

### **Youth Ministry and Disabilities**

Youth ministry is as much about relationship-building as it is about programming. Building supportive relationships and effective programming require an understanding of and appreciation for who our youth are.

Youth with obvious differences ("disabilities") offer a gift to a youth group. Their presence is a constant, visible reminder that each youth is unique and has unique needs and strengths.

At the same time, it is hard to be different. It is especially challenging during the pre-teen and teen years, when fitting in and belonging to the social group mean so much. How can youth leaders support and nurture youth who live with physical, cognitive and/or emotional disabilities?

### **The LASER Model**

We can focus in on some practical concepts through this "LASER" model of caring for youth with differences. We offer here a brief summary of the key concepts. A more thorough discussion is found at [www.adnetonline.org/Churches/Youth](http://www.adnetonline.org/Churches/Youth).

### **Learn about the disability or illness.**

Start with **parents**. Say, "We want each youth to feel respected and fully included in the youth group. How can we help this happen for your son or daughter?" Ask about interests and strengths, not just needs.

Then learn from **media resources**. There are many print, internet and audio/visual resources available. A good starting website is ADNet Online, found at [www.adnetonline.org](http://www.adnetonline.org).

Don't forget **the youth themselves**. Honest, respectful questions and conversations can occur once a relationship of trust has been established.

### **Accommodate the particular needs of individuals**

Ask and observe: **What are the barriers to full inclusion and participation?** Barriers can be **physical, cognitive, sensory, or emotional**.

Accommodation is the process of **adapting the environment** to remove barriers and facilitate greater participation. To accommodate well, the youth leader needs to know the youth, understand what his or her real limits are, and make judgments on when it is appropriate to push the person a bit and when it is better to accommodate respectfully.

### **Support persons to enable group participation**

Very often, a few additional resources make the difference for persons with disabilities to participate as fully as possible in the life of the church and/or youth group.

An extra adult at a retreat, a large-print Bible for Bible study, or an ASL interpreter for youth with deafness may be all that's needed. Perhaps you can work with parents to create an appropriate, consistent "behavior plan" to support youth with autism.

Respectful, honest explanations to other youth will help them relate well with individuals with mental illness or behavioral challenges.

### **Encourage by your words and your actions**

Understand your youth. Develop your spiritual "eyes." Notice the potential in each youth, however small or insignificant it may seem to be. Be sensitive and realistic about the abilities of your youth while also modeling the willingness to take risks. Recognize "**gifts of service**," not just "gifts of leadership."

### **Respect each youth as a beloved child of God.**

Care enough to **set standards** that are "realistically high." Pity is not love. Growth is a journey for each of us. Value effort, not just results.

**Use "People First Language."** We are people first, and sometimes we are people *with* challenges, *with* disabilities, *with* chronic physical or mental illnesses.

**Know yourself and know your youth.** We are all individuals with a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, gifts and needs, prone to sin and saved by grace. Be willing to share the faith journey with all your youth.

Finally, **never underestimate the courage** it takes for a youth with a disability, depression, or other mental illness to simply show up and participate. Let them know you are glad they are there!

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*We thank Cindy Warner Baker for this issue as well as additional materials available at ADNet Online at [www.adnetonline.org/Churches/Youth](http://www.adnetonline.org/Churches/Youth).*

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