

www.disabilities.lds.org

THE NEW DISABILITIES WEB SITE



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How a new Church Web site is helping members with disabilities—and their friends, leaders, and teachers—approach challenges with faith instead of fear.

BY KATHLEEN L. PETERSON

At 18, Brandon Sulser of Utah was injured in an accident and became a quadriplegic. “I’ve had many days filled with anger, grief, and sorrow,” he says. “But whatever situation life may bring, I try always to focus on the positive.” Now 29, Brother Sulser teaches Sunday School to 17- and 18-year-olds.

Meagan Borrows of British Columbia has autism and is developmentally delayed. She has a gift for paying attention to detail, so her bishop called her to serve in the Primary as an assistant secretary. Each week she takes attendance, sharpens crayon pencils, distributes handouts, and ensures that the children and teachers change classrooms on time. Now, because she has a responsibility, she never wants to miss church.

Like Brandon and Meagan, many members of the Church who have disabilities contribute to their wards and branches. Friends, leaders, and teachers are finding ways to help ease the burdens that many members with disabilities carry. Now both groups can find help in their service through the Church’s new Disabilities Resources Web site.

“Disabilities.lds.org provides help for families, caregivers, leaders, teachers, and friends,” says Doug Hind, who oversees special-needs materials in the Church’s Curriculum Department. “We’ve had pieces of information for them scattered in handbooks, in lesson manuals, and on other Web sites, but now it is in one place and much more accessible.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT CASEY

“The Disability Resource section of the Church’s Web site has proven to be one of the most helpful to individuals, families, caregivers, teachers, and priesthood leaders,” says Elder Gary J. Coleman of the Seventy, who serves as an assistant executive director of the Church Curriculum Department. “A wide range of practical and professional resources for those with special needs is now accessible to persons whose lives are touched by those needing loving care and assistance.”

Understanding and Including People with Disabilities

A disability is a functional limitation that may interfere with a person’s ability to walk, hear, talk, see, think, or learn. Disabilities do not affect every person in the same way. Leaders, teachers, and friends should work with people individually to understand specific abilities and limitations.

Debra Towsley of Idaho, who works as a speech and language pathologist and has taught a child with autism in Primary, is excited about the Web site.

“As an educational specialist in special education, I am so happy this is available,” she says. “I appreciate the common themes such as being respectful, maintaining dignity, looking at abilities rather than *disabilities*, and asking before helping or touching someone.”

The organization of disabilities.lds.org will stay the same, but articles and other information will be added and updated.

Help for Leaders and Teachers

Leaders, teachers, and other Church members can gain greater understanding and inspiration on how to temporally and spiritually support those with disabilities and their loved ones.

“You don’t have to be an individual who has a disability or even involved with a family member with a disability to gain important insight about people with special needs,” says Sister Ann M. Dibb, second counselor in the general Young



Women presidency. “You can learn to be a better teacher and to be more helpful, considerate, and caring. You can more closely emulate the Savior, who taught, ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me’” (Matthew 25:40).

The site includes ideas for focusing on the needs of members with disabilities, such as considering ramps or handrails, special parking, or audiovisual equipment. It identifies ideas for managing classroom behavior, adapting lessons, and tips about specific disabilities.

As we serve and work with those with disabilities we learn to love them and see them as servants of our Heavenly Father. Danilo M. Seraspe met Vernon and Jo Ellen Bonse, who are deaf, more than 15 years ago. He remembers that they were “pleasant and friendly,” yet Brother Seraspe felt uncomfortable interacting with them. “They seemed to recognize and accept the distance,” he remembers.

It was when Brother Seraspe was assigned to be the Bonsel’s home teacher that a strong friendship began. At the end of each day, Brother Seraspe and Brother Bonse would meet at the train station on their way home and conduct a home teaching visit. Since Brother Seraspe did not know American Sign Language, they communicated by writing back and forth to each other. “We used quite a bit of paper,” Brother Seraspe says.

Brother Seraspe, who was recently released as the bishop of the ward in New York that both families attended, is quick to recognize the contributions that Brother and Sister Bonse consistently make. He says, “The Bonsel’s offer prayers, give talks, and teach in Elder’s Quorum and Relief Society. They give their time, their hearts, and their intellect as they serve. Vernon and Jo Ellen are truly a blessing to our ward.”

Help for Families of Children with Disabilities

“It’s important for parents to treat their child with a disability as normal as possible,” says David M. Rushton of Texas, who has spina bifida. He remembers his own parents allowing him to be independent.

“When I was 15 years old, I asked my mom if I could be on the high school wrestling team,” Brother Rushton says. “She was afraid that with my spina bifida, I would be injured.

“With faith, my parents allowed me to wrestle. I never became a champion, but at one match I received a standing ovation—not because I won, but because I never quit and was never pinned to the mat by my opponent.

“Now I have my own family to take care of. It’s important for me to remember that the Lord gives no challenges we cannot overcome,” says Brother Rushton.



Because family plays such an integral part in the development of members with a disability, disabilities.lds.org includes five sections to help family members: a general overview, as well as pages directed specifically to fathers, mothers, siblings, and grandparents.

“A family member with a disability impacts the whole family,” says Sandra Tanner, a member of the Primary General Board. “This site was created because of their needs and because of the Church’s desire to help.”

Sister Tanner also points out the importance of having a place for every member to participate in church. “If there’s not a place for every member, some families might not attend,” she says. “Perhaps they might be embarrassed because they’re different, or they may not want to ‘impose’ on others. But they lose the blessings of church attendance, of strength gained by renewing covenants, of being taught by the Spirit, and of opportunities to grow through service. The gospel is for everyone. Blessing the one blesses us all.”

