Special Friends Ministry

STARTER GUIDE

Welcoming children with disabilities at your church

How Special Friends works, how to start one, and the checklists to do it with. Free for any church to use and share.

Everything here, plus training videos and planning tools, is at **specialfriendsministry.com**. Questions: Sue Hey, ot4jesus@aol.com

What Special Friends is

Special Friends is a simple way for any church to welcome children with disabilities. Each child gets a buddy who stays by their side, a calm place to reset, and Bible lessons that fit how they learn. Parents get to worship knowing their child is safe and loved.

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

How it started

Sue Hey is a school occupational therapist. In meeting after meeting, she heard parents say their family had been made to feel unwelcome at church. Some were even asked not to come back.

In 2011 Sue attended a Joni and Friends Family Retreat, a week where families of children with disabilities are simply loved on. She went back three years in a row and came home each time wanting her own church to offer that same welcome.

In 2014 Sue told her pastor she felt called to start a ministry for these families. They agreed to pray about it and plan for the fall. The next Sunday, a family visited with a little girl in a wheelchair. Pastor Jon Ferguson spotted Sue across the lobby and told her, "I think we're going to start right now." A young woman became the girl's buddy, the two became friends, and Special Friends began.

Since then, Stillwater has had a buddy ready every Sunday. Families who were turned away elsewhere found a home, and they told their friends. Other churches asked for help starting their own, and several now run Special Friends their own way. This site shares what Sue has learned so your church can do the same.

What we believe

Every person bears the image of God. Regardless of how a person communicates, learns, moves or behaves, they were created on purpose and belong in the body of Christ.

People with disabilities serve too. Everyone has gifts the church needs. Adults with disabilities from the congregation have helped build a Habitat for Humanity home, using work tables adapted for wheelchairs.

Every child sets the pace. Some children join the group right away. Others need time, a smaller setting or a break first. Lessons are adapted so each child can learn the same truth in the way that works for them.

Fun is part of the plan. When a child loves coming to church, the whole family gets to come.

Buddies get something out of it too. Buddies come to love a child and often find more patience and a closer walk with God along the way. It's a way to be the hands and feet of Jesus at your own church. As one pastor put it, "In some ways they understand Jesus better than any of us."

Why this matters

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

A basic program is enough to start. When Special Friends surveyed its families, every one said they were very satisfied once even a basic program was in place. You can make a real difference before everything is figured out.

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.

"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

How it works

The same caring adult stays with each child through the Sunday school hour. Depending on the child and the day, that looks like one of three things.

INCLUSION

In the regular classroom

The child joins the children's ministry program with their buddy beside them to help.

MODIFIED

Adapted activities

When a large group is too much, the buddy leads the same lesson one-on-one in a calmer setting.

SENSORY ROOM

A place to reset

For children who get overwhelmed easily, a room designed to meet their sensory needs.

A short, predictable hour built around the child

1

Arrive

Some children settle in the sensory room first. Others go right to class with their buddy.

2

See the plan

A picture schedule shows what's coming, so changes feel safe.

3

Move

About 5 min

A movement warm-up: a hallway obstacle course, Simon Says or simple yoga.

4

Bible time

15 to 20 min

The week's Bible lesson, adapted with pictures, music and hands-on activities.

5

Free time

The child picks a picture card to choose what to play for the rest of the hour.

Moving toward the classroom

Each child starts where they are and moves toward the classroom when ready. Step 1 is the most support. Step 5 is in the classroom.

Step 1: Sensory room	For a child who does best starting in a calm space. The goal is to work toward the classroom gradually, using the other levels as steps.
Step 2: Specialized lesson with sensory breaks	For a child who does better away from the big group. The buddy teaches the lesson one-on-one in a separate, calm, predictable space.
Step 3: Large group, specialized instruction	For a child who can stay in class with modified activities. Activities are adjusted to the child's level physically, emotionally or intellectually.
Step 4: Large group with sensory breaks	For a child who does well in class with regular breaks. The buddy watches for signs a break is needed, in or out of the room.
Step 5: Large group / classroom	For a child who can take part fully with a buddy nearby. Encourage full participation in the classroom whenever possible.

