

Transitioning Youth with Disabilities into Young Adult Programs

Christian Churches Disability Ministry

www.ccdmonline.org



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Christian Churches Disability Ministry (CCDM) 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 such as 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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There is No Growth without Change

Transitions are a part of life. We all experience them, with or without preparation. We know that transitions become more successful with planning, preparation, coordination, and follow-up.

When a child with disabilities has been included in church activities and Sunday school classes all his life, he has a solid base from which to make the transition to youth activities. However, a large percentage of students of all abilities drop out of church activities when they become teenagers. Social issues, peer pressure, changes in responsibilities, and other issues make this time of life a tough one. In an effort to counter this dropout trend, we have prepared this booklet.

Most disability ministry material places an emphasis on including children and/or adults with disabilities. The goal of this booklet is to help youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, and youth group sponsors keep *all* youth involved in the church as they transition to young adults and to particularly make the youth group inviting to those with disabilities.

Those who work with youth face the enormous challenge of impressing upon them the relevancy of the Scripture. This challenge may be even greater for the young person who is facing the uncertainties of adolescence along with the added burden of coming to grips with his or her disability. Childhood was one thing, but now they are entering adulthood and face a lifetime of new challenges. A caring, loving support system will never be more valuable or more needed. Making sure teenagers who have disabilities are a viable part of the church, accepted by their peers and others, will never be more important.

The primary goal of inclusion is to create an environment where the person with a disability can study and be an active part of the group. Helping new members or visitors get connected is a priority. If new members can establish friendships and real relationships within the first month of attending the group, there is a good chance that they will remain a permanent part of the group. It is a good idea to assign one or two long-standing members to take special care to get to know and interact with new members who have disabilities. Once the newcomers are incorporated, encourage them to befriend and guide others.



Remember that each student is unique. Also, students with sensory or physical disabilities will face a different set of challenges than those faced by students with mental and behavioral diagnoses.

Assessing Your Existing Groups

Is inclusion practiced in your current groups? Answer the questions below about each Sunday school, Bible study, and youth group in your church.

- Do the other students interact with the person with disabilities at school, on weekends, and holidays?
- Are persons with disabilities named as friends by the others in the group?
- Do they telephone or message each other?
- Are persons with disabilities chosen by their peers to be on teams, collaborate on projects, and go places together?

To further assess how well the church is doing with inclusion, meet with the parents or caregivers of your students who have disabilities. Ask them about their goals for their child with regard to church, school, and community. (You may not be responsible for the latter, but answers to these questions will give you a greater understanding of the situation and, if requested, you may be able to act as an advocate.)

If the student with a disability has been involved in your church program for some time, you should already have an Individualized Christian Education Plan (ICEP) on file. Use this form to evaluate how well you are doing on the previous goals set by the parents. Reassess any information that might need to change now that the child is entering adolescence. If you do not have an ICEP on this student, now is a good time to create one. Use the sample in the back of this booklet as a guide to create your own.

Discuss with parents how they prefer to share information about their child and plan together how you will deal with challenges that may arise. The “Responsibility Contract” (page 13) is a useful tool that may also give parents of students with mental and behavioral diagnoses some insight. To use it, sit down with the student and his parents and discuss your mutual goals. Allow the student to say whether or not these goals are important to him. Usually, teens and parents will be grateful for the individual attention from caring teachers and they will respond positively to the contract process. Enlisting the teen’s cooperation gives you a powerful weapon in your battle to keep this young person involved in the church!

Explain to the parents or caregivers that it is your goal to plan lessons and activities that will increase their child’s self-esteem. Speak positively about the student and mention specific talents and characteristics. Doing this in the presence of the student will go a long way toward building his self-esteem. Persevere in building partnerships and demonstrate an authentic interest in the parents’

goals for their child. Even more importantly, work to build your relationship with the student.

