

Welcoming children with disabilities

by [Melissa Guthrie](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue

Read the main article on [a worship service with children of all abilities](#).

I have a child who has a disability. Here are a few ways that congregations can try to embrace families like mine.

Use person-first language. Labels can be helpful, but our children are people first: Tommy, who has autism, or David, who has epilepsy.

Ask us what we need. We understand that you may not be able to accommodate every single, unique need. Still, when you ask how you can include us in worship, we feel acknowledged and important among the community.

Listen to our stories. Like other parents, we want to share our children's interests, abilities, and uniqueness. We want to share the hardships and joys.

Grieve and celebrate with us. Some of our children will not achieve typical developmental milestones, causing us to experience grief and loss. If you listen to our stories, however, we can grieve together—and celebrate other life events.

Find developmentally appropriate ways to mark milestones. We also grieve when church celebrations and rituals fail to connect our children to the community. When other children receive their first Bible, for instance, perhaps nonverbal children could be given a picture Bible or an interactive edition of Bible stories. Milestones and rituals can be adapted to include everyone.

Offer tangible help. You may not be able to offer us child care. But assistance with daily chores can make a difference: grocery shopping, a meal, help with an errand that hasn't gotten done because of appointments and therapies and social anxieties.

Educate yourself and others. Ask a parent or a professional to speak to your community. By learning about our differences, we grow in our ability to live and work and worship together.

Remember that all people have value—and needs. Brett Webb-Mitchell suggests that the heavenly banquet will be a noisy gathering, "what with

wheelchairs, crutches and aluminum walkers being scooted forward. There may even be a scream . . . from a child with fetal alcohol syndrome.” Wouldn’t we all live and work and worship better together if we shared our stories and needs?