

Mentoring a Friend with a Disability

By Jim Pierson

Even though the ideas contained in this article stand alone, it would be useful to read two articles in our blog that I have written about my dear friend Corey—who happens to have autism.

Mentoring is an important ingredient for adults with disabilities in a church's ministry with them. They need caring people to guide them on their spiritual journey. Sometimes "mentoring" takes on a formal sound. So, if "friendship" is a more comfortable, applicable term use it.

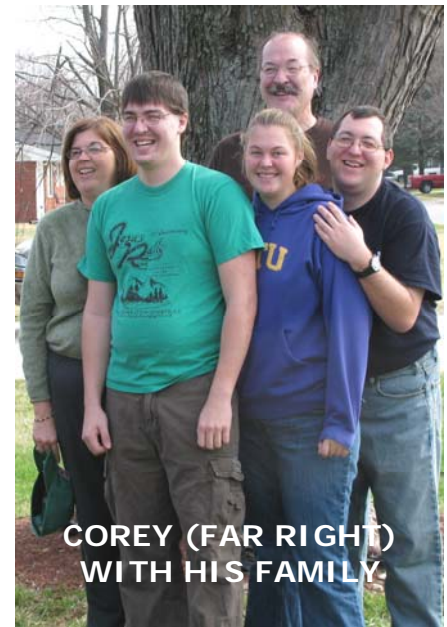
A positive, safe, equal, supportive atmosphere needs to be established. It includes a welcoming congregation, a supportive family, more than one mentor, a lead mentor, and a friendly relationship with the mentors. The first two components are obvious, but there needs to be more than one person involved with the person. However, one person who understands what is going on should involve other people as they need to be. Any mentoring situation should be as natural as possible. Be sure the chemistry is right between the mentoring pair.

My relationship with Corey is a blessing to me. For the six years I have known him, I have learned some things about being his mentor. It is important to stress that I have received a lot from the mentoring process too. To be clear, it is not a professional act; it is a personal one.

I have learned that a mentoring relationship does not happen immediately. Trust takes time. Trust is built on consistency.

I have learned how to be a better listener. On the surface, I knew Corey was happy with his class at church. However, when I heard him say he would like to have more friends, we had to make a plan.

It has underscored for me that my friend is a person not a disability. True, I have learned a lot about autism, but I have learned more about the beauty of the human spirit and the value of friendship.



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Being a John the Baptist is a role a mentor plays. For example, Corey and I have discussed the possibility of his learning to drive. Before our over-lunch conversation, I had a list of possible trainers and agencies that offer the service.

You too can enjoy the blessing of mentoring a person with a disability.

Let's start with the assumption that your friend-to-be is a part of the church you attend. If that isn't the case, locating a friend with a disability in need of a friend is not difficult. There are lots of people with disabilities that could use a friend. Ask a staff member at a group home, an independent living facility, a sheltered workshop. A social worker in a community agency could make a suggestion.

The following guidelines should assist you in the process.

1. If your friend is not a believer, teach him the elements of the faith. A good guide is *A Place for Me in God's Family*. It is available through the Store at www.ccfh.org. If he is a believer or after he embraces faith in the Lord, see that he is a part of a group or class to teach him Bible truths.
2. Learn about his environment. Where he lives? Does he have a job? What is his support system? Does he have a case manager? Does someone call on him regularly? Is his family involved? Does he interact with his neighbors? Does he live alone? What is his mode of transportation? What is his daily routine? Does he have a job? What does he do when he is not at work? Does he like sports? Does he have a hobby?
3. Learn about the diagnosis. Remember: A diagnosis happens to a real person with a name and a story. Online information should be adequate. You need to have enough information to help a relationship develop. For example, if your friend has autism, it is helpful to know that he might not enjoy being touched. Or, your friend might have brain damage that causes him to have a seizure from occasionally, even though he is on medication. If there is a family member or a staff person available, a brief conversation will provide some good information. You will learn a lot as you get to know the person.
4. Let your friend know your world. Who is your favorite sports team? Where do you work? What is your hobby? What is the make-up of your family? What is your story?
5. Learn to communicate with him. In most cases that won't be hard. In the case of a friend with difficult speech, don't say you understand if you don't. Don't apologize if you don't understand. Just say, "Please say that again." It might take a piece of paper and pencil. As you get to know your friend, it will get easier. If you like eye to eye when you talk to someone, your friend with autism does not always. That too will change as the friendship grows.
6. Find a common interest. It might be sports. It might be church. It could be movies. Maybe playing cards, chess, Scrabble, or some other table game might be the interest. You could teach each other a new game. The point is to land on something that the two of you enjoy. You might start a new interest together.

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7. As in any good relationship, it should not be one-sided or condescending. The mentor should not make all the suggestions of what to do, where to go, or pick up the tab. Corey lets me know when he is open or would like to attend an event.

8. Relax and enjoy your friend as you grow in friendship and faith.

CCFH Resources That Will Help You Build a Foundation for Mentoring

Abide in HIM – Evangelizing With Adults: A workbook that guides while using the stories of hymn writers who were either affected by disability (personal), experienced a traumatic personal experience (family), or were inspired by situations pertaining to ministering with those with disabilities (church and community) as inspiration.

The Importance of Good Social Skills: This Bible study helps people with cognitive disabilities succeed in social environments. The number of lessons may be adjusted to meet your scheduling requirements and/or the needs of your individual students.

Being A Man or Woman of God: Use this resource to help people with developmental disabilities understand their emotions, desires, and attractions; as well as how to interact with others in ways that are socially acceptable and pleasing to God. *Email us for an outline and sample lesson.*

Go to the CCFH Online Store and look under Workbooks to Order

Biblical Characters with Disabilities

Recently we were asked to list some biblical characters with physical disabilities.

Moses and Paul were leaders who persevered. In the cases involving healing, we know the major message is that Jesus included them in his ministry. Though we may not provide miraculous physical curing, we can include and seek the greater healing - bringing all to know Christ.

- Exodus 4: 10 – Moses; speech disorder.
- Matthew 9; Mark 5; Luke 8; stories involving health or physical problems
- Mark 2: 1-12 – Paralytic Man
- Mark 10: 46-52 – Bartimaeus; blind
- Luke 19: 1-10 – Zacchaeus; short in height
- 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10 – Paul; physical discomfort
- 2 Samuel Chapter 9 – Mephibosheth; physical disability

Do you have a question for us? Email to info@ccfh.org and receive a personal reply.

*Information in this CCFH **Connections** newsletter compiled by Sylvia Hemphill, Director of Administrative Functions and Resource Materials.*