

## Ten Ways to Care for Families of People with Special Needs

How can church bodies, the pastoral staff, individual staff, and lay people care for families of those with special needs? The answer involves both *being* and *doing*. Here are ten ways to *be* prepared to *do* what families need.

1. Be there when the crisis hits. Whether it's a devastating diagnosis before birth, soon after birth, or when the child is older, have a plan in place so someone provides face-to-face support soon after the crisis begins.
2. Be prepared to watch and follow the parent or **family's** lead. Families need presence and compassion rather than theological insights in a crisis. Take time to listen and assess their spiritual maturity rather than saying things like "God is sovereign over all things" while people are grappling with new realities.
3. Be prepared for hard questions. Parents or family members may well ask questions like "Why would a loving God allow this to happen to my child?" That's a question most aren't prepared to answer. However, we can assure them that God knows how it feels to be a parent who loses a child, that Jesus, His Son, knows what it is to suffer, and that He weeps with those who weep.
4. Be aware of the guilt parents feel. They may not voice their guilt, but most parents feel they are in some way responsible for their child's special needs. They need assurance that their child's condition is not a consequence of their actions or punishment for their sins. (John 9:1–9)
5. Be aware of the energy required to care for someone with special needs and to live with disability. Therefore they may need to turn down invitations, arrive late, or leave events early. Do not take this personally or label them as irresponsible.
6. Be there for the long haul. Special needs caregivers need support far beyond the crisis of diagnosis. Many caregiving situations last years and even decades. The church needs to stand with them throughout the journey.
7. Be there for the family, whether or not someone comes to faith. Christian compassion for special needs families must not be contingent upon family members coming to faith.
8. Be aware of long-term, reoccurring grief. The grief parents feel while caring for a child with special needs continues throughout the life of the child. Rather than being able to come to closure, their grief returns with each missed milestone or life experience.
9. Be prepared to offer practical help. Provide meals, pet care, and childcare. Do house cleaning yard work, and laundry. Stop by to visit parents or play with kids.
10. Be prepared to be a spiritual mentor. Read the Bible together, suggest books to read and discuss, ask how you can pray each month, find ways for practicing spiritual disciplines that take demands of caregiving into account.

## Resources

### Books for Adults:

Alcorn, Randy. *If God Is Good: Faith in the Midst of Suffering and Evil* (Multnomah, 2009)

Guthrie, Nancy. *Jesus Speaks Into Your Sorrow* (Tyndale, 2009)

Miller, Paul. *The Praying Life* (NavPress, 2009)

Philo, Jolene. *A Different Dream for My Child: Meditations for Parents of Critically or Chronically Ill Children* (DHP, 2009)

Philo, Jolene. *Different Dream Parenting: A Practical Guide to Parenting a Child with Special Needs* (DHP, 2011)

Philo, Jolene. *The Caregiver's Notebook: An Organizational Tool and Support to Help You Care for Others* (DHP, 2014)

### Books for Children:

*Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*, Pat Thomas (Barron's Educational Series, 2005) Preschool & up

*Ellie Bean the Drama Queen: A Children's Book About Sensory Processing Disorder*, Jennie Harding (Sensory World, 2011) Preschool – 4th

*A Friend Like Simon*; Kate Gaynor (Special Stories Publishing, 2009) Autism Spectrum Disorder

*In Jesse's Shoes: Appreciating Kids with Special Needs*; Beverly Lewis (Bethany House, 2007) Primary & up

*Just the Way I Am: God's Good Design in Disability*, Krista Horning (Christian Focus Publications, 2011)

*My Brother Charlie*; Holly Robinson Peete (Scholastic Press, 2010) 2nd–5th

*My Friend Isabelle*; Eliza Woloson (Woodbine House, 2013) Preschool – 1<sup>st</sup> | Down Syndrome

*Special People, Special Ways*; Arlene Maguire (Future Horizons, 2000) Kindergarten & up

*Susan Laughs*; Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross (Henry Holt and Co, 2000) Preschool–2nd

*Thank You, Mr. Falker*; Patricia Polacco (Philomel, 2012) Kindergarten & up

*Window Boy*; Andrea White (Bright Sky Press, 2008) 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> | Cerebral Palsy

*Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio*; Peg Kehret (Albert Whitman & Co., 1996) 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>

### Online Resources:

[DifferentDream.com](http://DifferentDream.com)

[SpecialNeedsParenting.net](http://SpecialNeedsParenting.net)

[KeyMinistry.com](http://KeyMinistry.com)

[IrrisistibleChurch.com](http://IrrisistibleChurch.com)

[Snappin.org](http://Snappin.org)