Buddies

A buddy is a steady friend who helps a child take part in church. Buddies have been retirees, teenagers, college students and a car mechanic who had never done anything like it. Most say they got as much out of it as the child did.

If you've wanted a way to serve and haven't found the right fit, this is a simple one. You come on Sunday like you already do, spend the hour with one child, and get to be the hands and feet of Jesus at your own church.

What a buddy provides

- Discipleship
- Friendship
- Safety
- Communication with parents

What makes a great buddy

- A growing relationship with Christ
- A willingness to learn
- A desire to serve

Six ways to adapt any lesson

From Libby, the occupational therapy student who built Stillwater's adapted curriculum.

Keep it fun. Nobody wants to go somewhere they don't feel welcome. That goes double for kids.

Same concept, different level. Teach the same truth as the rest of the class, made a little easier or a little harder for each child.

Have a buddy nearby. Someone the child knows who can step in when things get hard.

Large group or small. Some kids thrive in a big, energetic room. Others do best with one or two friends and fewer distractions.

Keep kids with kids. Time with same-age friends is good for everyone in the room.

Ask the parents. They know what their child loves, what sets them off, and what to do if there's a meltdown.

Questions church leaders ask

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. When a buddy knows a child tends to run, they're ready for it.

The right match matters too. Stillwater had one boy who would sometimes hit, and it took the right person to stay calm with him. The church asked a car mechanic, a big, gentle man who loves kids, to be his buddy. The two became best friends, and the boy's behavior changed when he was around him.

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. As Pastor Jon put it, "They weren't all professionals, and I don't think you need professionals. They had a big heart and were willing to learn and try new things." What makes a great buddy is a relationship with Christ, a willingness to learn and a desire to serve. The training videos and the buddy tip sheet cover the rest.

What if a child disrupts the service?

It will happen now and then. One Stillwater boy occasionally slipped away from his class, ran to the worship center and came up front to help with the sermon. The pastor made a joke, everyone laughed, and the service went on. The church had decided ahead of time that this is part of who they are, so nobody treated it as a crisis. Then they adjusted so it didn't happen every week. A few children also loved pulling fire alarms, so the church bought alarm covers. Decide now that small disruptions are part of church life, and most of them stop feeling like a big deal.

We're a small church.

A small church can do this well. If one child comes, you need one buddy. Add more as more children come.

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. See the sensory room checklist for a budget-friendly list.

What if volunteers don't show up?

Build a small team so no one has to serve every week. Give each child two or three buddies they know and rotate them. Sue schedules buddies this way so the child always sees a familiar face and nobody burns out. Look for each person's gift, too. Not everyone needs to be a buddy. Some people can meet with new families, train other volunteers, build, set up, or pray. A one-time event, like a respite night for families, is an easy way for someone to try serving before they commit to Sundays. Since 2014, Stillwater has never had a Sunday without a buddy.

How do we keep children safe?

Screen buddies the same way you screen any children's volunteer, including background checks, and follow your church's child safety policy. Before a child's first Sunday, ask parents about medical needs, allergies, bathroom help, what calms their child, and what to do if their child runs or has a hard moment. If a child runs, follow calmly and call for another adult. Buddies never restrain a child.

Will it make a difference?

Parents tell Sue it changes their whole week. Most buddies say they get more out of it than they give. When Stillwater started a prom for people with disabilities, so many church members wanted to help that by the third year they had to close sign-ups early.

Getting started

Start small, with the part you can do well. One buddy is enough to start. A second means nobody has to serve every week.

- [ ] **Pray**
  Ask God to lead the ministry and open doors.
- [ ] **Talk with your pastor**
  A pastor who backs it helps bring the whole church along.
- [ ] **Bring the congregation along**
  Help the whole church see these families as their own.
- [ ] **Find your first buddy**
  One is enough to start. A second means nobody has to serve every week.
- [ ] **Start small and keep it simple**
  One family and one buddy is a real start.
- [ ] **Train your team and tell your church**
  Consider a Disability Awareness Sunday, a service that celebrates people with disabilities.
- [ ] **Get to know each family**
  Start with a short "About my child" conversation.
- [ ] **Write one sentence about why you're doing this**
- [ ] **Shape it around the families you actually have**
  Every church's version will look a little different.
- [ ] **Get the word out**
  A one-time respite event lets people help without a long commitment, and brings families in.
- [ ] **Reach out to local colleges**
  Students in education and therapy programs make great buddies. Offer to write them recommendation letters in return.
- [ ] **Give people with disabilities ways to serve**
  Greeting, worship, service projects. Everyone has gifts to give.

