

Reaching Out

TO THOSE WITH DISABILITIES—AND THEIR FAMILIES

*Everyone needs a friend, a responsibility,
and nurturing by the good word of God.*

By Lynn Parsons

PhD Candidate in Special Education

A Primary teacher helps a little girl position her walker before sharing time. Another teacher makes sure a boy with a hearing loss looks at her before speaking. Members around the world extend themselves to those with physical disabilities every day. However, knowing how to help those with less-visible disabilities can be a challenge.

What can we do to help these families who deal daily with mental illness, intellectual disabilities, or other such challenges? These members and their families often feel alone. They may not be comfortable asking for help, or they simply don't know how to do so.

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) taught: “Every one . . . needs three things: a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing with ‘the good word of God’ (Moroni 6:4). It is our duty and opportunity to provide these things.”¹ While this statement was made in reference to new members of the Church, Latter-day Saints who apply these three principles to members with disabilities and their families can help strengthen them and help them meet the different challenges they face.

Friendship

Sometimes the best way to help members with disabilities and their families not feel alone or isolated is by being a friend. These individuals and families may feel burdened by the additional physical and financial demands that

often accompany disabilities. Having a friend is important and can add a new perspective to a life that seems laden with stress. Association with members may be the link that encourages them to keep active despite challenges.

How can you start? Begin by greeting the members of your ward with disabilities and their families. A sincere offer of friendship may include learning alternative communication methods, such as sign language, or investigating the individual's particular interests. You will demonstrate interest and Christlike love when you make an effort to discuss a favorite animal with a child with autism, greet with a warm smile a teen with an intellectual disability, or spend time listening to understand an adult with a speech problem.

Consider making an additional effort to acknowledge anyone who may appear or act differently. A teen with autism may struggle to carry on a conversation, or a child with emotional challenges may appear constantly angry. As members look below the surface to recognize the spirit underneath, it will be easier to see these individuals as the Savior does.

A personal visit to the home is a great way to encourage family members to share their needs and concerns. Think about using this time to start a conversation about how things are going generally within the family. Most people

Consider making an additional effort to acknowledge anyone who may appear or act differently.



aren't comfortable requesting assistance when the person offering isn't a close friend. Rather than making a general offer, try making specific suggestions about how you can help. You might offer to do one of the following:

- Stay with the family member who has the disability so that the caretaker can run errands, go to doctor visits, or take a break.
- Help with laundry, meals, cleaning, or other specific chores.
- Volunteer to drive family members to appointments.
- Help a child with homework in a specific subject.
- Give a listening ear during times of trial.
- Give the caretaker a chance to talk about topics outside of disability. Remember that the person has other interests and concerns and may yearn for everyday conversation.

Take time to consider what else you can do to help. The continual crying of a baby at church can be very upsetting to a child with autism or emotional challenges. Taking your infant into the hall may help a child with a disability avoid a meltdown. Strong scents can make someone with sensory problems feel ill, so limiting your perfume or cologne use can optimize how the person feels at church. Making an effort not to stare when a ward member with a disability does something unusual can also help the individual feel more welcome. Inviting someone with a challenge to help with an activity can boost self-esteem and create friendships. Work with the family to understand how you can help.

Sometimes these small gestures are all it takes to make those with disabilities and their loved ones feel part of the ward family. After all, as King Benjamin taught, "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17).

A Responsibility

It's difficult to feel part of a ward without a calling. Leaders may feel that a certain family is already overwhelmed, and so they hesitate to give the family additional



Those who have a disability also need a chance to learn and grow through service.

responsibilities. But people with disabilities and their loved ones may need the involvement and relationship-building that naturally happen through a Church assignment.

Finding a calling for a family member can be a delicate balancing act. Ward leaders will want to take into consideration any special needs when making assignments. A mother who needs to be available during Primary in case of meltdowns might help with weeknight Relief Society meetings. A father who needs to hold his daughter to keep her calm during sacrament meeting could teach Sunday School. A more flexible calling, such as editing the ward newsletter or serving as part of a committee, may be more appropriate for other members. Talking with the members themselves is generally the best way to understand how and where they would be able to serve.

Those who have a disability also need a chance to learn and grow through service. A visit with family members will help identify strengths that could be used to benefit all ward members. Focus on what they can do rather than what they may be unable or struggle to do. A young woman with an intellectual disability might be a class greeter. A young adult with Down syndrome might help teach a class or make copies in the library. Others could take roll, set up for activities, or welcome visitors to meetings.²

Nurturing with the Good Word of God

We all need regular opportunities to recharge our spiritual batteries. Parents of children with disabilities need respite time to learn and to strengthen their testimonies. Additionally, members with disabilities need exposure to the gospel to feel Heavenly Father's love.

Having parents serve as teachers or helpers in classes where their children with disabilities attend may seem like a perfect solution. They are, after all, the experts on their children. But these members may need to spend time in priesthood and Relief Society meetings to be buoyed up by their brothers and sisters. Giving others the chance to serve and spend time with a child with disabilities also offers members the blessings of knowing that child.

Associations of this kind allow members to develop patience and love as they find new ways to teach and learn. Members also have the opportunity to feel the strong spirits of individuals with disabilities, which can fill them with peace and love. As members make this effort, the Holy Ghost will confirm to them that Heavenly Father is pleased with their efforts in behalf of His beloved children.

The individual with a disability also needs to be in a class learning the gospel. President J. Reuben Clark Jr. (1871–1961), who served as a counselor in the First Presidency, stated that the youth are “hungry for things of the spirit; they are eager to learn the Gospel, and they want it straight, undiluted.”³ Teens with disabilities should be included with same-age peers when possible. Their spirits can be

Members with disabilities need exposure to the gospel to feel Heavenly Father's love.

touched by the truths taught as they participate with their friends. Others in the class will be blessed to feel the love and emotions expressed by members with disabilities as hearts are turned towards the Savior.

As ward members work together to make sure that the needs President Hinckley outlined—a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing by the word of God—are met for members with disabilities and their families, all members will grow closer to Christ and be strengthened by an increase in love and unity within the ward. ■

ONLINE RESOURCES

For additional information, including ideas for leaders and teachers, visit disability.lds.org.

NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Converts and Young Men,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 47.
2. See *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 21.1.26.
3. J. Reuben Clark Jr., quoted in Boyd K. Packer, “Ye Are the Temple of God,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2000, 72.

AN INVITATION TO ALL

“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized by God to assist in His work to bring to pass the salvation and exaltation of His children. The Church invites *all* to ‘come unto Christ, and be perfected in him’ (Moroni 10:32; see also D&C 20:59). The invitation to come unto Christ pertains to *all* who have lived, or will ever live, on the earth.”

Handbook 2: Administering the Church (2010), 2.2; emphasis added.

