

**CCDM seeks to enhance the lives of
persons with disabilities by:**

- Providing a full range of services for persons with developmental disabilities including residential options, vocational placement, opportunities for social interaction, and opportunities for spiritual growth.
- Enabling others through training, resources, and encouragement to effectively minister with persons with disabilities.
- Seeking partnership with individuals, churches, and other organizations to meet the physical and spiritual needs of persons with disabilities.

For information on how you can partner with us in this ministry, please visit www.ccdmonline.org.



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Helping Children Understand Disability

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CCFH Ministries wants to meet the needs of persons with disabilities and their families. One of the ways we seek to accomplish this is by providing booklets like this one for congregations and individuals to use. However, we ask that you contact us for permission to reproduce any portion of this publication.



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A Very Special Critter by Gina and Mercer Mayer. Available online at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Doris Sanford has published many books relating to disability issues including **Don't Look at Me** (mental retardation) and **Yes I Can** (cerebral palsy). These can be found at Amazon.com.

I Have a Sister, My Sister is Deaf by Jeanne Whitehouse Peterson. Available online.

Joni Eareckson Tada has written several books for children including four Darcy and Friends books, and **I'll Be With You Always**. Check www.joniandfriends.org for availability of these and more.

Just Like Everybody Else, by Jim Pierson. Out of print, but is available at Amazon.com

My Sister is Special by Larry Jansen. Out of print but available on Amazon.com.

The Crippled Lamb, by Max Lucado. Available in Spanish and English, on video, and as a board book from www.thomasnelson.com. Also available online.

What's Wrong with Timmy? by Maria Shriver. Published by Warner Books and Little, Brown, and Company. Available everywhere.

The Amputee Coalition of America has a wealth of wonderful books and tapes for children, adolescents, and adults. Check them out at www.amputee-coalition.org.

The Kids on the Block, Inc. is a source for curriculum using puppets to teach disability awareness. They cover a wide range of topics covering disabilities, medical conditions, and social and safety issues. See their catalog at www.kotb.com.

Helping Children Understand

Jim Pierson, President *Emeritus* of Christian Churches Disability Ministries (CCDM), was speaking for a Vacation Bible School session. The 40 children listened attentively to the importance of looking at, talking about, touching, and becoming a part of the lives of their friends with disabilities. "I love speaking to children," Jim reported. "When you've captured their attention and made the lesson meaningful to them, you can tell that they are soaking in every word. I stressed the fact that disabilities are a natural part of life—nothing to be ashamed of and nothing to be afraid of. I encouraged the children to be comfortable with and around disabilities."

During the question and answer time, a little girl raised her hand.

"Yes?" asked the teacher.

"I have a disability," said the girl.

"What is your disability?" the teacher inquired.

"I have a vision problem," responded the student.

"What caused it?" asked the teacher.

"I was born with it," answered the girl.

The goal had been achieved. Forty children had learned that having a disability is something we can be comfortable with, and a child had illustrated the point.

Your goal is for every child to be able to respond appropriately to all of his or her friends. Coaches, youth pastors, teachers and others who influence the lives of children can help achieve this goal.

Respond positively to the child's reaction

Children see disabilities as a health problem—a disease of some sort. Because parents have always warned, “Don't sit next to him, you will catch his cold!” they fear they will catch what they see.

Reaction: Children shy away from the child with a disability. They act as if they are afraid of him.

Response: Assure the children that a disability cannot be caught. Demonstrate your own comfortableness by taking the child with the disability onto your lap, or putting your arm around him, or whatever kind of touch is appropriate.

Explain to the children that this child was born with his disability because something happened when his body was being formed. Say, “Whatever happened is over. It's not going to get any worse, and you can't catch it.”

Answer the children's questions as honestly as you can. If the child with the disability is old enough, and otherwise able, he may be willing to answer the questions himself. Most questions are born out of a natural curiosity and will not be unkind. Just monitor the situation and call a halt to the questions when necessary. Say, “OK, kids, that's enough questions for now. Let's show Jacob our art center, and let him know that we are glad he is here.”

We all learn through observation—this is a fact of life. With their natural curiosity, children often stare. They will look long and hard at the differences they see in other people.

