

Salvation Belongs to Everyone

What is our responsibility to the child with a disability? These children don't always fit into the structure that we have created for those who can sit in a chair, listen without interrupting, and participate appropriately. I grew up thinking that God loved "these people" and that because of His love for them, they were saved. I still believe



that to be true to the extent that it is true for you and me. We are saved by the grace and love of God. I recognize that salvation and the unfolding of God's plan for me has given my life extraordinary meaning. To believe that children with disabilities are simply saved by virtue of their disability robs these children of the richness that a relationship with Jesus brings. Furthermore, it gives us a great excuse to shirk our responsibility as a Christian to them. This chapter deals with the age-old confusion that we experience over salvation as it relates to people with disabilities and my personal journey that began with resisting the notion that children with severe disabilities could be taught about the concept of God.

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." —**Mark 2:1–5**

PLEASE ASK

The Bible story on the previous page is heavy with meaning. When Jesus saw the paralyzed man, He didn't see his disability first. Instead Jesus saw in this man the same thing He sees in each of us. He saw a person for whom there was a plan of salvation. Jesus wanted this man to know that he was a child of God. His sins had been forgiven. Jesus looked into the man's heart, not at his body. Jesus made no judgment about the man's past. He didn't even ask the man about his sins. Jesus simply forgave the man. Salvation belongs to everyone.

We've spent a lot of time with that concept lately. If salvation belongs to everyone, then what is our responsibility to those people who learn differently? What would Jesus say? Would He say that because children learn differently or because they have behavior problems that they are exempt from His plan of salvation? How do we become more like Jesus? How do we look past the distorted body, the bizarre behaviors, the empty language, and look straight into a child's heart? Regardless of our expertise or experience working with people who have physical and mental disabilities, we all still struggle from time to time. But in those moments when we are compelled to look upon the heart of a child with a disability we'll see a person who is a child of God—not because he or she has a disability—but because that child is a human being.

This mother has lost her mind! That was the thought that flooded me as I sat in the board meeting. I had received a call from a mother of a child with autism a few weeks prior to that meeting. She invited me to attend the first board meeting of a newly-forming family support ministry called King David's Kids.

King David's Kids was in its infancy. I had agreed that my students and I would work with the special needs children while the parents met for support. Without the guarantee that a group of volunteers would keep these children, the parents' support group could not move forward. These volunteers couldn't be just any volunteers: They had to understand the nature of developmental disabilities; they had to be willing to work with the children in a large group; and they had to be willing to come back the following week.

My students are graduate students in communication disorders. They could gain a lot from the experience of working with children with developmental disabilities. Yet in this board meeting I was having second thoughts about my decision to volunteer my students and myself. The same mother who had asked me to join the board was now presiding over the meeting. She boldly presented the ministry's first mission statement: "To teach the love of Jesus Christ to children with special needs."

I had met these special needs children. Most of the children had autism. Some had Down syndrome. Others had rare disorders such as DeGeorge syndrome and Pierre Robin syndrome. Two of the children had severe cerebral palsy and were medically fragile. These children had serious issues.

Had this mother lost her mind? Did she know anything at all about children with autism? Perhaps I could get her to read some articles on "Theory of Mind." She needed to



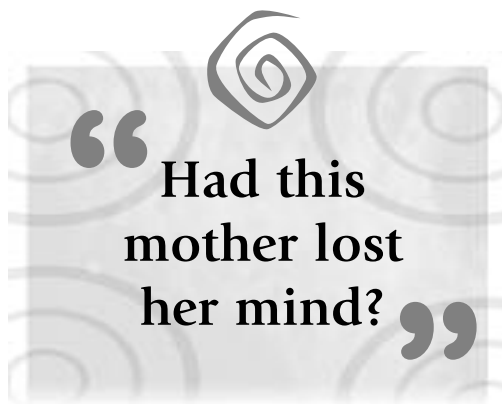
understand that children with autism can't take someone else's perspective. These children can't have relationships with other human beings. How were my students and I supposed to teach them to have a relationship with Jesus?

Resistance to change takes many forms. My form of resistance was to intellectualize this new notion that was presented to me—the concept that children with autism (and other disorders) could have a relationship with Jesus. To have a relationship with a man who lived and died 2,000 years ago requires a great deal of abstract thinking—belief in the Spirit and faith in the unseen. I could cite articles and texts—many of which support the idea that children with autism could not be taught the abstraction of a spiritual relationship. These children are literal thinkers. They can't deal with what they do not see and experience for themselves.

