

Introduction

Jesus sets a high standard in Matthew 19:14 when He says, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” His invitation is inclusive. No gender is specified. The call is not limited to children who will sit quietly at His feet and listen, color between the lines, raise their hands and wait to be called upon, or who work at grade level. No child is disqualified because of preexisting physical conditions, mental illness, or behavior issues.

Jesus sets a high standard that can be difficult for children’s ministry volunteers with willing, servant hearts, but without professional child development or educational training, to attain. Difficult, but not impossible. Because when God issues a command like “Let the children come unto me,” He equips people with willing, servant hearts to carry out His will.

Our Parenting Stories

We know this to be true because we are parents of kids with special needs. Katie’s daughter, Annie, had a stroke at the age of five as the result of a rare circulatory disease. The damage to her brain caused right-sided paralysis. Annie also lost her ability to speak. Treatment involved a ten-hour brain surgery and years of physical, occupational and speech therapies, which helped her to regain her strength and language.

Jolene’s son, Allen, had surgery for a life-threatening esophageal birth anomaly less than twenty-four hours after he was born. Complications led to six more surgeries before he was five and a final surgery at age fifteen. He then lived with undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), caused by early, invasive medical treatment. The condition was diagnosed and successfully treated when he was a young adult.

How do we know God equips those He commands to do His will? Because neither of us felt qualified to train up our children with special needs as parents are commanded to do in Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it."

Even though we didn't feel qualified—to be honest, we felt young, scared, ignorant, overwhelmed, and unqualified—God equipped us to carry out his command. He gave us everything we needed to raise our children . . . who are now young adults.

God's Equipping

We met at a special needs ministry conference in Des Moines, Iowa in 2010. Katie conducted a workshop to help pastors and ministry volunteers understand and include families affected by disabilities. Jolene was there to sit at her book table—hopefully to sell copies of her first book for parents of kids with special needs—and to attend Katie's workshop.

Katie made a beeline to the book table and introduced herself. Jolene attended Katie's workshop and loved what she had to say. Before the end of the conference, we exchanged email addresses and quickly became good friends. Maybe because we had a lot in common. After all, we were both parents of kids with special needs. We were both former public school teachers. We both had special education backgrounds. We shared a similar philosophy about inclusive education. And we discovered, that though we had taught in different states, we had employed many of the same strategies to create inclusive classrooms for our students.

In emails and phone calls, we often brainstormed about how to equip children's ministry volunteers to create inclusive environments for kids with special needs. One of our ideas was to create a resource full of simple strategies volunteers could use to make a variety of children's ministry settings more inclusive and accessible for kids with special needs. That idea birthed this book.

The Goal of this Book

Because children's ministry workers are volunteers who may or may not have training in the field of special needs education, one goal of *Every Child Welcome* is to encourage quality teaching. The goal is accomplished when volunteers assess and understand each child's strengths and needs rather than focus on the child's diagnosis.

Why did we choose this goal? Because it follows the example of Scripture. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus interacts with people who are affected by physical and mental illnesses in the context of their strengths and their needs rather than in the context of a diagnosis. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul refers to his own personal weakness, perhaps what today would be called a special need, as “a thorn in the flesh.” Instead of giving a specific diagnosis, Paul says, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:8–9).

Jesus set a high standard with His command to bring the little children to Him, regardless of diagnosis. Children's ministry volunteers can more easily obey Christ's command and follow His example when they interact with kids in the context of their strengths and their needs, and when they are equipped. Our prayer is that this book will help equip you for the task. So let's learn how to use this book to accommodate the needs of all the children who come to your church to meet Jesus.

How to Use this Book

Company's coming!

These two words can evoke a variety of emotions.

- Joy.
- Panic.
- Irritation.
- Excitement.

Whatever our emotions when company's coming we, as hosts, must spring into action. We have tables to set, grocery lists to make and powder rooms to scrub. And, whether we're serving pizza on paper plates or lobster on our best china, we have planning to do. Even the most inveterate hosts among us agree that when we can pause, pour a cup of coffee, and plan purposefully, our dinner parties are more enjoyable for everyone. Think of *Every Child Welcome* as your guide, written to assist in your purposeful planning in a variety of ways.

As a Planning Tool: Planning for children's ministry programs is not much different from planning for a dinner party. We want our guests to feel welcome and nurtured, enjoy each other's company, and be enriched and nourished by the conversation. Moreover, we want them

to leave feeling content and excited to return. When our guests have special needs, we must consider this in our preparation. Just as we create a menu to accommodate dietary restrictions, we must be sure that our children's ministry activities accommodate the unique needs of the children in our care. In doing so, we increase the likelihood that they'll digest the important concepts we're presenting. We want the hour we spend with them to increase their knowledge and nourish their souls.

As a Cookbook: Like a good cook who turns to a favorite selection of recipes to accommodate every guest who's coming to dinner, you can use this book to accommodate the children you work with. It provides a menu of helpful tips, activities, and information. As you get to know your students, you can choose activities that will enhance their learning, meet their needs and hold their attention.

As a Menu of Options: Do you want to create a welcoming environment before kids arrive? Then turn to chapter 1, *Setting the Table*. You'll find ideas about how to welcome children and set a positive tone in chapter 2, *Greeting the Guests*. Chapter 3 provides appetizers so kids can learn more effectively by connecting new information to what they already know. Chapter 4 explains how to create a positive environment so every child feels welcome. We have included main dish strategies for reinforcing the main idea of a lesson, building background knowledge and reviewing important concepts in chapter 5. Chapter 6 provides a selection of side dishes: hands-on activities to supplement instruction and to increase attention and participation. For special days like Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, turn to chapter 7, *Party Time Treats*, which describes activities to keep those days holy—and wholly understandable—to all kids.

In addition, chapter 8, *Service with a Smile*, is devoted to service activities, because we know that all kids—including those with special needs—can effectively serve the kingdom. We've designed strategies for wrapping up an activity effectively in chapter 9, *Washing Up*, and for providing reinforcement for continued learning at home in chapter 10, *To-Go Box*. Finally, because even the best cooks and children's ministry workers can get stuck in a rut, a menu of books, blogs, and websites to supplement your understanding of disabilities, special needs, and best practices is located in the resource section in the back of the book.

We hope this book will become just like that well-worn cookbook on your kitchen shelf, with dog-eared pages and your own notes scrawled in the margins. We also hope the children you are working with will learn some of these recipes by heart, so they can taste and see that the Lord is good!

This excerpt was taken from *Every Child Welcome: A Ministry Handbook for Including Kids with Special Needs* © 2015 by Katie Wetherbee and Jolene Philo, 978-0825443503

It was used with permission by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505-6020. For more information about *Every Child Welcome*, go to www.kregel.com