



## Spiritual and Religious Supports Part 4

*EP recognizes that faith, religion, and spirituality can be as important a consideration and as integral a facet in the lives of exceptional families as healthcare, education, and the myriad of other topics that touch and involve EP readers. This article presents installment four in this multi-part series.*

# An Atmosphere of Welcome and Mutuality

**How do faith communities work together to create it?**

**By Nella Uitvlugt**

**F**aith communities can be wonderful places for creating a welcoming circle of support for families with members who have a disability. Parents may assume that leaders of their faith community will naturally know how to be inclusive. This is not necessarily the case. The members may never have heard of IEPs or supports. This doesn't mean they aren't interested. Likely they have no idea how to go about including people with disabilities. The task of approaching your congregation can be daunting, especially after struggling daily to meet all the obligations associated with raising a child with disabilities. This article will encourage families and faith communities to strategize together on how to create an atmosphere of welcome and mutuality. Understanding that everyone has a role to play in the life of the faith community will be important when saying, "Everyone is welcome."

### **Welcome and Mutuality**

If you have a child with a disability, simply getting out the door to attend your congregation's worship time requires a major effort. By the time you arrive, you are tired. You may also be anxious about the behavior of your child that day and about unusual occurrences that could be upsetting or difficult for your child. But when other parishioners and staff have a welcoming attitude, the anxiety is greatly alleviated. A congregation that is well-informed and caring knows how to reach out and welcome every child.

How does this come about? Do congregations automatically know what to do to welcome everyone? Not necessarily. Many people are very unfamiliar with the needs of a child with a disability. Since each child is unique and has different needs depending on his or her diag-

nosis or disability, members of a congregation understandably feel anxious about how to respond. They may avoid dealing with the family due to fear or lack of information. Much of the terminology and issues that are a part of the family's daily routine are a total mystery to many church members. They have no idea what to expect or do.

For parents, it is very important that your child be understood and that you recognize the need to advocate for your son or daughter, even in your place of worship. However, it's also important to understand that many of the people who will welcome and include your child are volunteers who do not have the level of education, training, or expertise that educational and social service professionals have. Still, congregations can have a wonderful sense of the community that is required to welcome and love someone. From the perspective of a faith community with values and gifts, they can provide a welcoming and nurturing place for the whole family.

So a major question for parents becomes: What can we reasonably expect from this congregation?

First, I think that parents can expect that members of the congregation are truly concerned about the welfare of the child. You may need to be assured, however, that the members are capable and qualified, just as you had to learn to be capable of caring for your child. You probably did not earn a degree in parenting, but you did need to learn to deal with the daily needs of your child. So, as parents, you can also expect to have to communicate about your child's needs and perhaps give some training, particularly if there are behavioral or medical issues that need to be addressed. In these areas especially,

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# Welcome and Mutuality

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parents cannot assume that others will automatically know what to do.

One of the best ways to initiate a process of teaching and training for inclusion is to set up a meeting with the person in charge of the religious education program. This person generally recruits and oversees the volunteers in the individual classrooms. Building a good relationship with this person will be important for creating an atmosphere of working together to build community within the congregation.

Together with the program leader you may consider several goals, but the two most important will be to meet the needs of your child and to encourage staff, other children, and their parents to see your child as an important part of the congregation. The second goal may actually take longer than you expect. Sometimes it is discouraging to wade through this time of change.

One way to assist in the process is to set up a Spiritual IEP (SIEP) meeting. You may cringe at the thought of having another one of those, but truly it is a good way to get everyone together to discuss how

best to include and nurture your child. This meeting should be a time to share important information about your child.

## Who should attend this SIEP?

You should invite the religious education classroom teacher, any volunteer who may be assigned as a buddy or mentor, the religious education director or church educator, some parents, and possibly someone from your child's school setting. Often the special education teacher or the school classroom teacher who includes your child on a daily basis can be a helpful source of information and assistance.

## What should be discussed?

First, obtain medical information that is necessary and important for the well-being of your child. This should include information about any allergies to food or the environment. If your child needs to be taken from a wheelchair and placed on the floor, then proper transfer techniques must be taught. If your child has seizures, people should know what to do and when to get more assistance. Often there is a member of the congregation who is a medical professional. This may be a good person to ask to be available.