I decided to move forward with this project anyway. I decided that I didn't have much to lose. Even if the children didn't learn much about God, they would be loved and treated well while their parents met for support. Even if these children didn't learn much about God, my graduate students would have had the opportunity to work with a population of children they wouldn't have otherwise seen. The children and I embarked upon a journey that has become the mission of my heart.

Today, I watch as Jeffrey reads a portion of the story about Jonah. I smile when Maria requests her favorite song "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." A few weeks ago Maria went around the room with a Ken doll (who is dressed up like Jesus) and to each child in the room she said, "Jesus loves Harold, Jesus loves Jeffrey, and Jesus loves Maria."

I believe God sent these children into my life and my students' lives. These children have become our teachers. They have taught us about how normal they are in spite of their odd behaviors. They have taught us about their sense of humor (and about ours as well). They are not only capable of learning about God, but they are deserving of it by virtue of their birth.



Thank You, God, for the children of King David's Kids. Their lives have been given purpose by You and they have been faithful to it. You sent me teachers in the form of children. I would have resisted all others. Amen.



The Experts Speak

The Special Needs Child and Spiritual Growth

Very little has been written about children with disabilities and their spiritual development. What has been written suggests that spirituality is not necessarily dependent upon intellect. Anna Giesenberg (2000) has suggested that spirituality may be an innate feature of the human condition.

All too often, we assume that a child must express his knowledge of our faith in order to have a spiritual relationship with God. Reciting the books of the Bible, reading Scripture, and memorizing songs are all examples of a child's cognition (what a child knows). For many of us, the expectation is that children will demonstrate a certain level of cognition before we accept that their relationship with God is possible. But what about the child who can't read? What about the child who can't attend to the Bible story or the child who doesn't speak or hear? Must these children demonstrate the same levels of cognition in order to have a relationship with God? Is it possible, in other words, for Angela to understand God's love if she hasn't memorized the books of the Bible? Yes. Does that mean that I shouldn't expect Angela to ever learn the books of the Bible? No. It is important to remember that Angela may not learn the books of the Bible at the same time other children her age learn them—and that she doesn't have to in order to grow in the love of the Lord.

A few months ago during our church service, we stood to recite the Lord's Prayer, as is the custom for our congregation. I am always moved by the Lord's Prayer, but this day I felt especially inspired as my own voice was overshadowed by a beautiful chorus of men's voices from behind me. I was so taken by the sound of these voices lifting up the words we were taught to pray over 2,000 years ago that I became silent just so I could hear them. As we ended the prayer and took our seats, I looked over my shoulder. What I saw brought tears to my eyes. In the row behind me sat five men, all of whom are known to have developmental disabilities and reside in an assisted living home. They were blessing me!

There is a beautiful lesson in this for all of us. Spiritual development is a life-long process. If Angela can't recite the books of the Bible today, take heart. It doesn't mean she will never learn them. Nor does it mean that she can't move forward in her spiritual growth.

Families of Special Needs Children and the Church

Belva Collins (2001) and her colleagues have written that families who have religious ties tend to have better coping skills in dealing with the added



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stress that is often present when children have disabilities. Louise Jones (1997) is the mother of a child with a disability and the co-author of *Extraordinary Kids*. In this book she suggests that parents of disabled children are not likely to visit a church without an invitation or knowledge that a program exists for their kids. These families have endured too many disappointments to assume that anyone, even the church, will accept their children. Many have been hurt by someone in the church and are understandably skeptical. It isn't likely that, if they have been rejected by one church, they will try another one next Sunday.

The experts suggest that the religious community has a responsibility to children with disabilities and their families. Special needs children must be taught strategies that will enable them to apply their religious practice into their daily lives, even if they fail to understand abstract concepts. Families of these children need more than our prayers. They need to see us embrace their children as we welcome them into Bible class. They need to know that their children will be safe and happy while they are there. Finally, these families need to know that we believe their children are deserving of the joy and hope that faithfulness brings.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? —**Romans 10:14**

Voices from the Classroom

It is one thing to speak philosophically about how children belong in our Bible classes. It is another thing to actually do it. Casey, Angela, Harry, and Anna have taught me a lot about how to teach children with developmental disabilities. Let's examine each of their cases as voices from the classroom.

Casey

Casey enters the hallway from the outer door. He is screaming with his hands held over his ears. This is Casey's usual entrance into King David's Kids. His adult buddy escorts Casey into a small room nearby. In this room Casey's buddy shows him a "social story" that says, "I will stop screaming. Now I am ready to play." The words have pictures above them so that Casey can interpret the written message as it is read to him. Casey immediately becomes calm, looks at his buddy, and places his hand on the doorknob indicating he is ready to enter into the playroom with the other children.

