

# How Disabilities Impact Families

As a volunteer, you will connect with families who carry challenges that lie beneath the surface, unseen to most of us. Your awareness of them gives you a broader understanding of where a family affected by disability is coming from, and how refreshing your service is to them.

Disability impacts the whole family. It stresses marriage, as parents learn to cope with special needs and deal with grief and guilt, possibly blaming themselves for what they think they did wrong to cause their child's disability. A single parent must manage his or her child's issues alone. Siblings wonder if Mom and Dad will ever have time for them and can feel angry and cheated by all the attention their sibling requires. Extended family may have difficulty understanding, be judgmental, or offer little support.

Disability can make society seem negative and "staring". Friends and neighbors may take a giant step back from the family, simply because they aren't sure what to do or say that will help. Social activities may be crowded out by doctor appointments, therapies and a load of new duties at home. Isolation is common, as it seems easier to just stay at home than to manage with the family member's disability in public. Financial, medical, educational and scheduling stressors also assault the family. There are many unending questions about doctors, treatment options and therapies. The medical field can be confusing and sometimes seem harsh and unclear. Appropriate educational services can be very difficult and expensive to get.

In the scope of all this, here are some suggestions as we teach and care for the special needs children, adults and families that God brings to us:

- Get to know each family member. Greet them by name.
- Even when the family walks in late, have a smile and a warm welcome.
- Learn about family and individual interests and regularly ask about them.
- Ask how you can be praying for each family member. Then pray and follow up with them for answers.
- Eventually God may lead you to become involved outside of Sunday morning. This may be an occasional phone call, an offer to attend a sporting event, an outing with your student, taking the siblings out, or sharing a meal once in a while.

Families come to us at different places. Some 'walk in' pretty tattered. We may be their first taste of the love of Christ. Our love and interest in them and their child lets them know they don't have to carry their burdens alone. In order to consistently serve and be a blessing amidst some of these challenges, we, as Barnabas volunteers, must be in a right relationship with Christ, growing in our faith and seeking the Lord to fill us with His Holy Spirit. It is only then that we can offer His love, His joy, His peace, His patience to our students and their families. As we, then, prepare and give our best, families can feel confident to leave their children and attend worship together and hear the life-giving Word that they need to grow in their faith and apply to their special journey.