Second, discuss behavioral issues. Behavioral triggers and ways to redirect behavior are very important to share. Does your child need a time for resetting his/her behavior when over-stimulated? Where can this take place? Stress that this is not meant to be the dreaded time out, but rather a time to gain control. Another item to discuss is safety. What kinds of safety concerns do you have? A tour of the building or area that your child will be in provides a good way to assess any necessary changes or precautions.

Next, the meeting should focus on your child's interests, talents, and gifts. If music is important to your child, you should discuss how it can be used within the religious education process. Ask for suggestions about songs from the program that could be reinforced at home. Continuity between church and home is ideal for helping to ensure success. If there is a special program offered during the religious calendar year, gaining information about that will be important for promoting inclusion for your child. Talk about ways your child might be able to share gifts such as putting stickers on the attendance chart or passing out supplies.

Finally, the discussion should include whether the materials used in the religious education program need to be adapted or changed in some way for the unique learning style of your child. Does your child need additional visuals to better understand the lesson? Or is it important to include items that are tactile either because of low vision or because it helps to maintain concentration? These are relatively simple ways for educators to adapt to your child's needs.

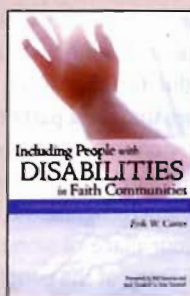
The teachers from your child's school can give useful information on how they include your child and share possibilities with volunteers. They should be advised to keep their information simple and remember that volunteers may only have 45-60 minutes each week with your child rather than an entire day. Keep in mind that the role of the church is to encourage the faith journey and not to do therapy, teach reading, or institute a behavior program. Should church volunteers be encouraged to use the same language and rules that

## Suggested Resources

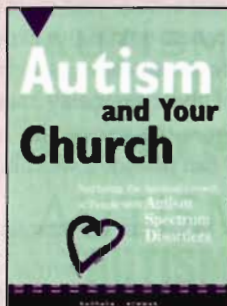
### For Children with Intellectual Disabilities



**Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities**  
by Barbara Newman



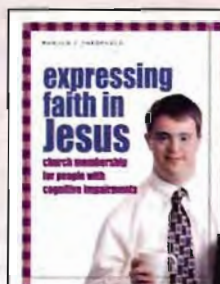
**Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities**  
by Erik Carter



**Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with ASD**  
by Barbara Newman

### For Older Teens and Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

**Expressing Faith In Jesus**  
by Ronald Vredeveld



To order any of these resources go to [www.friendship.org](http://www.friendship.org).

## Elements of a Spiritual IEP

- Involving of a variety of people
- Communicating medical information
- Strategizing about behavioral issues
- Focusing on a child's interests, talents, and gifts
- Considering religious education materials

are used in school and at home? Yes. Consistency in expectations is very important for success. But these things also need to be reasonably attainable by volunteers. Volunteers will not be able to spend time charting or carrying out extensive plans.

Some congregations have begun creating teams of their own members who support a particular family or individual in their congregation. This is a very flexible concept. The team is assembled based on the needs of the family or individual. Perhaps the team is the one involved in the SIEP, or maybe it is simply a grouping of families who want to learn to know your child and include him/her in their activities. The team could also be made of up of skilled individuals needed to complete a specific task, such as building a ramp or a fence.

Most often what is needed is a welcoming attitude that says to your child, "Would you like to sit with me during the worship service or in class? I will be your friend. I will help you navigate through portions of the service or class that you may have trouble with or even walk with you outside during the service if you can't stay the entire time." An example of this may involve drawing pictures to explain changes in the service to someone who has autism and needs to be prepared for the change. Or it may mean assisting in the participation of communion or the Eucharist or certain rituals.

The most desired outcome is to create quality communication between the family and the congregation or team. This will require some diligence on everyone's part. Families who pretend there aren't needs to be addressed or who come with a sense of entitlement cause frustrations within the congregation. Church staff and volunteers who presume that everyone should be exactly the same will turn families away.

Each person's uniqueness, both in gifts and needs, can contribute to a greater sense of community within the congregation—and that is hard to replicate anywhere else. There is much opportunity for sharing and delighting in each other. •

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