We still don't know why Casey screams as he enters our hallway. His language isn't developed well enough to tell us. His hands over his ears give us a clue however. The hallway is a narrow entry area. As Casey enters, the hallway is crowded with the parents of the other children who have stopped to greet each other.

Children with autism have great difficulty with a change in their routine. Many of them find extraneous noise extremely painful. The combination of these two things is enough to send Casey over the edge. We have learned to respond to Casey's needs by:

1. Not overreacting to Casey's behavior. Screaming is Casey's only way of telling us that he is upset, in pain, or both.
2. Providing Casey a quiet place for Casey to gain his composure. This allows Casey to get himself together and maintain his dignity.
3. Giving Casey a visual support system that reminds him of what he will do next. The written and oral message we provide to Casey helps him organize his thoughts so that he can focus on the evening's first event: playtime—a time that he enjoys very much.

Harry

Harry requests a piece of pizza during snack time. The pizza is cut into small sections so that Harry and his classmates can have many opportunities to make verbal requests. Harry's buddy places a small cut piece of pizza onto his plate. Harry refuses the small square of pizza and says, "Pizza, please." Harry is encouraged to take the piece of pizza on his plate and then he will be given another piece of pizza. Harry continues, "Pizza, please." My students and I scramble to uncover the problem. We know Harry loves pizza. Maybe he doesn't like pepperoni. So the pepperoni pizza is replaced with a small square piece of cheese pizza. Harry responds with, "Pizza, please." Out of desperation I go to the kitchen to investigate the varieties of pizza. Surely there is a kind of pizza Harry likes. I see the pre-cut pizza slices in the boxes on the cabinet and it hits me. I grab a whole slice of pizza and carry it into the student working with Harry and say, "Try this." The student asks, "Harry, what do you want?" Harry says, "Pizza, please." A whole slice of pizza is placed on Harry's plate. He picks up the pizza in his hand and begins to eat.

Harry presents an interesting case. Harry has autism. This case is a classic example of autistic children. Harry loves pizza. Why wouldn't he accept our small pieces of pizza? A slice of pizza is shaped like a triangle. The pieces of pizza we were giving to Harry were shaped more like squares. It smelled like pizza. It had the same ingredients as pizza. But it didn't look like the shape of a slice of pizza. To Harry, this wasn't pizza. Interestingly, we have met several children since our first experience with Harry who will not eat pizza that is not in the shape of a triangle. Children with autism are very literal interpreters. Their thinking is rigid.

This rigid thinking can be seen in other examples as well. Maria loved the story of Jonah and the whale. We were certain that, because she enjoyed the story, she would also enjoy the activity that followed. She didn't. In fact she resisted participating in the activity by kicking and pushing away from it. After some investigation, we discovered the reason behind Maria's resistance. The Jonah in the storybook had red hair and wore a blue robe. The Jonah in the activity had blond hair and wore a green robe. An important modification for Maria is that the story characters must look the same. Now, Jonah looks the same in our activities as he does in the books.

Angela

As a new member of King David's Kids, Angela enjoys Bible story time.

When the children enter the room for story time, each child sits on a colored spot in the circle. Angela sits in her special place too. She sits under a table—a place she has chosen for herself. Angela is not forced into the circle with the other children. Instead, she is allowed to sit under the table where she can see the book and hear the story. Her buddy sits with her. Soon Angela will join the other children in the circle.

Angela sits under the table during story time. Consider these arguments against Angela's behavior. Shouldn't she be expected to do the same things the other children are expected to do? It isn't fair to have a different expectation for one child. Everyone has to be treated the same.

Richard Lavoie (1989) is an expert on children with learning disabilities and the author of *How Difficult Can this Be?* He raises an interesting point about treating all children fairly. Dr. Lavoie suggests that treating children "fairly" does not mean treating them "equally." Treating children fairly means giving each child what he or she needs.

In this case, Angela needs to feel secure. The small, darkened space underneath the table provides Angela with a feeling of security. She is the smallest and youngest of the children in the group. She is also the newest child to the group and doesn't yet fully understand the evening's routine. Within a few weeks Angela will join the group and participate in the same way that the other children do—especially if she is not forced to conform to what she does not yet understand.

But don't we want these children to learn something? Yes. We want them to learn that they are safe and that they can be happy in this place. Later, they can learn the content of what is being taught. There will be many opportunities for Angela to learn in the years ahead, what is being taught tonight.

