15-year-old daughter, Stacia, has special needs, there are even more challenges keeping them from attending services and becoming part of a faith community.

The obstacles facing families who have teens with special needs can be so overwhelming that many families decide to not even attempt to find a place to worship. For some families, one parent may stay home with their “Stacia” while the other attends services, or they may attend together as a family, arriving late and sitting in the back ready to make a hasty exit at the end of the service. This is the extent of many families’ involvement in a faith community. The challenges keep them from developing relationships with others, as well as the opportunity to get involved in service and Bible studies or small groups, which would nurture and grow their faith.

For these families, the challenges don’t stop on Sunday morning. There is a daily barrage of juggling appointments, financial concerns, physical stress, and the strain placed on their marriages. They may struggle with school districts to find appropriate classes and placement for their teens with special needs. Each area of development or transition can reveal new obstacles.

## Transition Issues and Challenges

Transition issues are always a concern for parents of teens with special needs. Often, parents are not aware of the steps they need to take to support their teen in the school system. One specific area is the change from an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). This plan should be developed once a teen with special needs turns 14. The ITP guides and directs the teachers and supports those involved in transitioning the teen from high school into adulthood. This plan will lay out the importance of developing social skills, life skills training and work development. Families like the Clines have faced the challenges of transitioning from elementary education to junior high and then, finally, high school. Once Stacia entered high school there were many other transition issues, including:

- Transitioning from one home room to many different classes;
- A new aide in an inclusion class;
- Less focus on academics and more on life skills;
- A job or work program;
- The widening gap in social skills and ability to interact with peers.

## The Challenge of Hormones

Sexuality is another significant challenge for families who have teens with special needs. People often make the mistake of assuming that since a teen may have the cognitive development of a five-year-old he or she does not experience the same hormones and feelings typical of the teen years. This could not be further from the truth. Kathy is a young woman who has Down syndrome. As a teenager she began to experience the usual physical changes in her body. These changes scared her, and she did not know how to deal with all of the feelings and emotions. Her parents also struggled with knowing how to respond. They were fearful of Kathy being taken advantage of because she was so friendly and trusting. Kathy also began to “discover” boys and become sexually attracted to them. Though her parents knew they had to talk with her about sex, it was even more difficult than it is for parents of typical teens. These parents need guidance and training on how to talk with their teens about their changing bodies, sexuality and the importance of private areas no one is allowed to touch. It is a very sensitive subject, but a critical one due to the statistics indicating a high incidence of abuse in children and teens with special needs.

## Thinking Outside the Box

The ministry leaders who desire to reach teens with special needs will have to become masters at innovative thinking, dreaming and working outside of the box. The traditional methods used by churches and youth ministry programs often lack the flexibility needed to include teens with special needs and their families. There are two key elements for creating and developing ministry programs to address the needs of these families. First, all people are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26–27). Second, no two people are alike. Just as no two individuals have the same fingerprints, each person has been uniquely created by God.

Below are some program suggestions to include teens with special needs and their families:

- Start a shadow or buddy program. This idea is simple and easy to implement. A shadow or peer buddy is someone who has been selected and trained (usually by the parents) to work with the teen who has special needs. This buddy will assist the teen so he or she can be included in typical youth ministry and attend various activities and small groups. It will be important to develop a shadow/buddy description or contract that can be used so everyone is on the same page.
- Create and develop a specialized class designed specifically for teens with special needs. This is a great option for teens with more moderate to severe disabilities, because staff and volunteers are trained to address some of the behavioral, social and cognitive development challenges that can keep their families from participating.
- Develop a small group for teens with special needs. Many youth groups have gone to the small group format to foster spiritual development as well as provide opportunities to develop deeper relationships. Developing small groups for teens with special needs within the group would provide an avenue for the teens to interact with each other and still be a part of the youth group. This group can also be a blend of typical teens and those with special needs.
- Develop a parent support group for parents who have teens with special needs. This type of support group would provide an avenue for parents to come together and encourage each other as well as develop friendships and their own spiritual development. It would be helpful if the support group was run simultaneously to the youth programs or specialized classes, so the parents did not have to worry about childcare for their teen.
- Develop recreational activities and other events that the teens can participate in. Remember to think about the logistics of including teens with special needs. The following questions can help in the development of activities:
  - Are there any physical restrictions that may need to be adapted for a teen using a wheelchair?

- Is the location accessible?
- Are extra volunteers needed to assist teens with special needs to be included in the activity?

Creative and innovative thinking is also needed in the area of developing training for parents. Many youth ministries offer various types of parent training and education, and parents who have teens with special needs can benefit from training as well. For example, most parents fret about their children's future, but worries can be compounded for parents who have teens with disabilities. Those issues can be addressed in trainings or seminars explaining Special Needs Trusts, the different housing options for adults with special needs, and community resources available for teens and adults.

When it comes to training teachers and volunteers, many times the information will cross over, however, there are some specific areas for serving families with teens who have special needs. From autism to working with teens who have challenging behaviors, training is needed for the different types of disabilities the teachers and volunteers may encounter. There may be someone within the faith community who can provide training, or there are many services available through community organizations. A great resource is the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Once resources have been located, focus on developing relationships with the individuals who can help build bridges for the families.