Expand your awareness of cultural diversity, challenge stereotypes, and build church-wide plans that offer full membership to all children. Often we are judged (rightly or wrongly) by our talents and skills and how our mental and physical abilities mesh and contribute to the task at hand. This is no less true for a young person with a disability. Stress to parents your willingness to adapt activities and events so that their child can participate. If events do occur in which their child will not be able to take part, try always to have an alternative activity prepared

Increasing the Probability That Students will fit in at the Next Level

Most educational programs move a child up to the next level when that child has a birthday or the new academic year begins. When dealing with children who are mentally or emotionally challenged, it may be necessary to determine if that child is socially, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually ready to move to another level. If there is any doubt that the child is ready, youth leaders should be ready to prepare them for the transition. There are three interacting components used to evaluate a person's social and personal competence. They are self-perception, behavioral repertoire, and effectiveness.

☉ Self-Perception

Scripture reference for youth worker's study:

1 Corinthians 12

The chapter deals with spiritual gifts and each person's importance to the fellowship of believers.

The most effective way to build self-esteem in any person—child, young person, or adult—is to impress upon them their importance to Christ. This, of course, is easier said than done. If a student has lived with a disability all his life, he may also have encountered scorn, rejection, avoidance, or indifference from others. If a poor family environment has compounded these painful episodes, you have your work cut out for you. Please do not give up. You may be the life-saving influence this young person needs. You may be his or her *only* source of positive feedback.

You entered youth ministry to guide and encourage young people to follow the right path and, if necessary, redirect them onto a road that will change the outcome of their lives. A young person with a disability may offer you your greatest challenge—and your greatest reward.

Another important way to build self-esteem in people is to identify and praise them for their abilities. In order to do this, you obviously have to get to know them. Perhaps the young person in your group who cannot communicate well verbally has turned to computer-generated poetry to express his inner thoughts and needs. His experiences with his limitations will resonate with many adolescents. Find out if he will allow you to share some of his poetry. Or ask him if he will write a piece to accompany some particular Bible lesson.

Perhaps the young lady with cerebral palsy has written some beautiful praise songs. Learn them and teach them to your group and to the entire congregation. Make sure that everyone knows who authored or composed the songs. Perhaps someone who uses a wheelchair is also an accomplished pianist or guitarist or has a beautiful singing voice. Invite the blind girl in your group to read from her Braille Bible during lessons. Maybe the student with autism is an excellent cook and would be thrilled to be asked to bring treats to your next gathering.



Perhaps the person with mental retardation is a powerful prayer warrior. His or her public prayers may well touch the hearts of everyone in your group. Prayer is just one of the ministries in which students with disabilities can be actively involved. Find other opportunities for service. The teen in a wheelchair may be eager to help plan special events; the student with Down syndrome may want to straighten hymnbooks and pick up trash in the pews. Find ways of publicizing their duties and accomplishments in the church newsletter. For example, "Emily Johnson is in charge of auditorium cleanup this week." Nothing increases our self-esteem more than knowing that we are being useful — and appreciated.

A subtle cueing system can be an effective method to give a student the feedback he needs regarding his behavior without disturbing the class. A buddy, a prompter, or the teacher can develop a series of non-verbal signs and gestures. When prompting is needed, either to reinforce or correct, use the signs to communicate. While it is important that the student get some form of immediate feedback to reinforce and retrain behavior, be aware that others in your group will quickly pick up on the cueing system. Do not allow the signals to be abused or used to tease the person who has a disability. In some cases, you may be better off meeting with the young person in private to review his behavior. Be sure to praise the positive things as well as correct the negative.

Introduce your students with disabilities to Mariposa Ministry (http://affnet.ucp.org/ucp_generalres.cfm/1/8/34/1992). This ministry explores what it means to live with a physical disability—socially, emotionally, and spiritually—and empowers peer counselors who have lived with disabilities to reach out to the community, especially to disabled youth and young adults. Their web site contains a wealth of unique discussions, commentaries, and links. Mariposa Ministry seeks the full participation of persons with disabilities in the life and ministry of the church. From this web site, you will gain great understanding of what it means to live with a disability, and the site may change the life of a disabled young person in your congregation.

