Creating a special needs ministry

Maria Binney, OTD/S
Belmont University School of Occupational Therapy

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to create a special needs ministry for children at West End Community Church (WECC). In recent years, children with special needs and their families have been increasingly excluded from church communities. By creating a special needs ministry, I aimed to ensure that all families are welcomed and supported at WECC. I utilized evidence-based literature, mentorship from children’s staff at neighboring churches, and a variety of conference presentations and other published materials to lay a foundation for the special needs ministry. My project included 3 components: advocating to church staff and congregation members for inclusion of all children and families, program planning to create a framework for the ministry, and education to equip Sunday school teachers and volunteers with knowledge and resources to support children with special needs. The creation of Connection: Special Needs Ministry caused a ripple effect at WECC that not only benefits children with special needs, but also their parents, peers, teachers, helpers, and the church body as a whole.

Goals and Outcomes

Goal I: To identify barriers to inclusion in church communities and to advocate for inclusion within these communities

- Collaborated with special needs ministry staff at local churches to determine barriers to inclusion at WECC
- Created an evidence-based message to present to the children's staff at WECC to explain the benefits and to advocate for inclusion for all children.
- Held an educational meeting with the pastor to advocate for the importance of inclusion and to provide him with practical methods for promoting inclusion in the church.

Goal II: To develop and promote the use of appropriate methods for gaining meaningful participation of children with special needs in church

- Designed a standard operating procedure for children's ministry staff on including children with special needs by assessing and enrolling each child's special needs into their or her Sunday school class.
- Developed inline forms to be used at home visits for each family who has a child with special needs.
- Created a ministry name, logo, mission statement, strategic plan, missions, and curricular goals for the program as well as an informational website.

Goal III: To advocate the church congregation on specific needs and to provide them with resources that will empower them to include all children on Sunday mornings

- Developed a Buddy Helper manual to educate Sunday school volunteers on strategies to use in the classroom to support children with special needs.
- Developed a series of teacher training videos to educate each family who has a child with special needs.
- Created a handbook and a series of posters to promote Buddy Helper ministry.

Goal IV: To utilize principles of occupational therapy (OT) in identifying strategies for advocating the inclusion of children at West End Community Church

- Developed a series of teacher training videos to educate each family who has a child with special needs.
- Created a mini-service presentation to introduce the needs of special children and the benefits of inclusion.
- Created a mini-service presentation to create an awareness of the importance of inclusion.

Timeline

- January
  - Conducted community service
  - Attended Children's Pastoral Conference
  - Developed a series of teacher training videos to educate each family who has a child with special needs.
- February
  - Created a mini-service presentation to introduce the needs of special children and the benefits of inclusion.
  - Created a mini-service presentation to create an awareness of the importance of inclusion.
- March
  - Meet with pastor to introduce the series of posters
  - Meet with pastor to introduce the series of posters
- April
  - File teacher training videos
  - Create website for Connection: Special Needs Ministry
  - Write job description for special needs coordinator

References


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Literature Review

Traditionally, churches have been social places where people gather to build relationships, celebrate traditions, and grow in their faith. However, in recent years, children with special needs have been increasingly excluded from church settings. In a study by Amy Jacobson, parents of special needs talked about their experiences with children's ministries, and the majority discussed feeling that their children were ignored, overlooked, or treated as a “disability” rather than as a person (Jacobson, 2007). Additionally, a 2012 study by Charlene Shultz found that the majority of pastors and congregation members felt their lack of experience and training limited them from fully including children with special needs in church activities (Shultz, 2012). This trend is forcing families to leave churches at a time when they may need a church community the most.

According to related research, there are a variety of benefits of inclusion. For the purposes of this project, Sunday School can be likened to a school setting as both are structured to include snack time, a craft, free play, and story time. In a 2003 study of children who attended inclusive preschools, teachers reported that children with special needs demonstrated increased social and adaptive skills and their typically developing peers demonstrated increased acceptance of others (Valk et al., 2003). These benefits also hold true in research with older children. In a study of elementary and middle school aged children in a California school system who transitioned from separate classes to inclusive classes, children with special needs demonstrated less problem behaviors while their typically developing peers demonstrated increased compassion toward others (Bunton et al., 2004). From research on school inclusion for children with special needs, it is apparent that the benefits are far-reaching, both for children with special needs and for their typically developing peers.

Importantly, if children are able to participate in an inclusive children’s ministry throughout Sunday school classes, their parents will be more likely to feel welcome at the church and choose to attend church services and activities. Existing research notes numerous benefits of religious involvement for adults. According to a study by Taylor and Chatters, church attendance is correlated with increased feelings of social support, and adults who are active in their churches describe the church as operating like a “substitute family” (Taylor & Chatters, 1996). Additionally, one literature review examined religious commitment as it relates to physical and mental health status in adults, and found that regular religious attendance is correlated with decreased mental and physical ill health as well as better coping strategies (Taylor et al., 1998). A study by Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, and Kaplan echoed many of these results and also found that regular church attendance was a protective factor for marital stability (Strawbridge et al., 2001). According to these findings, creating a special needs ministry to promote inclusion of all children would benefit special children and their needs.

Daily Schedule

Special Needs Ministry

Mission Statement

The Special Needs Ministry is designed to support children from babies to 6th grade with special needs, but not limited to learning, communication, social, physical, and sensory differences.

- To fully include children with special needs and their families in the life of church
- To ensure a safe, loving, and accepting environment to learn about God and the Bible
- To support each child with consistent Buddy Helpers to promote his or her participation in children's ministry

Belief Statement

We believe that God created each child according to His perfect design (Psalm 139:13-14). We know that each child brings unique capabilities and worth (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). We believe that each child brings value to the church body, and we actively seek to include all children in the children's ministry at West End Community Church.