Can everyone get in and take part?

Walk your church with these questions. Some barriers are physical, like steps and narrow doors. Others are attitudes.

- [ ] Accessible parking spaces and signs, on paved lots
- [ ] Accessible entrances and restrooms
- [ ] Ramp, elevator or chairlift, and an automatic door
- [ ] Doorways to all spaces at least 36 inches wide
- [ ] Large print bulletins
- [ ] Hearing assistance devices
- [ ] Programs for people with learning disabilities
- [ ] Support for people with mental health needs
- [ ] Fire and severe weather exits that work for everyone
- [ ] **Covers on fire alarm pulls**
  Some children love to pull them. Covers cost about $60 each.
- [ ] **Disability Awareness Sunday each year**
  A service that celebrates people with disabilities.
- [ ] **Training on respectful language and welcome**
  For ushers, greeters and teachers.
- [ ] Gluten-free communion bread
- [ ] Awareness of food, bee sting and fragrance allergies
- [ ] Care for caregivers, siblings and family members

A sensory room on a church budget

A sensory room is a calm place for a child who is overwhelmed by noise, light, smells or crowds. Children can use it for a short break or stay as long as they need. It can be a whole room or a corner. Pick a quieter spot away from windows so you can control the light.

Keep costs down

- Make a list of what you'd like and ask the congregation to sponsor items one at a time. One church got everything on its list this way.
- Ask for toys and furniture families' kids have outgrown.
- Skip the sensory catalogs. Most of this is cheaper at regular stores.
- Rice or dried beans in a plastic tub make a sensory bin. A small tent with pillows makes a quiet hideaway.
- If you can afford two bigger items, Sue recommends a ball pit and a hanging swing, hung by someone who knows how. Both calm a child who needs quiet and help a child who needs to move.
- Keep it uncluttered. Store extras in labeled bins out of sight.

What to put in it

Movement

- Platform swing or hammock
- Mini trampoline
- Spinning seat (sit and spin)
- Scooter board (a low rolling board to lie on)
- Parachute
- Rocking chair

Calming

- Weighted blanket or lap pad
- Tunnel or tent to crawl into
- Mat with pillows and blankets
- Soft music or headphones
- Ball pit
- Safe chew toys and things to touch

Touch

- Bins of beans, rice or lentils with hidden objects
- Sensory board or wall
- Slime or cornstarch mixture
- Soft brushes
- Fidgets, koosh balls, gel bags
- Bubble wrap

Visual

- Glitter and gel bottles
- Light-up toys
- Bubble or lava lamp
- Spinning toys
- Puzzles
- Visual timer and picture schedules

Sound

- Musical toys
- Pop tubes
- Toy xylophone
- Sound machine or white noise
- Slow, steady worship music

Calming or energizing?

Some children need to settle down. Others need to wake up their bodies before they can focus. Ask parents what works at home.

Calming

- Gentle, firm squeezes down the arms (ask first)
- Weighted vest or blanket
- Sitting in a bean bag chair
- Carry, push or pull something heavy, like a crate of books
- Wall or chair push-ups
- Stress ball, putty or fidgets
- Slow, rhythmic swinging
- Soft music and dim lights

Energizing

- Frog jumps or animal walks
- Mini trampoline (supervised)
- Rocking or balancing on a wobble board
- Quick starts and stops
- Upbeat, faster music
- Bins of rice or beans to dig through
- Brighter lighting
- Cold water or a crunchy snack (check allergies first)

Try it: Dots. A calming technique that takes under a minute. With permission from the parent and the child, gently but firmly press your thumb into the child's open palm for 2 to 3 seconds. Make nine presses in a circle, then the tenth in the center. Repeat on the other hand.

