



Is My Child with a Disability Ready to Be Baptized?

Our son's eighth birthday was approaching. But how could we be sure he was ready for baptism?

By Katie Edna Steed

Our son, David, would be turning eight in less than a year. My husband and I wanted him to be prepared to make the sacred covenants of baptism. That meant doing things like reading the Book of Mormon, studying the baptismal covenants, and reviewing the baptismal interview questions. We had done all this before with David's older sister, but David has autism, so deciding if he should be baptized was not as straightforward for us.

Yes, we knew what to do to help him prepare, but looming over all of this preparation were the questions: *Should* David be baptized? Was he ready? Did he need to be baptized? Did he understand what he would be committing to? How could we know for sure that we were doing the right thing?

Like many parents who have a child with a disability, these questions led us on a journey of seeking doctrinal insights and personal revelation.

The Age of Accountability vs. Accountability

Doctrine and Covenants 68:27 reads, "And their children shall be baptized for the remission of their sins when eight years old, and receive the laying on of the hands."

If we relied solely on this scripture, we would conclude that any eight-year-old is ready to be baptized. However, the scriptures also teach:

"Little children are redeemed . . . through mine Only Begotten;

"Wherefore, they cannot sin . . . until they begin to become accountable before me" (Doctrine and Covenants 29:46–47; see also Moroni 8:7–22).

How could my husband and I understand if David was accountable? We continued to search.

We learned from Church policy that the individual's accountability depends on both his wishes and his level of understanding; if David was worthy and desirous to be baptized and demonstrated that he could be held accountable, we should not withhold baptism from him.

We also learned that if David's disability limited his intellectual capacity to that of a little child, he would not be held accountable and would not need saving ordinances (see *Handbook 1: Stake Presidents and Bishops* [2010], 16.1.8; members who have questions about Church policies can consult with their bishops).

David's intellectual capacity was actually quite typical. However, I still found myself questioning whether David had reached an appropriate level of accountability. I continued to prayerfully search and hope for direction that would bring me peace.

Disabilities and Innocence

I know some parents who have a child with a disability who take great comfort from reading that those who pass through mortality without having become accountable retain the status of innocence: "All little children are alive in Christ. . . . For the

power of redemption cometh on all them that have no law; . . . and unto such baptism availeth nothing” (Moroni 8:22).

The Prophet Joseph Smith also described the condition of children who die and have not become accountable: “And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven” (Doctrine and Covenants 137:10).

I know that for these individuals, baptism is not necessary in this life. I also knew that God would help us to know what would be best for David.

Seeking Divine Guidance

For those with disabilities, there is a large range of abilities. Many individuals with disabilities are above the mental level of eight years and may be baptized and confirmed if they become accountable (see *Handbook 1*, 16.3.5). Other individuals will not be accountable. I knew my husband and I could consult with our son, with God, and with our bishop, who stands as a “judge in Israel,” to help make the inspired decision concerning David’s readiness to be baptized (see Doctrine and Covenants 107:76).

These words from Alma brought me great peace: “And now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, . . . what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you?” (Mosiah 18:8, 10).

After all of our preparation, all of our lessons at home and in Primary, I started to ask David questions I knew he would be asked in his baptismal interview.

Sometimes his responses demonstrated understanding, but sometimes he didn’t know how to respond. I found myself wondering if we were doing the right thing.

Finally, the Spirit whispered to my heart, “Why don’t you ask David what he thinks?”

I turned to David and asked, “David, do you want to be baptized?”

He looked right up at me and said, “Yes!”

When I asked him why he wanted to be baptized, he said, “To be like Jesus.”

I was overcome with peace and direction. I knew right then that even if David didn’t understand every question perfectly, he was ready to be baptized and confirmed. He knew what he needed to know, and most importantly, he knowingly had a desire to enter God’s kingdom through baptism.

The day David was baptized and confirmed a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was full of love, friendship, and peace. The room was filled with family, ward members, school friends, and even teachers from David’s school. The example David set that day of choosing to follow Jesus and be baptized was an example that influenced many for good. Our family is stronger because we had the opportunity to learn how the works of God would be made manifest through our son, David (see John 9:3). ■

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HOW CAN WE HELP MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES?

As leaders lovingly follow the Savior's example of helping others feel included, members with disabilities and their families will feel His love and understand their important place within the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12, 18). As you lead and serve, consider the following:

1. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Sometimes we are afraid to address differences, but as you ask questions respectfully, individuals will appreciate your sincere desire to understand their circumstances. Frame questions in a loving way, such as: "How can I help make your experience at church more meaningful?" Members with disabilities and their families are often the best resource on their disability and can tell you where help is needed.

2. Foster understanding. After consulting with members about their disabilities, discuss with them what they would feel comfortable having you share with others. Then, as appropriate, help ward leaders and other members understand the individual's disabilities and needs. This can foster greater compassion and understanding as well as inspiration about how to provide support.

3. Provide accommodations. There are many simple adjustments you can make to promote learning and involvement for everyone, including allowing extra time

to respond to questions, using closed captions with videos, allowing those with limited hearing or sight to sit where they can hear or see better, and using a variety of media to present lessons. You can also consult a ward or stake disability specialist about specific accommodations you can make.

4. Create service opportunities. Meet with individuals and their caregivers to identify what their skills and talents are. Then prayerfully identify meaningful ways for them to serve. Everyone has something that they can contribute to the work.

5. Reach out with love. Seek to emulate the open acceptance in Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's words: "As members of the Church, we are all on this journey. . . . Whatever your circumstances, we welcome you" ("What I Wish Every New Member Knew—and Every Longtime Member Remembered," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Oct. 2006, 10). Of all the Church's resources, one of the greatest will always be individuals who minister to one another in love and friendship.