**A “Wish List” For Our Churches ~**

**From Parents Who Have Children With special Needs**

I am part of a local support group for moms who have children with special needs. The moms in our group have children ranging in age from toddler through adult, and our children have a variety of challenges, ranging from intellectual and physical disabilities to mental and emotional health issues.

I asked the women in our group about their experiences with their churches—how their churches have been helpful to their families, as well as where their churches have fallen short. Then we brainstormed and came up with a “wish list” of what we would love to see our local churches offer families who have children with special needs.

1. It would be beneficial for the church to appoint a “special needs liaison.” This person would serve as the contact person for families who have children with special needs. She or he would be the intermediary between the families and the various church programs.
   1. The liaison would meet with each family as needed, to identify their specific needs. He or she would help integrate the child into church activities as best as they can.
   2. It would be helpful for the liaison to occasionally call the families to see how things are going, and to ask specific questions such as, “Is everything going okay?”, “Has anything changed?”, “Is there anything you need?” etc.
2. Host an open forum in your church in which parents who have children with special needs can meet together with the church leadership. Invite the parents to come with suggestions, ideas,

opinions, etc., on what your church can do to specifically make each child, each family feel they are an integral part of the church.

1. If your church has a “spiritual gifts survey,” include a category for those who would be willing to help meet the needs of children and adults with disabilities, as well as the needs of their families. This option could be categorized according to special needs, i.e. physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, mental illness, etc. A few concrete suggestions to include on a spiritual gifts survey:
   1. Be a one-on-one assistant to a child with special needs. This assistant could attend Children’s Worship, Sunday School, Cadets, GEMS, youth group, Bible school, etc. with a child or teen who needs extra help or supervision.
   2. Spend one hour a week with a teen or young adult who struggles with an emotional disorder or mental illness.
   3. Provide transportation for older teens or adults with special needs who are unable to drive.
   4. Provide child care on Sunday mornings for families with a special needs child (who is unable to attend services), so that both parents can attend the worship service along with their other children.
2. Communication is extremely important. Families must be willing to communicate their needs to the church, and the leadership of the church must allow families to express their needs. One mom said it like this, “We can’t expect the leaders and/or teachers in our churches to instinctively know what our families need. We need to be strong advocates for our kids, and the church needs to allow us to do that—without judging us.”
3. Create a “welcoming environment” in your church. Let families who have children with special needs know they are important to the church family. Convey messages that communicate the church’s concern, care, and willingness to help.
4. When questioning whether a child will be able to participate in a program, always go with the assumption, “This will work. Somehow we’ll make this work!”
5. Pair older, responsible teens in the church with children who have special needs. They could be special buddies for each other at church functions, programs, etc.
6. Feel free to ask appropriate questions about our children, but please don’t offer unsolicited advice. Most families have doctors, therapists, and other specialists whom they look to for advice.
7. Ask us (parents) how we’re doing. One mom, whose adult son is physically and emotionally impaired, said, “If your child had cancer others would ask how they could help, or how we were doing. I don’t think anyone knows how hard it is to be a caregiver except the people who are. “
8. Make sure the church is covering all the practical bases regarding accessibility, signage, etc.
   1. Accessible doors are a must—bathroom doors, as well as outside doors. One mom mentioned that the bathroom doors are so heavy at their church that her young son, in the early stages of MD, cannot open them.
   2. Ask parents of children in wheelchairs (or whose children struggle with physical weakness and disabilities) to walk through your church to make sure it is accessible and make suggestions for improvements.
   3. Use developmentally appropriate signs for the church nurseries, instead of categorizing the rooms by age. For example, designate your nursery rooms as “Infant,” “Crawler,” and “Walker.”
9. Here are a few other practical suggestions:
   1. Purchase gift cards to restaurants, coffee shops, gas stations, or grocery stores for families who have children with special needs. When the family is in a crisis situation (i.e. child in hospital), make sure they receive some of these cards to help alleviate a stressful—and often costly—situation.
   2. Offer to pay for or provide childcare so that the parents can have an occasional date night.
   3. Bring an occasional meal to these families. Don’t always wait for a crisis to hit. Some of the moms mentioned how full their days are with bringing their child to various therapies and medical appointments. Parents who have children with mental health issues are often very tired and weary from the daily demands made on them. An occasional meal would lift their spirits and help them realize they are not forgotten and that someone cares.
10. Offer to spend one-on-one time with our children who have special needs. Several parents stated they wished others would take the initiative to take their child out, without having to be asked. One single mom said she always has to ask others for help. And even though they are very willing, she wishes that occasionally someone would volunteer on their own.
11. Offer grace to parents whose children are unable to sit quietly. This is how one mom put it. “Sitting through a worship service with our son is very challenging for him and for us! I wish there was an “umbrella of mercy” for him, so that he could sit in the back row and play iPad with headphones on, without us feeling watched/judged. The additional challenge we have is that nothing externally about our son implies that he is special needs…”
12. Be aware of, and respectful of, those who are highly susceptible to illness and germs. One parent, whose young daughter is medically fragile stated, “A wish for me would be a level of awareness that some people cannot have hand to hand or hand to face contact. There are a lot of positive ways to interact without touching.”
13. Host an occasional special event for families who have children with disabilities. One parent said their church did this one time and their family really enjoyed it. They had a lunch, followed by a fun activity. She wishes they would offer something like this on a more regular basis.

***Summary***

No matter what kind of practical help the church can or cannot provide, it *must* offer spiritual support. There are at least three ways the church can and should help parents who have children with special needs:

1. Offer us grace—not judgment. Almost all of the parents I spoke with—regardless of what denomination or church they attend—said, “Church is hard.” Most of them said they’ve felt judged because of their child’s behavior. This was mentioned not only by those whose children have mental and emotional issues, but also by those whose children have obvious physical and/or intellectual disabilities. From the outside it might look like we’re ineffective parents and others may assume our children’s issues are a result of poor parenting. However, if you’ve not walked in our shoes, please offer us grace instead of judgment. One mom said, “Get to know us without making an instant judgment.”
2. Be patient with us and allow us to grieve—no matter how old our child is. Having a child with special needs (any age child—any kind of special need), brings about an on-going grief. The church must recognize and understand that special needs parents continue to grieve long after receiving their child’s diagnosis. Each milestone-not-met brings a fresh wave of grief to the parents. One young mom, whose 3-year old daughter has intellectual and physical disabilities, said, “I thought I dealt with my grief in the delivery room.” She is just beginning to realize that each time another milestone remains unachieved—and each time her daughter’s peers pass her by—she enters into the grieving process once again.
3. Pray for us. Parents who have children with physical, intellectual, emotional, and/or mental health challenges walk a very lonely, isolated, and often confusing road. Intercede for us when we’re weary, afraid, discouraged, and sad. Don’t be afraid to ask us how things are going and offer to support us in prayer.

***Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Gal. 6:2***

Bev Roozeboom, author of *Unlocking The Treasure: A Bible Study for Moms Entrusted with Special-Needs Children.*  For more information on this Bible study, go to [www.bevroozeboom.com](http://www.bevroozeboom.com).