

**Youth Ministry and Disabilities**  
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Each human being is one-of-a-kind, created in God's image, a mixture of strengths and needs, abilities and disabilities. Youth with obvious differences ("disabilities") offer a gift to a youth group and to the church. Their presence is a constant, visible reminder that each of our youth is unique and has unique needs and strengths.

At the same time, it is hard to be different, to feel apart from others. 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?

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.

What is "disability"? A disability is present when the resources of the individual are not sufficient for the demands of the environment. Living with a disability is somewhat relative, depending on the overall resources of the individual, the nature of the environment, and how society expects persons to function in that environment. As a simple example, an individual with blindness is not "disabled" in the dark.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, the apostle Paul talks about the gifts of those who seem to be weaker. The passage suggests that the church needs the gifts of those living with disabilities as much as they need the support and care of the church. Youth leaders need to be aware of disabilities and mental illness not just because they will encounter youth who need and deserve wise care and support, although that is true. Even more important, however, is learning to respect and care for and include youth who live with a variety of challenges. In helping each youth to find the physical, emotional, and spiritual resources to face the unique challenges of his or her own life, the youth leader will also grow and the church will become more complete. It is one of the mysteries of faith: we are each necessary for the well-being and healthy functioning of the church.

Having said and understood all of that, are there practical ways to get a handle on a vast array of potential challenges that a youth leader may face? Just as a laser focuses light, we can focus in on some practical concepts through this "LASER" model of caring for youth with differences. (Actually, this is a good model no matter what the age or condition!)

The LASER model:

- **Learn**
- **Accommodate**
- **Support**
- **Encourage**
- **Respect**

**Learn** about the disability or illness.

- **Learn from parents:** A good approach is to say, “We want each youth to feel respected and fully included in church and the youth group. How can we help this happen for your son or daughter?” Ask about interests and strengths, not just needs. In most cases, parents will be glad to share with someone who is genuinely interested in learning about their daughter or son.
- **From media resources:** There are many print, internet and audio/visual resources available. Anabaptist Disabilities Network has a website called ADNet Online [www.adnetonline.org](http://www.adnetonline.org) which is a good starting point to help find helpful resources.
- **From 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.
- Some examples of accommodation:
  - Many youth rooms have couches where youth are expected to squeeze together. Provide some single chairs as well for those who need personal space.
  - Room for wheelchairs to move freely and space already available in which wheelchair users can park and sit comfortably with the rest of the group.
  - Provide snacks that all can eat. Eliminate foods that trigger allergies. Be aware of portion sizes for youth with diabetes.
  - Provide for a “reduced schedule” for such activities as live-ins and winter camps so that those who need it can get more sleep or simply take a break from sensory overload.
  - Have an agreement within the youth group to avoid strong-smelling deodorants and perfumes because of chemical sensitivity challenges.
  - Know what behaviors can be controlled and which are involuntary. Be gracious, ignore when appropriate, and model acceptance and respect. Youth will generally follow the leaders’ example.
  - Allow for variety of levels of participation in activities. Some youth are not as adept verbally or physically.

**Support** persons in ways which will enable them to participate with the group.

- Very often, a few additional resources are all that is needed to make it possible for persons with disabilities to participate as fully as possible in the life of the church and/or youth group.
- Examples:
  - In a camp or retreat setting, provide an extra adult whose main role is to provide for needs of a youth with a seizure disorder. This may mean such things as making sure

medication is taken, returning to cabin early because of sleep needs, maintaining hydration, or directing an appropriate response if a seizure occurs. This person should *not* be “glued” to the youth the entire time, but keeping a watchful eye and taking primary responsibility for safety and health issues.

- Large-print Bibles, devotional books, song books, and journals with larger, bolder lines for youth with visual impairments can be helpful.
- ASL interpreter in worship service and Sunday school class for youth with deafness.
- Willingness to work with parents (and sometimes youth as well) to create an appropriate, consistent “behavior plan” to support youth with autism.
- Respectful, honest explanations to other youth so that they can relate well with individuals with mental illness or behavioral challenges
- Supportive resources can make the difference between active participation and none at all. Parents can be an important resource in helping youth leaders understand the needs of their youth and plan for good support. However, the responsibility for thinking ahead and initiating the process belongs to the youth leader, *not* to the parents. In this way the church can show love and care to the parents and the youth. Without it, families will often look for another, more supportive church home or drop out of church altogether.

**Encourage** all youth by your words and your actions.

- The youth group (and the church as a whole) is stronger when the **gifts of all its members** are valued and used.
- **Develop your spiritual “eyes.”** Notice the potential in each youth, however small or insignificant it may seem to be.
- **Be an example of a person willing to take risks.** Try out new roles and extend yourself in ways that stretch you beyond your comfort zone. We can’t ask our youth to stretch and take risks if we aren’t willing to do so ourselves.
- **Be sensitive and realistic.** A youth with a fine motor tremor is probably not going to feel safe holding bulletins out to those entering the sanctuary, but she might be glad to help in the nursery. A youth in the midst of severe depression may not be ready to wander through the sanctuary with the roving microphone during sharing time, but he might be glad to help one other person prepare hot drinks and set up for the coffee hour.
- **Be creative.** If you have a youth with very limited communication skills who can memorize and say aloud a three-word phrase, work with it! Teach her to say “Praise the Lord,” and then use this skill in a responsive call to worship in which you speak the larger parts, and she, in front with you, leads the congregation in the response.
- **Understand your youth.** Be alert to hidden “disabilities” which result in fear and unwillingness to share gifts with congregation. This might include such things as discomfort in crowded spaces or reading difficulties.
- **Notice hidden gifts and talents,** and find ways to use them. Many youth not verbally gifted may still have leadership skills when engaged in a group activity
- **Develop and recognize “gifts of service,”** not just “gifts of leadership.” Be an example of someone willing to serve in practical, humble ways.

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

- **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!**
- **Value effort**, not just results.
- Care enough to **set standards that are “realistically high.”** Pity is not love. Growth is a journey for each of us; be willing to share the journey with *all* your youth.
- **Use “People First Language.”** How we speak can help or hurt. No one wants to be defined by an illness or what we can’t do. We are people first, and sometimes we are people *with* challenges, *with* disabilities, *with* chronic physical or mental illnesses.
- **The greater our willingness to know ourselves** as individuals with a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, gifts and needs, prone to sin and saved by grace, **the greater our ability to accept and respect others** in the same way. Individuals with disabilities challenge us to move beyond our own comfort zones, to risk, to try without quite knowing how to succeed, and to take the chance of failing. When we notice, listen, and seek to learn and grow in opening our hearts, our youth groups, and our congregations to individuals and families with challenges, we open ourselves more fully to Jesus, and become a more complete expression of God’s love for the world.



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