

General Overview

Awana's vision and prayer is that all children and youth throughout the world will come to know, love, and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. With our commitment to reach ALL children, we equip churches to minister to kids of different ages, backgrounds, and abilities with joy. The information below provides a statistical and theological overview of children affected by special needs. We pray this helps you reach EVERY child in your community for the Gospel and disciple them well.

REALITY & STATISTICS

- **DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY** During a study period from 2016-2019, about 1 in 6 kids aged 3-17 years (17%) were reported by parents as being diagnosed with a developmental disability. These included autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, blindness, cerebral palsy, and others (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>).
- **AUTISM** According to estimates from the CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, about 1 in 44 children have been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>).
- **ADHD** 9.8% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 6 million) have received an ADHD diagnosis (www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html).
- **BEHAVIORAL DIAGNOSIS** 8.9% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 5.5 million) have a diagnosed behavior problem (www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html).
- **LEARNING DISABILITIES** 2.3 million public school students have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for learning disabilities (<https://www.understood.org/articles/en/learning-disabilities-by-the-numbers>).

THE MOST IMPORTANT
DATA POINT IS THAT

100%

OF THESE CHILDREN
NEED JESUS!

This could be the largest unreached people group in America. Unfortunately, families have been asked to leave churches, actively or passively, because of the challenge their loved one with a disability creates for church programming.



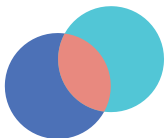
THEOLOGY OF

Disability**God's Design for the World**

God created everything and said that it was good (Genesis 1). This was the Normal World. The entrance of sin brought corruption (Genesis 3) that changed the world God originally intended and created, to be abnormal. We expect to see certain things in an Abnormal World. Disability is one of them.

In the Garden, God created humanity to function at 100%. This is no longer possible in a post-Fall world. We ALL function differently than how God intended, with different capacity and capability in areas of physical, social, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual ability. However, some disabilities are harder to overcome and more visible or apparent than others. It is only by God's grace that we ALL possess the capacity to improve function in our spiritual lives.

Every single person is made in the image of God. That image may be marred by the consequences of mankind's sin, but it still exists. As such, every person has value, dignity, and is deserving of respect.

**God's Design for the Church****BELONG**

- Since all people are made in God's image, we should seek to love, care, and intentionally reach out to those in our community. This includes those affected by special needs (Genesis 1).
- All believers are called to serve in the body of Christ. No matter a believer's age or ability, they have a crucial role to play in the growth and health of the church (1 Corinthians 12).

BELIEVE



- Every person is fearfully and wonderfully made by God. We need to see and believe this truth about our brothers and sisters affected by special needs and then help them believe this about themselves with confidence (Psalm 139).
- Every follower of Christ, despite age or ability, is invaluable to the growth and health of the church. Leaders and church members need to believe this about those affected with special needs because this is God's design (1 Corinthians 14).

BECOME

- All believers are called to grow in the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).
- Those affected by special needs may not complete handbooks or win awards, but if they have a heart full of Jesus, then we have accomplished our purpose.

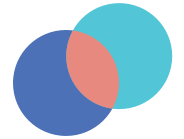

For more insight on discipling kids and students with special needs check out **Awana's Special Needs Guide.**

Sharing the Gospel



A common myth in Christian circles is that someone with a disability gets a free pass to heaven.

**THIS COULDN'T
BE FURTHER
FROM THE
TRUTH!**



The Bible says that everyone is a sinner (Romans 5:12, 3:23) who needs Jesus and can't reach heaven without Him (John 3:16, Romans 6:23). Everyone who calls on Him, who trusts Jesus, regardless of function or ability, will be saved (Acts 16:31). **We must proclaim the Gospel to every single child with clarity and urgency.**

When sharing the Gospel with someone with special needs, it's easy to allow questions to distract from our purpose. We may question how and when persons with special abilities understand the Gospel, but that shouldn't be our primary concern... It's God's job to communicate with each individual as only the Holy Spirit can. Our responsibility is to faithfully provide them access and opportunities to hear, know, and believe the Gospel.

We can't always tell what is going on in the heart and mind of another person - only God can. But we can celebrate changes in someone's behavior, choices, and actions as a fruit of belief in the Gospel.

For more insight on discipling kids and students with special needs check out
[Awana's Special Needs Guide.](#)



Connecting with Families

It is our joy, not only our responsibility, to connect with families affected by special needs. By connecting with parents, we communicate care for their child and a desire to grow in our knowledge and service to them. We hope the following tips will help you connect and foster good relationships with these precious families.