☉ Behavioral Repertoire

Scripture reference for youth worker's study:

Matthew 5- love as commanded and be blessed

John 3:16 – love as God loves us

Luke 6:27 – love for enemies teaches tolerance

“Behavioral repertoire” refers to a person’s social skills, problem-solving skills, role-taking abilities, assertive skills, and communication skills. As is true with any young person, peers often determine the behavioral repertoire of a young person with disabilities. Developing a system of *positive* peer influence among church youth will be a tremendous step toward developing lasting friendships and an accountability network that will sustain young people as they go through their teenage years. In order to develop such a system, young people need to be educated on moral issues and the motives and attitudes that help us make correct choices. They need to understand that Christianity is not a series of do’s and don’ts, but is a relationship with our loving God that spills over into our relationships with everyone else. Help and encourage your young people to develop a prayer group at school, get involved in sports activities, church outreaches, and Bible studies that are fun, challenging, and that will help them to develop spiritually. *Teach them* to love one another as Christ loved us.

Help young people of all abilities develop problem-solving skills. Perhaps making a game of it can help them learn to stop and analyze a situation without feeling that you are judging their every move. Try using the traffic light as a visual symbol. Red means “stop and think: analyze the problem.” Yellow means “brainstorm solutions to the problem” and green means “select and apply the best solution.”

Create a series of situations. For example:

- ◆ You and some friends are at the mall. You find a wallet that is loaded with cash — and the owner's ID.
- ◆ You have your parents' permission to go to a certain movie. On the way to the theater, one of your friends suggests that you all go to another movie instead — one that you know your parents would not want you to see.
- ◆ You are on a first date with someone you have wanted to go out with for a long time. Your date makes it clear that he thinks Christianity is not for him.

Without censure, let students list possible responses to each situation. Get them to discuss the likely consequences of each choice. Ask them to let their imaginations run wild and take the consequences to the farthest possible outcome—both good and bad. (Your date leads you to sin or you lead your date to a relationship with Christ.) Talk about the fact that *all* choices and/or actions have consequences. Talk about how “little” sins shape our consciences. Let the students practice different kinds of verbal responses.

You probably will not have to encourage laughter and teasing, but if your students are unusually reserved, appoint someone to be an antagonist. This will give them practice in standing up to peer pressure. (But make sure that everyone understands this is only a game.) Let the students identify the good and bad in each suggested response.

Ask if they can reach a consensus of the best course of action. If they can't, this is another opportunity to discuss the gray areas of life and how important it is to think about your values *before* getting into a situation.

◎ Effectiveness

As young people become more socially competent and personally effective, they are better able to determine if they are achieving their personal goals. This type of self-evaluation does not happen automatically for a person with mental or behavioral disabilities. Once again the buddy, prompter, teacher, or youth leader needs to take the person prayerfully through his goals (use the “Responsibility Contract,” page 13) and talk specifically about how and when goals were met, or why they were not met. These meetings can be phased out as the young person learns how to evaluate himself and takes on more and more responsibility for his behavior and its consequences.

Social Interaction

Loneliness can be an especially big issue in the life of a person with disabilities and a huge problem for some teens. This is why developing real relationships with students in your group and encouraging them to form friendships with each other is important. Jesus Christ gave the solution to the problem 2,000 years ago when He said, "love one another as I have loved you." A young person should know that he is precious to God, loved by family and friends, and is accepted by his peers.



You can tell a lot about who is in danger of feeling left out by direct observation. Watch the group's interaction. Who do they study with, play games with, play sports with, go to the movies with, talk to on a personal level? Use these same questions to interview your group or do a survey. Is there a student who does not seem to blend in? Find out more about the person and what others in your group are thinking and feeling; then you will be in a position to help them.