Anna

Anna has difficulty sitting still for more than a few seconds in most situations. Her hands and feet are constantly in motion. As a result, she was previously allowed to roam the room aimlessly while the other children participated in story time. Now, Anna sits in her buddy's lap. Her buddy never forgets to wear her tennis shoes that tie. During story time, Anna unties her buddy's shoes and waits for them to be re-tied so that she can untie them again. Recently while playing this game, Anna's buddy didn't immediately re-tie the untied shoes. Anna spontaneously said the first meaningful word we have heard, "More!"



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Anna may present one of the more serious concerns voiced by teachers. She is allowed to untie her buddy's shoestrings while the other children listen to a story. The concern here is that Anna isn't learning anything about the content of the lesson.

Anna is non-verbal and has severe attention deficits. Anna's mother reported to us that one of her first educational goals was to attend to a task for 10 seconds. The fact that Anna can sit for 10 minutes and engage in a shoe-untying task with her buddy is truly amazing. We are excited about Anna's progress, not because she is attending to the lesson, but because she is learning to attend to something—even if it is shoe untying. Learning to attend to an activity—any activity—is a necessary first step to attending to a lesson. I believe that someday Anna will be able to attend to the lesson's content. Until that time, we will help her to attend to activities while exposing her to as much of the lesson as possible. Anna may not learn tonight that Noah built an ark, but she will learn, at the very least, that she is loved and included. Which lesson is more important for Anna to learn?

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Speak up, Speak Out

Our voice is an important element in this book. Whether you are considering ways that you might include a child with special needs into your classroom or you are simply concerned that your church may need to be more accessible to individuals with disabilities, your voice should be heard.

We should all be asking questions and raising our voices on behalf of those who cannot. Why aren't there more people with disabilities in our churches? Why aren't parents bringing their children to our Bible classes? Why isn't our church offering special programs to meet the needs of families of children with special needs?

Although serving a child with special needs may begin in the Sunday school teacher's classroom, ultimately, the ability to serve this child through his adulthood is dependent upon the entire church. What vision does the leadership of your church have for including people with disabilities? Have the leaders of your church issued a mission statement regarding individuals with disabilities? A well-grounded philosophy among the

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leaders of any organization is fundamental to the success of such a program. We recommend that you use your voice to talk to your church leaders about a sense of community for everyone.

Use your voice to lead a discussion guided by the following questions: Are all members in the church treated fairly? Does everyone have an opportunity to contribute? Are individuals with disabilities really included in the worship service or are they relegated to a small section in the worship space? Are they greeted when they enter the church building or must they keep to themselves? Do we have enough accessible parking? Should we send teachers to seminars and workshops so that they can receive proper training? Because divorce rates among parents of children with disabilities is higher than average, what are we doing to minister to these families?

A church that is “inclusive” is grounded in an attitude of acceptance. Once this attitude is adopted it will drive the decisions and actions made by the church.

Lift Your Voice



Pray for God to open your mind and heart to all possibilities, for the children in your Bible classes and for yourself.

Pray for an inquisitive and curious mind about odd behaviors. Give God your automatic judgment of challenging behaviors and open your mind to alternative answers that God can place in your mind.

Are You Ready?

CHECKLIST FOR INCLUDING A CHILD WITH DISABILITIES IN BIBLE CLASS

- Evaluate safety issues and precautions
 - Insure nearby bathroom facilities
 - Have smooth flowing traffic patterns
 - Provide a variety of textures and surfaces
 - Have schedules appropriate to age level
 - Alternate active and quiet time
 - Where possible include indoor and outdoor activities
 - Balance teacher-directed and child-directed activities
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- Develop clear and predictable rules
 - Have flexible schedule & provide regular routine
 - Reduce distractions, both physical & verbal
 - Build success into activities
 - Use clear, positive feedback
 - Use logical consequences
 - Provide clear verbal and physical cues
 - Organize all paperwork/materials
 - Provide resources and areas to encourage good work habits
 - Schedule both discussion and work times
 - Locate and use all avenues for help
 - Identify people with useful knowledge
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- Engage the child's attention
 - Prepare child for transitions
 - Emphasize what needs attention
 - Respond to and follow child's lead
 - Visit and share information with parents
 - Become aware of family/sibling situations
 - Seek information from resource people
 - Have a back-up plan

What I Think About Inclusive Bible Classes

Think about and write down your thoughts about the benefits and concerns of an inclusive Bible class for each group of people identified below. After finishing, discuss your thoughts with other members of your team.

	Benefits	Concerns
Children with special needs		
other children		
Bible class teachers		
Parents		
Church community		