HELP FAMILIES PROCESS DISABILITY

- Disabilities happen for many different reasons. Some are induced by man's choices like trauma, RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder), and FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), but most are not.
- Many families joyfully care for a child with special needs but also experience the weight of that responsibility. It is important to help them view their child's disability within the context of eternity (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

MAINTAIN A CHILD-SPECIFIC APPROACH

- Learn about special needs diagnosis specific to your students and ministry.
- Learn calming techniques and ideas to redirect behavior of individual students.
- Coordinate with parents, following up with calls or visits, to determine diagnoses and triggers that will help you plan ahead with child-specific solutions.
- Record trigger points during club and adapt the curriculum or environment accordingly.

COMMUNICATE WITH FAMILIES REGULARLY

- See each parent as a unique person, not just someone's parent.
- Include the student in conversation by asking questions, then involve the parent in additional discussion.
- Reinforce a student's positive interaction and behavior.
- Be proactive by asking for input and looking for solutions BEFORE there is a situation.
- Seek help with student-specific challenges.
- Schedule additional follow-up with parents as needed.

SERVE BEYOND CLUB

- Connect with families outside of Awana Club.
- Host volunteer trainings and refresher courses regularly.
- Walk through crises with families and pull the rest of the church in for support.



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Behavior & Discipleship

In all instances of misbehavior, we need to ask the question, **why?** *Why have the rules that are set been put into place? Why has my response to misbehavior been chosen?* It is vital that our response be seen through the lens of discipleship. It is not merely a means to gain control or enforce preferences, but to evaluate situations and our responses with greater clarity and Gospel focus.

BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION THAT EXPRESSES:

- Something is wrong (ex: sensory overload).
- A child doesn't know what to do (ex: processing overload or malfunction).
- Physical exhaustion or illness.
- Lack of skills.

BEHAVIOR CAN BE CAUSED BY:

- Mental health diagnoses (ADD/ODD/Bipolar/Schizo, Depression, Anxiety)
- Side effects of medication
- Trauma/post-traumatic stress
- Brain injury
- Child abuse/neglect
- Attachment disorders
- Sensory integration
- Puberty/hormones
- Emotional dysregulation
- Other contributing factors:
 - Exhaustion/sleep deprivation
 - Malnutrition/dehydration
 - Family circumstances
 - School stress

COMMON BEHAVIORS THAT CAN OCCUR:

- Running
- Distraction
- Inability to maintain eye contact
- Disengaged/shutdown
- Crying
- Big and uncontrolled emotion
- Aggression
- Outbursts
- Vocalizations
- Fight or flight
- Task avoidance
- Repetitive stereotypic movements or stimming (which may be a child's attempt to emotionally regulate themselves)
- Tantrums and meltdowns*

* There is a significant difference for children with special needs between a **TANTRUM** and a **MELTDOWN**.

- **TANTRUMS** communicate the desire to manipulate your behavior as a leader.
- **MELTDOWNS** communicate a lack of skills in regulating their response to something that is overwhelming.

TANTRUMS and **MELTDOWNS** are best addressed in different ways.

- When a student is experiencing a **TANTRUM**, set clear boundaries.
- When a student is experiencing a **MELTDOWN**, handle them with gentleness and the knowledge that you are right there with them.
- Distractions are a great tool to help kids break loose from the emotional tidal wave of a **MELTDOWN**.



Simple Strategies to Help with Behavior

Create clear ministry standards.

Train and equip your **WHOLE** team.

- Push for consistency across leadership by having uniform responses to specific situations.
- Consider allergies when planning food and activities (ex: latex balloons).

Join students on their level.

- Don't ask questions.
Children are concrete thinkers. Tell and instruct.
- Provide options to help them with decision-making.
Example: "You have two choices, Jason, you can sit with us for the Bible story or you can take a break in the quiet room. Let's make a choice!"
- Don't skip steps when giving instructions.
Example: If you expect a child to do A and B, arriving at C, don't verbalize A and C and assume the child knows B.
- Create a plan for elopers, tantrums, and meltdowns.
- Build accommodations and prompts.
Accommodations are amazing tools that support children affected by special needs. A child's success is measured by their ability to do something or participate, and celebrated - with or without accommodation.

*Learn more at www.aacandautism.com/lamp

** Learn more at www.pecsusa.com/pecs/

Communicate with kids clearly and effectively.

- Lower your voice. Don't raise it.
- Limit inferences, words with dual meanings, metaphors, similes, or idioms.
- Learn communication devices, sign language, or necessary communication systems Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)*, Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP)** , etc.

Remember that behavior is communication and not always an issue of compliance.

- Reduce triggers and unnecessary stimuli.
- Give choices within parameters.
- Walk students through problem-solving.
- Offer replacement behavior.

Develop a plan.

- Regulate yourself first in difficult situations.
- Help the child regulate until they can do it on their own.
- Document and implement strategies to de-escalate.

Plan ahead of time for change and transition.