### **Move the Walls in Youth Ministry**

Flexibility will be critical as you begin to move the walls in youth ministry. What does it mean to move the walls? One of the main reasons teens with special needs are not in church or part of youth ministry is because of the many barriers that keep them from participating. An overall lack of awareness within the church and youth group in regards to special needs is a typical barrier. A youth pastor friend said, "When I think about youth ministry and students with special needs, I think about how much I don't know. When I become aware of a student that has special needs, I immediately go through a series of thoughts like, 'What boundaries are appropriate for him/her? Will he/she understand me?' I know for myself I don't have a lot of education on students with special needs, so the comfort level I feel with them is not strong and therefore leads to an experience that probably isn't beneficial for either party. When you are in a room with a lot of students, the attention I can give to a special needs student, let alone any other student, is limited since I'm trying to make connections with the students that are present there for such a short period of time." This pastor's lack of education and awareness is similar to many other youth pastors and leaders.

There is also a need for education and awareness for the teens who participate in youth groups. Many may know someone with special needs or know a little about different kinds of disabilities but may still be timid about interacting with them. Consequently, they do not accept teens with special needs or know how to include them. Here are some practical tips for breaking down barriers:

1. Create awareness opportunities for typical teens to learn how to accept those with special needs.
  - Host a special needs awareness day during youth group. This can be in conjunction with an all-church special needs emphasis Sunday or during a regular youth group meeting. Have the students participate in various activities to help them better understand what it is like to have a disability.
  - Invite someone who has a special need to share their story and the importance of being included in a faith community.
2. Organize activities in a non-threatening environment where teens with special needs and typical teens can interact.
  - Attend a sporting event or go to an amusement park.

- Have a movie night (or enjoy a matinee).
  - Plan a beach day.
  - Go bowling.
  - Host a game night at church.
3. Model peer relationships which foster inclusion of teens with special needs. The shadow or buddy program is a great way to demonstrate how to include a teen who has special needs.

## A Place for All

Once the walls have been moved and teens with special needs and their families are accepted into the faith community, the next step is to encourage their involvement. Scripture teaches that every person has gifts to be used in service to God (Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12). Teens with special needs are no exception. Often teens like Stacia are not aware of their gifts, so the challenge is to create specific opportunities for involvement in worship and service. There are many helpful spiritual gifts assessment tools available, however, they may need to be adapted in some cases depending on the cognitive development of the teen. Another way of learning which gifts a teen possesses is by finding out what they enjoy and are good at. Whether it's volunteering on the prayer team, serving as a greeter or working in the church office, it will require some time and trial and error to help these teens discover their gifts and best places to serve.

Andrew and his parents have been members and involved in church for many years. When Andrew was in his teens, he was encouraged to use his musical gift of playing the drums to be a part of the praise band. He was thrilled to be able to worship God by doing something he really loved. Andrew still serves as a part of the praise band and has even branched out to play at additional ministry events at church.

Garret is another young man who uses his musical gift to serve and worship God. He has Cerebral Palsy which has affected his ability to move without the aid of a wheelchair, and his speech is very limited. When Garret speaks you have to listen carefully to even be able to understand. When Garret sings in worship to God his voice is crystal clear as he communicates his love for the Lord. His worship pastor knows what an incredible gift Garret has and the blessing it is for the entire congregation, so he provides opportunities for this precious gift to be shared.

Brenda is friendly and very outgoing. She is always smiling and desires to make people feel welcome as they enter the church on Sundays. Her job is to pass out the programs and welcome those coming into service. She happens to have Down syndrome.

Lydia has a love for children and shared this with one of the pastors at her church. Knowing there was always a need for volunteers to serve in the nursery and in the toddler department at church, the pastor spoke with the ministry leaders over those areas and made arrangements for Lydia to begin volunteering with the children.

Bryce is a 16-year-old boy who has an incredible gift of being able to read anything, but he cannot comprehend what he reads. His schoolteacher knew that Bryce needed an opportunity to serve and give back. She began to work with another teacher whose students were blind and visually impaired. They came up with a plan for Bryce to read to the students who were blind. The students enjoyed having Bryce read to them and he was proud that he was able to do something good for his school and community.

All of these teens were given the chance to use their gifts and abilities to build up God's kingdom and build connections. Connection is important for everyone in a faith community. Service is one way that teens with special needs can begin to bond with others in their church. Connection also happens as teens like Andrew, Lydia, Bryce, Garret, Brenda and their families are given opportunities to be involved in corporate worship, small groups, specialized classes, support groups, Bible studies and any other activity where they are able to learn and grow in their relationship with Jesus and those within the Kingdom of God. Ultimately, connection happens when, "we love because he first loved us."

*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister (1 John 4:20–21, NIV).*

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1. National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, [www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)

## About the Author

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**Julie Keith** received a BA degree in Associate Ministry with an emphasis in Disability Ministry, a MA degree in Marriage Family Child Counseling from Pacific Christian College and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Southwest Theological Seminary. Julie has served as Disabilities Minister at several churches, including 12 years as Special Needs Pastor at First Church of the Nazarene in Pasadena, she currently serves as Associate Pastor to Children and Families at Tehachapi First Church of the Nazarene where she ministers with several families affected by special needs. Julie has also worked in social services with individuals who have developmental disabilities and conducted training and education for staff in this field. She is also the Southwest Region's Disability Representative for the Church of the Nazarene.