

Best Friends to Parents of Children with Disabilities

"I knew from the beginning that I was a great disappointment and trouble to my parents," Brenda told me. I felt her pain as she said it. An infant can sense the parents' emotions. Although she spoke of them now with tenderness and understanding, she would never fully escape the effects of that first impression: Her parents were ashamed of her because she was not the perfectly formed child they had expected. She was inferior because she could not see.

Later I heard a mother tell how it feels to have a child with disabilities. "The first stage you go through is grief," she explained, "and it's like you're having to grieve for the death of the child you were dreaming of. You go through shock, numbness, denial-you get angry. It's basically the same steps you go through with death.

"This didn't mean I had no love for her. I was confused and disappointed. My grief overshadowed the joy of having a baby. It seemed there was no one I could talk to about it. I thought no one knew what I was going through, and that was really stressful."

Surveys of parents show that nothing pleases them more than to see their children included with others in classes and activities. They want people to think of their children first as persons with names, like anyone else, not put all the emphasis on a certain quality or condition.

"It's very important to me for my child to be included," is a typical response, "because the other children, those who are developing in the generally expected ways, are good role models for her. She needs to learn how to meet people and what she must do to fit in the real world." One man told how he shed tears when he saw his son with physical and mental limitations chosen by the class to help with a special project.

Christian teachers are in a unique position. We can help children and parents understand each other's feelings and needs. Working in an environment of inclusion and encouraging parental involvement, we can demonstrate acceptance and love to both parents and children.

1. Be aware of parents' emotional needs.

Disappointment, grief, and sorrow are the deepest primary emotions parents experience when their children are labelled not normal. In their anguish they may question God, feel resentful and victimized, or blame themselves, and then compound their distress with pangs of guilt. Many are torn between the need to love and reluctance to claim a child who seems imperfect.

In addition, most families face other major crises in coping with situations related to a child's disabilities. Stresses multiply because of financial problems, medical procedures and therapies, and impact on jobs and careers. Frequently family relationships become strained. Siblings may develop resentment and guilt. The stress of caring for a disabled child is cited as the cause in many marital disputes. One study reports that four out of five couples who have a disabled child break up.

Eventually, however, most parents do love and accept their children. When you have contact with them as a Christian educator, they are probably seeking a place where their children will find friends and opportunities to develop their potential. Your ministry goal is to bring parents

and children into harmony, to help them understand and appreciate each other as they serve the Lord together.

2. Listen as a friend.

Be openly interested, not shocked nor evasive. Do not scold nor preach. Never attempt to ignore a disability. Do not try to placate parents and pretend everything is fine or imply that a disability is the will of God. Just accept them warmly and express willingness to share their concerns. Encourage them to talk about their children, and ask questions about the class and activities. Show them the facilities. Welcome their comments. Invite them to become involved in children's and adult's activities.

3. Be an advocate and seek practical support for families.

Work in appropriate ways to see that the pastors and other leaders are aware of family situations. Be a spokesperson and advocate throughout the church to keep members informed concerning ministry opportunities and aware of their attitudes and responsibilities regarding persons with disabilities.

Find out what services and helps are available in the community. Have specific information available for parents. Know how to help people contact sources of help, such as counseling, school services, vocational training, recreational programs, and financial assistance.

4. Help all parents teach children how to relate to people who are different.

Many parents feel unprepared to explain when their children ask why another child can't see or is in a wheelchair. Discuss openly in parents' meetings, and whenever appropriate in regular Sunday school classes, the subject of teaching children to empathize with the disabled.

Here are some suggestions from parenting guidelines:

- Talk to children about their friends and classmates who have disabilities. Do not pretend they are not different.
- Help children to see that all people have some characteristics in common and some differences.
- Even though we are different, we can do many things together. Being different is not being inferior.
- Young children sometimes think they may hurt disabled persons by touching them or be hurt themselves. Assure them it is good to play together, share toys, and help each other.
- Children usually follow the parents' example. Parents can set the example by treating disabled persons in natural, friendly ways. Talk about positive abilities and achievements. Be thoughtful of their needs, caring and helpful without expressing condescension or pity.
- Empathy is the heart of Christian relationships

- Empathy includes both knowledge and emotion. It is understanding the situation of another person and feeling with person. Ultimate empathy is the incarnation of Christ, as He became man to feel our pain and take our sin. We follow Him most closely when we invest time and effort to know people as they are, and help them be whatever is best and highest for them on earth and in heaven.