

Training a Buddy for Disability Ministry Is Easy

By Jim Pierson



The goal of disability ministry is to include a person with a disability in the life of the church. Basically, the person is given the supports to allow him to

feel comfortable with a group in the church. One of the most important of those supports is the "buddy." The idea is to assign the person with a disability to a volunteer who helps him negotiate the church environment.

Training these valuable parts of our disability ministries is important. When we consider what the content of the training process should be, we make it too difficult. I remember conducting training sessions that included discussing all of the types of disabilities, what to do in medical emergencies, disability etiquette, and a lot of other details. I do not do that anymore. The most effective training is individualized, not group.

Start the training by recruiting several people who would like to be buddies to a person in your program. Keep a file of basic information for both the buddy and the person to be served (age group, hobbies, interests ...) —primarily contact information.

Then, when you know you have a person who needs a buddy, check your list and find a good match. Provide the buddy with the necessary resources for effective ministry. Be sure to cover security/personal contact issues in your training materials.

The following steps will be useful:

1. Give the diagnosis, a few details about it, and how it affects the person. She does not learn easily; uses a wheelchair; uses sign language. It would be good to have a print out of some details about the diagnosis from an online resource such as *Exceptional Teaching Online* or the book *Exceptional Teaching* (both available at www.ccfh.org.)
2. Relate some personal information about the person. What does he like to do? What is his favorite food? What is his favorite TV show? How does he spend his day?
3. Explain the person's behavior: She does not like to be touched; cries for no apparent reason; puts her hands over her ears when the noise gets too loud; etc. If there are outbursts, explain what triggers them.
4. Allow the buddy to meet his friend. Tell the friend something about his buddy. Tell his hobbies, favorite football team, and the like. After all, the heart of this ministry is people working with people.

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5. If possible, introduce the family to the buddy. The purpose is for them to share information that would be useful in working with their child.

6. Provide the buddy with time to ask questions without the friend or the parents present.

7. Offer some materials to use with the person—items like two-handed scissors, masking tape to fix the paper to the desk, etc.

8. Assign a starting date. Assure the buddy he will not be left alone the first time.

9. Offer positive, constructive suggestions about how he did.

10. Encourage the buddy to relax and enjoy the opportunity of making an eternal difference in the life of a fellow human being.

These ten points should not imply that the training is cut and dried. The purposes of the training are to make both people feel at ease, offer some practical help, and provide on going support. Make the points suit your training need.

Two factors will enhance the buddy's experience. First, let him know he is appreciated. Getting a pat on the back is a great motivator. Second, never let the volunteer feel he is stuck in the job. Tell him it is fine if he wants to take some time off.

Thank You For The Question

Question: Our pastor asked me if we should offer the Lord's Supper to participants of our disability ministry. What are your thoughts?

Jim Pierson's Reply: First, the members of our disability ministry at our church take Communion just like the rest of the congregation. If the individual has expressed faith in Jesus, he is free to be a part of the Lord's Table. It is important that they be taught it is a privilege, because of their relationship with Jesus, to take the emblems. Sometimes there is a question about people with intellectual disabilities. If they know who Jesus is and have made a commitment to Him, they can partake. It is a good thing to do a practice run with your class members.

Second, if special arrangements need to be made, arrange them. A lady with severe physical problems resulting from cerebral palsy was a part of our congregation. In order for her to take the Lord's Supper, she had to suck the grape juice with a straw. The people who prepared the trays placed a short straw on the one that would be passed her section. An attendant would assist her with getting the bread to her mouth and old the cup while the straw was used.

Third, tougher cases, like a person with a feeding tube, require some creativity, consultation with the family, and a plan.

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.*