FOR BUDDIES

When a child is struggling

Behavior is communication. When a child stops doing what the group is doing, they're usually telling you something is too much: the noise, the lights, a change in the routine, or someone moving too fast. Your job is to read the signal and give them a way out.

Signs a break is needed

Most hard moments give warning. Learn what it looks like for the child you're with. Common signs:

- Rocking or pacing
- Covering ears or eyes
- Making more noise than usual
- Flapping hands or fidgeting more
- Hitting or biting themselves
- Getting very quiet or turning away
- Heading for the door

When you see them, act early. A walk in the hallway, a few minutes in the sensory room, or just a quieter corner often stops things before they build. Pointing to the picture schedule helps too, because it reminds the child that this part will end and something better is coming.

If a child has a meltdown

- **Stay calm.** Your voice and body set the temperature. Speak slowly and quietly, or not at all.
- **Make the space safe.** Give the child room, and move anything that could hurt.
- **Don't talk them through it.** Questions and reasoning are more for an overwhelmed child to take in. Wait.
- **Never hold a child down.** If you ever feel you'd need to, call another adult instead. Churches that want more preparation can look into crisis prevention training, often called CPI.
- **Afterward, don't make it a big deal.** Offer water, a quiet activity, and a fresh start. Tell the parents what happened and what seemed to help.

If a child runs

- Follow calmly. Running after a child at speed usually makes them run faster.
- Know your exits before the first Sunday. Keep outside doors closed and ask another adult to watch them.
- Most children run because they're overwhelmed. Once they're safe, think about what set it off and change it next week.
- A picture schedule helps here too. It shows the child that church ends at a certain point and they will go home.

If a child doesn't want to join in

- Don't force it. Pushing usually turns a no into a meltdown.
- Try a "first, then" card: first this short thing, then the thing they like.
- Offer a smaller version of the activity, or a job. Handing out supplies or holding the picture counts as taking part.
- If they'd rather watch from the edge of the room, let them. Children take in more than you think.

Talk with the parents. Parents know what calms their child and what sets them off. Ask, and ask again as you get to know the child. Make it clear you're asking because you want their child there and want Sunday to go well. Every child can be loved, cared for and supported during their hour at church.

FOR BUDDIES AND TEACHERS

Sensory strategies in the classroom

Many children take in the world louder, brighter and faster than the rest of us. A regular classroom can be a lot. These are small changes that help a child stay in the room with everyone else, and most of them help the other kids too.

For the whole room

- Use a picture schedule and point to it often. Knowing what's next lowers stress for everyone.
- Break up sitting time with movement. Act out part of the story, stand up for a song, or do ten wall push-ups between activities.
- Offer more than one way to sit: a carpet square to mark personal space, a wobble cushion, a beanbag, or lying on the floor for a story.
- Keep fidgets in a basket for anyone who needs something in their hands.
- Don't rush. A child who's hurried is a child who's about to be overwhelmed.
- Give the child who can't sit a job: pass out supplies, hold the picture, be the helper.
- Set up a quiet corner, even just a pop-up tent with a pillow. Make clear it's a place to reset, never a punishment.

Sound

- Use a quiet, calm voice for instructions, and fewer words.
- Get the child's attention before you give a direction. Have them say it back to you if that helps.
- Let a child wear headphones if the room gets loud.
- Soft music or white noise in the background smooths out sudden sounds.
- Split tennis balls on chair legs stop the scraping that bothers some children more than you'd guess.

Sight

- Fluorescent lights bother many children. Use natural light or lamps when you can, or add fabric covers made for fluorescent fixtures.
- Keep walls and tables uncluttered. Busy rooms are hard to settle in.
- Seat the child away from windows and doors, near the front.
- Use bright, colorful lesson materials so the thing you want them to look at is the most interesting thing in the room.
- A visual timer shows how long until the next thing.

Movement

- Build movement into the lesson: jumping, marching, Simon Says, acting out a Bible character.
- Pushing, pulling and carrying calm the body. Let a restless child carry the crate of supplies, stack the chairs, or push against the wall.
- Rocking chairs and swings settle some children and wake up others. Ask the parents which their child needs.
- Play dough and squishy toys give the hands something to do and the body something to settle with.
- A short walk in the hallway is a sensory break. It doesn't have to be the sensory room.