Use straight talk when discussing Jesus' commands. We are to:

- love one another (John 13:33-35; Ephesians 4:1-3),
- accept one another (Romans 15:5-8),
- live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:15-17),
- serve one another (John 13:13-15; Romans 12:9-11),
- not cause anyone to stumble (Romans 14:12-14),
- agree with one another (1 Corinthians 1:9-11),
- encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:10-12),
- show compassion and forgiveness (Ephesians 4:31-33).

Here is a discussion question for your group: Do these commands apply only to Christians dealing with other Christians, or do they apply to the way Christians must deal with everyone?

Talk to your students about those perceived to be the loners and outsiders at school — who is reaching out to them? While students with disabilities may very well be in the group considered loners and outsiders, they can just as well be in the group who reaches out to others. If you can teach those with disabilities that they do, in fact, have a ministry to others, this may be a life-changing revelation for them. Jesus' instructions are for every Christian.

A Jump Start for Any Stalled Youth Ministry

Hardwired to Connect is a paper published by the Institute for American Values that reports on the deteriorating mental and behavioral health of children in the United States. (See <http://www.americanvalues.org/html/hardwired.html>). While the statistics in the report are frightening, the conclusions of the report are very

encouraging for the church. First, it says, people are “hardwired” (i.e. created) to connect to other people. Second, we are hardwired to connect to something or someone that has transcendent, moral meaning. Third, when we do connect to “The transcendent,” the benefits permeate every aspect of our lives — social, emotional, behavioral, physical, and spiritual. Another aspect of the report that is very encouraging is that it is *never* too late for this connection—to others and to God — to take place. You, Mr. or Ms. Youth Worker, can take a teen into your group and into your life and turn his life around simply by caring about and for him, and inspiring him to connect with the One who can give him new life.

CCDM has prepared a resource booklet called *Created for Relationship* that will examine each plank of *Hardwired to Connect* in light of how it applies to the ministry of the church. We provide suggestions for how the church can use this scientific data to present the old, old story in a bright new light. Please see our online store at www.ccdmonline.org to order the booklet.

Help the Person with a Disability Stay Involved

Ministry leaders invest a lot of time in children with special needs but many times see them become less and less involved as they get older. Our goal is to see that church is viewed as a welcoming, accepting place by youth entering their teen years. We want to be sure those already in our church stay focused on God. At the same time, we want to reach out to youth outside our church family. Besides working strenuously with students of all abilities to make sure that they are accepting of others, there are a few more steps you can take.

- Address transportation issues. Know how the student will get to services and events. If your church does not have a formal transportation system, find a “buddy” for them. This “buddy” should be able to bring them to church services and meetings. If special vehicle accommodations are needed, check to see if there are community agencies that may be able to provide assistance.
- Plan a weekend retreat with youth workers to teach them about the special needs of students who have disabilities and about how to meet those needs. Use material from CCDM to explain different types of disabilities. Remember that the more any of us know about a subject, the more comfortable we will be with it. Stress to your workers how vitally important it is to reiterate to all students, especially those with disabilities, that they are loved and accepted. Repeat this weekend or training program for each new set of volunteers.
- One church organized a weekend retreat for teens to introduce them to new members of the group who have disabilities. This allowed them to spend some quality time together and get to know each other in a setting that was unfamiliar to all of them. That way, they could form some bonds of friendship before the inclusion process started.
- Most young people with disabilities need a highly structured program in order to feel comfortable and confident. When you need to make major changes to the routine, inform the young people with disabilities ahead of time so they can think the changes through and be prepared. Involve all the students in the planning of programs and activities. The more teens feel that they are responsible for decisions being made, the more they will participate. If possible, make small, incremental changes to the routine.
- All of your students will benefit if you present your lessons in a creative way, but those with disabilities may benefit the most. Try to use every sense somewhere in every lesson. Use song, art, drama, and choreography as avenues of teaching. The idea is that if a student is not good at reading, he may be good at singing. If he cannot sing, he may be a natural actor. If he does not

like being “on stage,” he may be artistic. Memorization is more fun when set to music. A prayer walk or a prayer skate can be a memorable event. When sitting in a group, place chairs so that all participants can see each other and make room for a wheelchair, leg braces, etc. In order to increase the level of communication among your group members, use materials that are culturally relevant. Place materials within view, but enough out of reach so that people have to ask, interact, or express opinions.