Scriptures and Quotes

Members with disabilities and those who love them may become disheartened at times, but the Lord will always bring succor and comfort to those who are troubled. For instance, Deuteronomy 31:6 offers this encouragement:

“Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid . . . for the Lord thy God . . . will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.” This and other helpful verses found in the “Scriptures and Quotes” section of the Web site remind those who are discouraged that they are not alone.

“Disabilities.lds.org offers some wonderful, encouraging scriptural references that address individual needs from varying points of view,” says one sister in North Carolina, who has rheumatoid arthritis. “The scriptures can help calm fears and give hope.

“The example of Jesus having charity for the disabled and afflicted can strengthen one’s reliance on the Lord,” she continues. “The scriptures provided remind us all, whether one has a disability or not, of Heavenly Father’s involvement and support in our lives. I am thankful for the peace and comfort that come through the scriptures.”

Materials

In addition to having taught a child with autism in Primary, Sister Debra Towsley serves with her husband as a coordinator at a local assisted-living center. She has seen firsthand the blessings that Church materials can bring into members’ lives. “Many of the residents have Relief Society and Priesthood manuals in large print,” she says, which gives



them access to materials they might not otherwise enjoy.

The Church produces many such materials to give members with disabilities better access to Church lessons, music, and programs. These adapted resources include audiocassettes, CDs, MP3 files, videos with captions, sign-language dictionaries, and various publications. Materials are offered for particular ages or auxiliaries, as well as for specific disabilities.

The site links to ldscatalog.com, where many of these materials can be ordered, as well as to online media formats instantly available on LDS.org.

Frequently Asked Questions

The Frequently Asked Questions section offers a wealth of information not covered elsewhere.

Here, readers can find “how-to” instruction, resource ideas, statistics, and answers to questions about doctrine and policy.

For instance, some might wonder if a service animal is allowed in a Church building. The answer is yes; the only place service animals are not allowed is in the temple. There, temple ordinance workers are glad to offer assistance to anyone needing it. The site also advises members to be aware of local laws concerning service animals and places where those with disabilities might need additional assistance.



COME WHAT MAY, AND LOVE IT.

“My grandson Joseph has autism. It has been heartbreaking for his mother and father to come to grips with the implications of this affliction. They knew that Joseph would probably never be like other children. They understood what

that would mean not only for Joseph but for the family as well. But what a joy he has been to us. . . .

“Any reservations that his family may have had in raising Joseph, any sacrifices they have made have been compensated tenfold. Because of this choice spirit, his mother and father have learned much about children with disabilities. They have witnessed firsthand the generosity and compassion of family, neighbors, and friends. They have rejoiced together as Joseph has progressed. They have marveled at his goodness.”

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin (1917-2008) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Come What May, and Love It,” *Ensign*, November 2008, 28.



D*isabilities.lds.org highlights many materials that give members with disabilities better access to lessons, music, and programs. Here, a girl with cerebral palsy gives a prayer in Primary using a communication board.*

that the Lord must really believe in me and my abilities to overcome my special trials,” says Brother Rushton. “Because of the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, one day I will be made whole. Few can appreciate this or be more grateful for it than someone who has had a disability.” ■

You need not be a special educator or have professional training to work with members who have disabilities. If you have an experience with blessing lives through the information on this site or through other resources available to you, please share it with us. You can also send us questions you would like answered. Please e-mail your queries and your success stories to specialcurriculum@ldschurch.org.



The site also allows members to submit their own questions, which will be considered for future inclusion on the site.

A Resource to Empower Individuals

“Every member of the Church should take advantage of the wealth of the disabilities Web site,” says Sister Dibb. “The information will bless and empower individuals to find the help that they need. This is truly an example of how the Church strives to provide assistance for individuals and families.”

“I remind myself

HELPS AND RESOURCES

In addition to the general helps found on the site, disabilities.Ids.org also offers disability-specific information in 10 categories. Each of these pages contains a list of online resources that are not maintained or controlled by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but are provided as additional resource material. These links are listed under each category.

Autism

- National Institute of Mental Health
- National Autistic Society
- Asperger Syndrome
- CDC Autism Information Center
- Autism Speaks

Chronic Illness

- U.S. National Library of Medicine: National Institute of Health
- National Center for Disease Control and Prevention
- Healthline
- American Autoimmune and Related Disorders Association

Hearing Loss and Deafness

- National Association of the Deaf
- Self-Help for Hard of Hearing People
- Alexander Graham Bell Association for Deafness and Hard of Hearing

Learning Disability

- Learning Disabilities Association of America
- LD Online
- National Center for Learning Disabilities

Physical Disability

- Spina Bifida Association
- National MS (Multiple Sclerosis) Society
- Muscular Dystrophy Association

Speech and Language Disorders

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders
- Medlineplus: a service of the United States National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health

Intellectual Disability

- American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities
- NICHCY Fact Sheet on Mental Retardation
- Centers for Disease Control Fact Sheet on Mental Retardation

Mental Illness

- Mental Health Resources
- National Institute for Mental Health
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
- Medline Plus: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Memory Loss

- Alzheimer's Association
- NICHCY Traumatic Brain Injury
- Mayo Clinic Traumatic Brain Injury

Vision Loss and Blindness

- American Council of the Blind
- American Foundation for the Blind
- National Federation of the Blind
- National Association for the Visually Impaired