Mouth

- Let children keep a water bottle, ideally one with a straw. Sucking through a straw is calming for many kids.
- Ask parents whether their child uses a chew toy or a snack to settle. Chewy and crunchy foods both help, with the family's okay and an allergy check.

FOR TEACHERS

Adapting any Sunday school lesson

You don't need a separate curriculum. Take the lesson you already have and teach the same truth at more than one level. Here's how Stillwater does it.

Before Sunday

- **Find the one idea.** Every lesson has a key concept. Write it in one short sentence a young child could repeat. Everything else serves that sentence.
- **Plan for more than one way to learn.** Most lessons are built for listeners. Add something to see, something to touch and something to do.
- **Check the plan a few days ahead.** Small changes can happen Sunday morning, but the lesson itself should be ready before the week ends.
- **Ask the parents what works at school.** If a child already uses a picture schedule or a first-then card, use the same one. They'll know it. If not, make one here .

During the lesson

- **Keep it short.** Teach in blocks of a few minutes with movement or quiet time between them. Fifteen to twenty minutes of lesson is plenty.
- **Act it out.** Simple props and costumes turn a story into something a child can be part of. A flannel board does the same for the child who'd rather watch.
- **Use music.** A song carries a concept better than a paragraph.
- **Same concept, different level.** While one child writes a sentence, another draws it, another points to the picture, and another holds the felt piece. Everyone learned the same thing.
- **Let the buddy help.** Guiding hands, breaking a craft into one step at a time, or sitting slightly apart with the same materials.
- **Pair the child with a peer.** Another child who models what to do is often better than an adult telling them.
- **Keep it predictable.** Same order every week. The routine is part of the lesson.

Large group or small

Some children do best in the big, energetic room. Others need two or three kids and fewer distractions. Plan activities that work either way, so you can move a child between settings without starting over. Time with same-age friends matters for everyone in the room, so don't separate a child more than they need.

Above all. Make sure the child feels welcome and valued as part of the class. A child who loves coming back will learn far more than one who sat perfectly still once.

Buddy tip sheet



Print one for every buddy.

1. Greet your special friend by name in a calm voice. Get down to their eye level.
2. Tell them what you'll be doing next. Knowing what's coming lowers anxiety.
3. Give a heads-up before every change of activity. A picture schedule or timer helps.
4. If noise or movement is building up, take a walk in the hallway or visit the sensory room.
5. Encourage them to join in, but keeping them happy and safe matters more. Take a break and try again.
6. Guide their hands with yours only if they welcome it. Some children don't like to be touched, so work within their comfort level.
7. Keep instructions short and clear. Fewer words are easier to follow.
8. Eye contact is hard for many children with autism. They are still listening.

Never restrain a child. If things escalate, stay calm, give them space and ask another leader for help.

You are a blessing. Thank you for giving your time to serve children and families with disabilities.

Resources we trust

Organizations

- **Joni and Friends**
  Sue brought the idea for Special Friends home from their Family Retreat.
  www.joniandfriends.org
- **Church4EveryChild**
  Research and resources on including children with special needs.
  church4everychild.org
- **The Banquet Network**
  A network of churches doing disability ministry.
  www.thebanquetnetwork.com
- **National Down Syndrome Society**
  Information and support for families and churches.
  ndss.org
- **CDC: Autism Spectrum Disorder**
  Plain-language facts about autism.
  www.cdc.gov/autism

Books

- **Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship**
  Barbara J. Newman
- **Including People with Disabilities in Faith Communities**
  Erik W. Carter
- **Disability and the Gospel**
  Michael S. Beates
- **The Church and People with Disabilities**
  Peggy A. Johnson

Talk with Sue. Sue Hey has helped several churches start their own Special Friends ministry and is glad to help yours, wherever you are. Email ot4jesus@aol.com or use the form at specialfriendsministry.com/contact.html. The site also has training videos, a printable ministry plan, a picture schedule maker, and an "All About Me" page parents can fill out for their child's buddy.