A NOTE FOR OUR CHURCH LEADERS

Bringing Special Friends to our church

A simple way to welcome children with disabilities and their families, started at Stillwater Church in Dayton, Ohio, and free for any church to use.

1 in 3
families of children with disabilities have left at least one church because their child was not included or welcomed.
Church4EveryChild

46.6%
of these parents have skipped a church activity because their child was not welcomed.
Church4EveryChild

86.5%
of these families who do attend say their church needs more disability training.
Church4EveryChild

80 to 85%
of churches are estimated to have no special needs ministry of any kind.
The Banquet Network

What it is

Each child with a disability gets a buddy, a caring person from the congregation who stays with them through the Sunday school hour. There's a calm place to take a break, and the week's Bible lesson is adapted so each child can take part. Parents get to sit in worship knowing their child is safe and loved.

> **"We need to modify the structure, not modify the kids."**
> Sue Hey, founder of Special Friends

What it takes

People with a heart for it
A few people willing to spend an hour with a child and get to know their family.

A pastor who backs it
A leader who helps bring the church along.

One person who feels called
Often it's the person who first brought the idea up.

What families find at a welcoming church

- A buddy your child knows, who stays with them the whole hour
- A quiet space for when the room gets too loud
- Lessons adapted to how your child learns
- Someone who asks what your child loves and what calms them
- A building your child can get into and get around in
- Acceptance of the ways your child is different

Common worries, briefly

What about behavior?

This is the most common worry. Traditional children's ministry assumes every child can sit, listen, do a craft and wait for a snack. Many children don't fit that mold. The fix is to change how the hour is set up. Give them a buddy who knows them, a place to take breaks, and shorter lessons with more movement.

We don't have special education experts.

You don't need them. Stillwater's buddies have included retirees, teenagers, college students and a car mechanic with no experience at all.

We're a small church.

A small church can do this well. If one child comes, you need one buddy.

Won't this be expensive?

A sensory room can start as a corner with a tent, some pillows and a bin of rice (watch closely, since some children put things in their mouths). Ask your congregation for outgrown toys and furniture.

How a church starts

1. Pray
2. Talk with your pastor
3. Bring the congregation along
4. Find your first buddy
5. Start small and keep it simple
6. Train your team and tell your church
7. Get to know each family
8. Write one sentence about why you're doing this
9. Shape it around the families you actually have
10. Get the word out
11. Reach out to local colleges
12. Give people with disabilities ways to serve

"I promise you that you are not going to feel like you have every single step in place before you start this. But if the Lord is calling you, I believe the Lord will raise up the right leadership. It might just be one or two people right off the bat."

Jon Ferguson, pastor at Stillwater Church when Special Friends began

Where to learn more. specialfriendsministry.com has training videos, answers to the questions pastors ask most, a printable ministry plan, and a two-minute "Is your church ready?" check. Sue Hey, who started Special Friends, is glad to talk with any church: ot4jesus@aol.com.