Anchor your teaching in Jesus' example

When four friends took a man with a physical disability to Jesus (Mark 2:1-12), the crowd surrounding Him blocked their path. So they carried their friend to the roof, made a hole, and lowered the man to the healing presence of Jesus.

Children will delight in being encouraged to “take the roof off” for their friends with disabilities. Have a brainstorming session about ways they can help their friends who have disabilities at home, school, and church. Get the kids to think about things like curbs and stairs and uneven sidewalks. Ask them how they would open a door or carry a lunch tray if both of their arms were using braces. Ask them how they could help someone in a wheelchair play dodge ball. Ask them what they could do if they saw someone picking on a child with a disability. Help children learn to be excited about being kind.

Provide Opportunities for Growth

Many children enjoy reading and almost all of them enjoy being read to. Take advantage of this fact by providing material that will lead children to a broader understanding of the disability community. There are lots of good children's books about disability. They go out of print quickly, but an Internet search will provide a list of books currently available.

The next page lists some of the best.

- They will learn that kids with disabilities are kids just like themselves. They have good days and bad, they get angry and they laugh, they have favorite foods and movies and music.
- They will learn that they have more in common with these kids than not. Teach children to encourage people who have disabilities. Help them send notes, cards, small gifts, and make visits. Such action can lead to more involvement in lives of others in the future.

Teach children without disabilities to be peer tutors and buddies in the Christian education programs of the church. This service builds good attitudes, trains future leaders, and fosters the knowledge that all people are valuable.

In her classic book, *Angel Unaware*, Dale Evans Rogers wrote that children “have clear, sharp eyes that look way down, and what they see is always beautiful.” The world has a way of changing this characteristic about children, but you can help them return to their natural, accepting state.

Reaction: Children stare at a person with a disability.

Response: Teach the difference between a friendly look (pleasant expression, smile, and making eye contact) and an unfriendly stare (frowning, look of disgust). Anticipate the questions. Before the child can say something unkind or embarrassing, set the tone for him. Say, “Paula, this is our new friend, Jacob. Jacob has cerebral palsy. That means that his left arm and leg do not work. Let’s show Jacob where he can hang his coat.”

Reaction: Children naturally mimic the characteristics they see. When they do, they are probably exploring how it would feel if they had a disability.

Response: Explain to the child (calmly and in private) that he may hurt his friend’s feelings if he mimics the disability in front of him. Tell him that he can “try walking like that” at home. At home, ask your child how he feels when others mimic him. Help him to understand that the child with the disability has the same feelings.



Enhance positive attitudes with positive experiences.

Help children use appropriate language. Teach them to name the person first and then the diagnosis. Say, “people with mental retardation” instead of “the mentally retarded.” Use words of respect. Say, Pete uses a wheelchair,” instead of “Pete is wheelchair bound.”

Don’t say to a child, “We are all handicapped in some way.” This statement is meant to help persons with disabilities feel equal, but this is not what the child sees. He knows he can run, but his friend with a brace cannot. Furthermore, the child with the brace also knows that his physical disability gets in the way of everything he wants to do—it is more of a handicap than your temporarily sprained ankle!

Teaching the idea that people with disabilities are special—exceptionally brave, stronger willed than most of us—is not particularly helpful either. To people who live with a disability, the disability is normal. They do not want to be treated like they are unique. In the second place, we are all special in God’s sight. We all need to treat each other with respect and courtesy.

Introduce children to adults who have disabilities. An adult who is warm and accepting will know when a child is having trouble accepting the disability and may start a conversation, offer a ride on the wheelchair, or let the child touch his or her leg brace. One Sunday school teacher invited a blind adult to come to her class of five-year-olds. The children were allowed to touch, ask questions, and express their concern. They went away with a deeper understanding of what it means to be blind, and that it is not scary to be with a blind person.

Remind parents that their children will pick up on their attitudes even when words are never spoken. Children copy what they see and hear—and they are always listening! Disability awareness training for parents and other adults who influence children can have a wide-reaching effect.

Give children examples of the benefits they will receive by being friends with kids who have disabilities:

- They will develop Christ like compassion and sensitivity.
- They will understand the challenges faced by people with disabilities
- They will learn acceptance, tolerance, and patience.