- Discuss skills and strategies with families.
- Contact parents with schedule changes or substitute/absent leaders.
- Provide visual schedules or social stories.
- Be careful of time references unless you plan to honor them.

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Awana's Special Needs Guide.

Game Time

During His earthly ministry, Jesus let the little children come to Him (Luke 18:16). **In following His example, what can you do to ensure that all children in your ministry are able to come and actively engage in Game Time?**

ACCOMMODATIONS

an alteration of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allows an individual with a disability to gain access to content and complete assigned tasks. These allow children with disabilities to pursue a regular course of study.

MODIFICATION

a change in the curriculum. Modifications are made for students with disabilities who are unable to comprehend all of the content an instructor is teaching.

ADAPTATION

changes in the way instruction and assessment are carried out to allow a learner equal opportunity to demonstrate mastery of concepts and achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Practical Accommodations, Modifications, and Adaptations

Adaptations for physical disabilities:

- Play at least one game where the child who struggles the most can be successful.
- Mix up the teams every week.
- Pair the child with a buddy (peer or adult) to help with physical navigation.

Adapt activities and lessons to your specific set of students.

- Repeat directions.
- Pair the child with a buddy (peer or adult) to model activities.
- Provide visual instructions (pictures or written).

Provide literal interpretations of songs and important words.

- Provide earphones or fidget items.
- Give sensory breaks.

Don't discount incidental learning.

- Swap traditional Awana games with crafts or "classes" in specific hobbies or skills (music, robotics, etc.).

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Large Group Time

During His earthly ministry, Jesus let the little children come to Him (Luke 18:16). **In following His example, what can you do to ensure that all children in your ministry are able to come and actively engage in Large Group Time?**

ACCOMMODATIONS

an alteration of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allows an individual with a disability to gain access to content and complete assigned tasks. These allow children with disabilities to pursue a regular course of study.

MODIFICATION

a change in the curriculum. Modifications are made for students with disabilities who are unable to comprehend all of the content an instructor is teaching.

ADAPTATION

changes in the way instruction and assessment are carried out to allow a learner equal opportunity to demonstrate mastery of concepts and achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Practical Accommodations, Modifications, and Adaptations

Use a multi-sensory approach in your teaching.

- Involve all five senses - seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting.
- Invite children to be part of the story.
- Provide sensory fidgets (pop toys, fidget cubes/spinners, stress balls, tangles, squigglets, etc.).

Adapt activities and lessons to your specific set of students.

- Speak at a lower tone and turn down the volume when playing media.
- Create a visual schedule of Large Group Time.
- Give kids a way to communicate with you if they are nonverbal or verbally limited Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)* or Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP)** visual communication systems.
- Allow navigation space for mobility equipment, wheelchairs, etc.

Provide literal interpretations of songs and important words.

- Pay attention to metaphors, analogies, and similes in teaching materials and songs.
- Define Christian phrases such as "saved", "righteousness", "born again", etc.

Don't discount incidental learning.

- Just because some children may appear to be unfocused, distracted, or disinterested doesn't mean they are not receiving, understanding, and benefiting from the class.

*Learn more at www.aacandautism.com/lamp

** Learn more at www.pecsusa.com/pecs/

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Small Group Time

During His earthly ministry, Jesus let the little children come to Him (Luke 18:16). In following His example, **what can you do to ensure that all children in your ministry are able to come and actively engage in Small Group Time?**

ACCOMMODATIONS

an alteration of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allows an individual with a disability to gain access to content and complete assigned tasks. These allow children with disabilities to pursue a regular course of study.

MODIFICATION

a change in the curriculum. Modifications are made for students with disabilities who are unable to comprehend all of the content an instructor is teaching.

ADAPTATION

changes in the way instruction and assessment are carried out to allow a learner equal opportunity to demonstrate mastery of concepts and achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Practical Accommodations, Modifications, and Adaptations

Establish a normal routine in Small Group Time.

- Ask volunteers to read aloud as opposed to having them ask a child to read.
- Have students work one-on-one with leaders (if possible).
- Move to a quiet space when reciting scripture then return to the group.
- Learn and say one verse before moving on to another.

Reinforce every student's progress.

- Some kids work twice as hard to accomplish half as much.
- Celebrate milestones and honor their attempts to motivate them to continue.
- Give each child the same award in front of their peers even if the section completed was modified.

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Adapt memory work to your specific set of students.

- Utilize visual representation of verses.
- Accommodate length and verbiage of verses.
- Provide an explanation of verses being memorized for full comprehension.
- Allow space for mobility equipment and check table heights.

Consider alternate ways to recite verses.

- Use sign language with those who are nonverbal or verbally limited.
- Use Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP)* or Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).**
- Put each word (or phrase) of the verse on a piece of paper and have students arrange the verse in order.
- Allow kids to write or type out the verse instead of saying the verse out loud.

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