

# **How churches can provide respite for special needs families**

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Did you know the stress level of mothers who have a child with special needs has been compared to that of combat soldiers? Often, families of those with disabilities feel hidden within faith communities because they're simply not there or not included in the activities. What can we, the church, do differently to provide times of respite for these families? How can we build relationships, offer support and provide rest?

## **What is respite?**

Respite is a short period of relief or rest from something difficult or unpleasant. Family relationships are often strained as a result of the parents' time being monopolized by the special care necessary for a child with a disability. Siblings of children with special needs may have little time with their parents.

Offering times of respite can be an opportunity for parents to reconnect with their other children and for spouses to spend time together. Churches can play a crucial role in providing this support and rest.

## **What does respite look like?**

There are three approaches to respite care: group-centered, family-centered and church-centered respite. These approaches will focus on drop-off/child care, relief for the family and caregivers, and support while the child with special needs is at church.

# Group-centered respite

Many families who have children with special needs struggle to find acceptance, often feeling their child does not “belong.” The church can provide that “belonging” and share God’s love with them through nights of respite.

A night of respite can be a once-a-month experience for children with special needs that gives parents a much-needed evening out. This parents’ night out provides fun activities for the kids and some free time for the adults.

## **What does a church need to make a “Night of Respite” a success?**

- **Volunteer team**

This team will consist of directors and coordinators who ensure the night runs smoothly, from registration to clean up. This team will need an overall director, a volunteer coordinator, a medical coordinator and an activities coordinator.

The volunteer coordinator will manage the number of attendees and the number of volunteers needed to care for the children attending the respite night.

The activities coordinator will let their creative juices flow as they plan theme activities, from bingo and scavenger hunts to crafts and photo backdrops.

The medical coordinator will know the medical needs of the children attending and lead a group of medical volunteers to meet those needs.

Insider tip: Churches typically have success finding volunteers through

special education teachers, the medical field, student ministry, college partnerships and homeschool groups.

- **Medical plan**

It's wise to recruit, train and organize a group of professional medical personnel to volunteer their services for the respite event. Establish clear guidelines for what services the volunteer respite medical team will be responsible for based on the comfort level and expertise of those recruited—such as tube feeds, medicine administration, suctioning of airways and other services.

- **Intake forms**

Having records of important information on each child at the respite event is essential. This record includes all pertinent information for the guest, including emergency contact information, a list of medications and any other information the parents offer. This record should stay with the child at all times.

- **Themes/Bible story**

As a church, we seek to advance the gospel through our events and activities. A respite night should be a place where the gospel, Scripture and Bible stories are shared. Theme nights can bring a fun spin to a Bible story—such as weather night/Jesus calms the storm, Valentine's/Jesus loves you.

## **Family-centered respite**

The family-centered respite approach allows church members to rally around a special needs family to provide care and support. One way this has been successful is by developing a team of volunteers who play a specific role in that family's rest and care.

## **What does this team look like?**

- **Family support team member**

This person assists a specific family through one of the following: monthly meal delivery, home projects, child care/respice care, transportation, child mentorship, etc. This is an ongoing volunteer role.

- **Respice care/child care**

Parents may need an occasional break from the stresses associated with providing for a child with special needs. This break may be a simple two-hour slot for a mom to go grocery shopping or an overnight stay while a couple gets away for the weekend. This can be a consistent or sporadic volunteer role.

- **Prayer and encouragement**

The role of prayer can mean a world of difference for a family. Acts of encouragement, such as notes, are also essential to the family's well-being. This is an ongoing volunteer role.

## **Church-centered respice**

A church-centered approach refers to the regular support and care provided to a child with special needs during weekly worship and small group time. This support allows families to leave their child in a children's ministry equipped and ready to care for that child.

What can a church do on Sundays and Wednesdays during weekly services?

- **Sensory rooms**

A sensory room is a space that provides a child with personalized sensory input that helps children calm and focus themselves to be better prepared

for learning and interacting with others. Sometimes, children need a calm place to regulate. Other times, it provides a location for learning in a room with the least restricted environment.

Tip: Multiple websites help a church set up its sensory room. [Fun and Function](#) is a great resource.

### ▪ **Worship rooms**

Some churches can attach a parent/child room to the back of the worship center to allow a parent and child to slip away during worship. This side room enables the parent to engage in worship while allowing the child the space to move and play freely.

### ▪ **Buddies**

Not every child with special needs requires a buddy, but a buddy is an excellent way to provide kids with the extra support they need to feel safe, understood, and accepted. Those who fill the role of a buddy understand the child's circumstances and provide appropriate support and care for that child.

## **What is the first step?**

The first step is to simply start the conversation. What would a time of respite look like at your church? Half the battle is the church body realizing the need. Some studies show nearly half of special needs parents refrain from participating in a religious activity because their child was not included or welcomed.

These families often worry about their child making a scene, disrupting or being a burden to others. Many of these families have daily struggles and challenges. If going to church is one of those struggles, why go?

So, start the conversation today. You can do this. Be a difference maker in

the lives of these families by building relationships, offering support and providing rest through times of respite.

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