Encourage everyone to learn from each other. Give your students with disabilities parts in the drama, the choir, the praise band, etc. Give them jobs to do in the church for which they are fully responsible. Encourage them to keep a journal and to follow the devotional schedule. Involve the youth with disabilities in the same activities as the others. Expect them to participate at whatever level they are capable, but expect them to participate. Make them accountable.



- Divide duties and assignments into small increments. Actively teach social and conflict resolution skills and be a good example yourself. Role-play situations that cause conflict and help the group come up with solid biblical solutions. Good management and class control must be planned in order to exist (it does not happen accidentally). Maintain a positive climate where everyone’s opinions and contributions are respected. Be proactive when difficult situations arise and deal with them in a consistent and timely fashion.

Create an Environment that Fosters Partnership

When you are successful at keeping young people with disabilities active in youth group and Sunday school, there is a good chance that they will become active and vital members of the larger congregation. This outcome is beneficial to both the individual and the community. Enable the members of the church to be friendly and supportive of those with disabilities by teaching them what they need to know to be accommodating. Encourage the church to reach out and be supportive of the members who have disabilities. Make sure your buildings, grounds, worship services, programs and activities are as accessible and inclusive as possible and that staff and members receive basic information on disability etiquette. Inclusion in the life of the church is the key.

Maximize the productivity and independence of each student. When a person feels valuable and sees that his talents are being used, he will eagerly participate in the church for years to come. The church could offer to host a community or neighborhood Special Olympics. Introduce students with disabilities to things that they may be good at and that may spark an interest that will last a

lifetime. The American Morgan Horse Association conducts a photo contest (<http://www.morganhorse.com/upload/photos/1828contestapp.pdf>). Young Playwrights Program and other sites on the Internet are places where your young people with disabilities may secure information on how to spotlight their gifts and talents. The site www.bindependent.com has a variety of assistive devices that the church might want to provide to those with disabilities when appropriate.

Your church could sponsor a job fair. Invite professionals and businesses that hire people with disabilities to speak, give job counseling, and practice interviewing. A little imagination and a lot of energy can help to keep your young people happy and active in the church during their teen years.

In Conclusion . . .

As these children become young adults, their social needs change, satisfying them and keeping them involved become more of a challenge. It is our prayer that the material in this booklet will help you and inspire you to think of more ways to keep all young people, especially those with disabilities involved and committed. It is vitally important to keep teenagers involved in the life of the church. They are our future leaders.

Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6

Responsibility Contract Example (Mental or behavioral diagnosis)

For period _____ to _____

Student's Name

Youth worker's name

RESPONSIBILITIES—Who/What/When/How Much

Suggested questions: "What responsibilities do I have when I come to church?"

"What responsibilities do you expect the student to exercise?"

(I must be courteous to others, take my turn, speak appropriately, etc.)

Student:

Youth Worker (or parent):

PRIVILEGES:

For example, "If student meets his goals (above) for one month, he will be allowed to attend the youth group outing." "He will take his turn at giving the devotional (prayer, etc.)."

How will behavior be observed? By whom?

Who will keep records?

Who will provide privileges? And when?

Student Signature & Date

Youth Worker Signature & Date

Questions for Parents

Consider the following questions when talking with the parents or caregivers of a young person with disabilities who is attending or will be attending your group. These caregivers know the person best and can provide a wealth of information when asked the right questions.

