

# Parent Conversation Guide

(A Guide for Talking to Parents Who Have Children with Special Needs)

by Katie Wetherbee

## Focus on the Positive

Parents of children with special needs are accustomed to talking with teachers. In general, these parents will have more conferences and meetings with school staff than parents with typically developing children. In addition, many parents of kids with disabilities have daily communication with school staff, therapists, and other providers. Sadly, this communication often focuses on what the child *cannot* do. Therefore, church staff and volunteers have an excellent opportunity to build up the child—and the parents—by telling what the child *can* do.

When a parent comes to pick up a child, try to give specific, positive feedback. Say:

- “Jacob has so much energy. His enthusiasm is contagious!”
- “Mara helped three kids with an art project this morning. She has such an eye for art, and her friends wanted their projects to look like hers.”
- “Shawn really showed me the value of persistence today. He wanted to complete the obstacle course, and he did it with a smile on his face! His new friends were so impressed with his precision and determination. One of them said he is a hero!”

By providing glimpses of a child’s strengths, we encourage parents in their journey of raising a unique (and sometimes challenging) child. The words you speak might be the only positive words a parent has heard in a long, long time. As King Solomon reminds us, gracious words are like enjoying pure honey from a honeycomb. They can sweeten and heal in difficult situations. (See Proverbs 16:24.)

## Learn About Strengths and Needs

Vacation Bible School is a fast-paced, often exhausting week. The thought of trying to learn about individual kids’ strengths and needs may feel impossible. Although time is really not on your side, investing even a small amount of energy in learning more about a child can yield great dividends in the future. Imagine a parent, whose child has experienced very little success in community or church activities, hearing you say, “We just love having your child in our class/group this week. Tell us what you love most about him!” This can begin a conversation that builds trust and helps the parent to share more about the child’s strengths.

As the conversation continues, a volunteer might comment, “I noticed that whenever we have to walk in line to get outside, Marcus gets frustrated and wants to run ahead of the others. What can we do to redirect him so that he won’t be as frustrated?”

Once a parent provides information, the talk can go deeper: “Are there any other strategies that really work well at home or at school? We would love to learn them, because he is having such a great week, and we want to do our best to keep him coming back!” Again, the focus is on the child’s strengths, supporting areas of need, and ultimately, keeping the child (and family!) engaged in VBS and in church.

## **Build Relationships**

Relationships are rather like a bank account. The more we invest, the more there is to draw from when something goes awry and needs to be fixed. Therefore, we need to capture each opportunity we have to invest in families. Conversations that compliment a child's strengths and ask how to best support the child are great examples of relationship building. Consider some other ways you can care for parents and build bridges:

- Offer a breakfast station in the church facility where parents can go after they have dropped off their children. Brew some really good coffee and provide pastries from a local bakery. Encourage parents to linger and relax, and appoint a church staff member or volunteer to join them—not to evangelize, but rather to laugh, chat, and get to know them.
- Write a note to a parent that describes something wonderful about their child—and mail it. Postcards and notes are rare in this age of e-mail and texting. A handwritten letter will be savored and kept.
- Call the parent after VBS is over, and say again how much you enjoyed getting to know the child and family. Express your desire to have them return for church services and other special events that your congregation offers.
- If you feel that you have connected well with a parent, consider inviting the person to meet for coffee or a meal. Parents of kids with disabilities often have very few invitations—and sometimes, very few friends. Their days are crowded with doctors' appointments, therapy sessions, and school meetings. A lunch date might be a real luxury for a parent!
- Invite the child for a playdate at your home. Be aware that many children with disabilities live in a state of "left out." Knowing that a family enjoys a child's company and appreciates the child's strengths will be a wonderful boost to the parents.

## **Discuss the Child's Behavior**

As we already know, parents of children with disabilities are often called in to discuss their kids' behavior. Remember, VBS is supposed to be a relaxed week of fun, games, and learning. Parents are likely hoping their kids will blend in, and that any behavioral issues might fade with the novelty of the situation. Certainly we can allow a lot of behaviors without reporting them. An occasional bout of complaining or frustration does not need to be written up and discussed in a formal meeting. However, any behavior that persists and is of concern should be discussed with parents, according to the protocol of your congregation's care and safety policies.

Concerning behaviors might include:

- self-injury
- destruction of property
- talk of hurting self or others
- aggression toward others
- eating nonfood items
- persistent crying
- leaving the group or building without an adult

You can use some of these strategies for sharing information about behavior:

- Find a quiet place to talk, away from other volunteers or children.

- Start with a positive comment: “I am having the best week with Addie! I am so glad she has joined our group.”
- Explain what you *saw* and what you *heard*: “I want you to know that today I noticed that Addie was sitting away from the group. When I walked closer to see what she was doing, I heard a crunching sound. She had a piece of crayon in her mouth and was chewing it.”
- Explain what you *did*: “I approached her from the front so she could see me and told her that it was time to spit out the crayon. She resisted at first, but I gave her a choice between spitting it out in the classroom or going to the restroom. She chose the restroom and spit it out there. She rinsed out her mouth and returned to class.”
- Allow the parents to respond. They might have questions or express embarrassment about the child’s behavior. Reassure them that all kids display unique behaviors from time to time, and that you and your team are not upset or angry.
- Be aware that some parents may become defensive or angry, or they may use humor to brush off the event. If that is the case, remain quiet and simply restate that you wanted them to be aware of what happened and how it was handled.
- Consider following up with the parent via phone or e-mail to check in, offer reassurance, and remind the child and parent how excited you’ll be to see them the following day.

### **Report an Incident of Aggressive Behavior**

When a child physically hurts another child or an adult, parents need to be notified as quickly as possible. As with other behavioral incidents, the reporting should be objective. Take care to describe the events that occurred before, during, and after the incident. This will give parents an idea of what may have triggered the event. In addition, the details can be helpful for all involved so that a plan can be made to prevent a similar incident from occurring.

Here are some guidelines for communicating with parents about an aggressive episode:

- Find a quiet place to talk, away from other children and volunteers.
- Include a church staff member in the discussion.
- Describe the incident in terms of what happened before, during, and after the event.
- Tell only what you *saw* and *heard*; refrain from sharing your opinions.

Say *this*: “When we were working on a craft, Lucy wanted the red crayon. She tried to take it out of another child’s hand, and he pulled away. Then Lucy stood up, grabbed a pair of scissors, and threw them at the other student. The scissors did not hit him. She picked up a pencil, but did not throw it. Our high school volunteer grabbed the pencil from her, and I told Lucy to come with me. She knocked over her chair with her hand and then ran out of the room. She went into the lobby and hid under a couch. She stayed there for about five minutes and then came back to the classroom with me.”

Not *this*: “Lucy was working on a craft and just couldn’t wait her turn for the red crayon, so she got nasty and launched a pair of scissors at Byron. Then she took a pencil and aimed it right at him. Our volunteer got the pencil, and then I told Lucy to come with me. She just would not mind me. She never does. She raced into the lobby. She is too old to be acting like this!”

- Allow the parent to respond. Reassure the person that you understand some days can be difficult, and that you still care very much about the child and family.
- If your congregation has a specific policy about aggression, review this with the family. Hopefully, this kind of policy has already been explained to parents prior to any incidents occurring.
- Ask the parent to join you in making a plan for the following day. Ask questions about what works at school and at home during incidents such as these. Inquire about what might be most helpful.
- Reassure the parents (and the child!) of your forgiveness and understanding.
- Follow up with a phone call that evening to check in with the family, answer any questions, and touch base about a plan for the following day.