1. What activities could you provide at home as a reward?
2. What particular skill areas concern you most with respect to inclusion?
3. What behavior at home do you feel needs to improve?
4. When is a good time to call at home?
5. May I call you at work? What is the best time? What is your number?
6. Is there someone at home who can pick up the student if necessary?
7. Would you be willing to get involved in our congregation? What areas interest you?
8. What is the most difficult problem you face in rearing your child?
9. What are your expectations for your child?
10. How can I help you the most?
11. What is your routine in the evenings? Is there time to read the Bible with your child?
12. Do you feel comfortable and competent discussing spiritual matters with your child?
13. Would you like to have a conference with your child participating?
14. When is the best time to meet?

Bible Class Setting for Teenagers

1. Have few rules...no more than seven and keep them posted where the group meets.
2. Make every lesson a Bible lesson. Do not separate the Bible from daily life; apply it.
3. Stay in control and, if necessary, make discipline positive and constructive.
4. Acknowledge your students' proper interaction by praising their good behavior and wise decisions.
5. Follow through, keep your word, and be consistent.
6. Look deeper. Remember that negative behavior often masks a deeper cry for attention or help.
7. Do not expect to completely eliminate all negative behaviors.
8. Provide necessary breaks in concentration.
9. Create an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance. Allow students to express their feelings without fear or ridicule.

How to Complete the ICEP Form

The **identifying information** is self-explanatory. It's important to know how to reach the student's parents or guardians at all times. Meeting at least once with the student's public school teacher will provide you with valuable insight on how the student behaves in public settings and what behavioral modification techniques the teacher has found to be effective.

The **assessment information** is to help you know where the student is in his understanding of spiritual things. Here you will note things like, "Has never attended Sunday school." "Does or does not understand right from wrong." "Is a Christian.")

Under **student's strengths and limitations** you will note things you have observed or that others have told you. Strengths like, "Loves people." "Likes to help." Limitations like, "Lacks common sense." "Has no fears." "Does not read." "Must receive directions one step at a time."

It is important to know the **family's involvement** so that you will know best how to approach the student. Does the family attend church themselves or do they send their child? Is your student from a solid Christian background or are all your lessons going to be new to him?

You want to involve a **family without disabilities** in the education of the teen with disabilities for several reasons. One may be to provide him with an example of a Christian home that he may not have in his own home. Another reason is that this family can be an advocate for the student who has a disability (and his or her family). This family will also assure the parents of the other youth group members that their children will not be slighted or suffer any consequences as a result of the inclusion of the student with the disability. This family may also agree to include the student with disabilities in their family activities once in a while. Outline the responsibilities in this section.

The **long-term goals** will be things like, "Joe will understand that Jesus is his Savior." The short-term goals will then be broken down into components like, "Joe will understand that Jesus is the Son of God," and "Joe will understand that God sent Jesus to earth," and "Joe will understand that Jesus paid the price for his sins." You will want to have several short-term goals for every long-term goal. It will be helpful to set these goals with the family's participation.

Methods for inclusion in the community will suggest ways that the church will help the teen with disabilities become an active member of the community. Examples: "Joe will visit the zoo and have lunch with the group." "He will participate in the children's hospital outreach." "He will spend a night at church camp."

Individualized Christian Education Plan

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

Student's Name _____

Diagnosis _____ Age _____ Date of Birth _____

Parents/Guardians _____

Address _____

Telephone _____ E-mail Address _____

Placement in Public
School _____

Address of School _____

Name of Teacher _____

Telephone _____

ASSESSMENT INFORMATION

Student's present level of religious awareness and spiritual development:

Student's strengths and limitations:

FAMILY'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE STUDENT in the Christian education of their child:

Is the family open to doing home activities to augment the lesson?

INVOLVEMENT OF FAMILY WITHOUT DISABILITIES

LONG-TERM GOALS

Description	Person Responsible	Date of Implementation

SHORT-TERM GOALS

METHODS FOR INCLUSION IN THE COMMUNITY

SIGNATURES

Minister Date

Christian Education staff member Date

Parent(s) representing children without disabilities Date

Parents of student with disability Date

Teacher Date

Date goals will be evaluated