Working with children with special needs

• Value every child as an individual. Before the start, find out as much as possible about them – their likes and dislikes, strengths and limitations. Then you will know how best to include them and make them feel safe.

• Prepare each session with a range of abilities in mind. Think carefully about working with abstract ideas. These may be misunderstood and taken literally! Have a range of craft ideas. Check that you do not give a child with learning difficulties a task that is appropriate for their reading age but inappropriate for their actual age. In other words, make sure that pictures and other aids are age-appropriate.

• Give all children opportunities to join in activities. Some children with special needs may have distinctive areas of interest or talents that you can encourage. As far as possible, keep children with disabilities with their own peer group.

• If you have a child with hearing difficulties, make sure they sit near the front and that they can see the speaker’s face clearly (not lit from behind). If a loop system is available, check that it is working for the child. Discussion in small groups can be hard for deaf children. Try to reduce background noise.

• Pay attention to any medical needs noted on the registration form, particularly any medication they take. Keep a record of any medication given, initialled by the first-aider and another team member.

• Designate leaders to work one-to-one with children with challenging behaviour. Where appropriate, set up a buddy system so that they work closely with a peer.

• Expect good behaviour from all children, but be tolerant of unusual behaviour. For example, some children need to fiddle with something in their hands.

• Ensure that all the children know what is planned for the day. Give the children a five minute warning when an activity is about to finish. Some children need to finish one activity before they can concentrate on another.
Mission impossible?

Including children with disabilities

Recently I was delighted to receive this news:
‘One 8-year-old in our group (who we will call Grace) has multiple needs – she is unable to sit or stand unaided and has no speech. Grace loves music and anything visual or tactile so we try to incorporate activities of this type into the programme and ensure that she is always positioned so that she can watch what is going on. The other children are very fond of her and accept her without any problem. They were very concerned when she was in hospital recently.

Grace attends a special school and on a Monday she always takes whatever we have been doing on the Sunday into school. Her mother writes an explanatory note for the teachers and this is then used as the basis for the week’s RE lesson! On one occasion the teachers told Grace’s mum that they had been looking on the Internet to find out more about Abraham as they didn’t know the story! We have now started buying an extra copy of the material we use to send to the school.’ Grace is an example of how all children can be a natural part of our groups and play an important role in extending God’s kingdom to others!

So, how can those of us involved in children’s work help the variety of individual children with differing needs and abilities to know God? And in particular, how can we help those with no background experience of church to feel welcome, to belong and to want to join a group or club? We want to include them, but the challenge to understand them, and their needs, can make even thinking about it difficult. I’ve worked for several years with children with severe learning difficulties and I’m still learning from the children I meet. Working with a mixed group has many challenges but it does come with rewards as well. Anyone working with the group can learn much about themselves and others through the act of including all. This article offers some ideas to start you off on your adventure or to help you in what you are already doing.

What do we mean by children with disabilities?
The term ‘disability’ can include impairments to the senses, language and communication and learning. Some children will have more than one disability, but never presume that because a child has a physical disability they also have a learning disability. You will need to find out about the individuals you are working with and look at the child before you think of their particular disabilities. Different children will have different strengths and weaknesses and therefore will be able to contribute more or need more help in different areas.

Aims of the mission
Parents of children with disabilities may find it difficult to come to terms with their child’s difficulties and the demands that are made on their emotions, time and energy. Some of them will have searched a long time, trying many churches, to find a supporting, accepting and loving church environment. These families desperately need a place to belong; a place that will love and embrace their children just as they are, complete with physical, learning or behavioural disabilities. By showing we care about their child we are extending our care to them. But of course, ultimately we are there for the children themselves. Children with disabilities are as important, individual and human as the rest of us and just as able to make a response to a God who loves them, even if their response may not be in a traditional form! Like any of us they need to be shown that they are precious to God, just as they are.
Equipped for mission

Basic kit
It’s impossible to give you all the answers for every child you may encounter as there is not one way that will work for all. You will need to carefully, and prayerfully, consider how best to show God’s love to individual children and look at how to make the activities accessible for them. Here are some ideas for best practice:

• Gather information from the parents and carers (or the child themselves) about the child – their likes/dislikes, particular abilities/difficulties etc. If parents or carers feel it is appropriate for you to contact their school, you may also want to talk to the child’s teacher about the ways that they help the child to understand, and maybe visit to see the way they do things.

• Use this information to build up a brief description of the child that can be shown to those working with them. This should be relevant and positive. It should give you an idea of what the child might find upsetting and allow you to take this into account when planning. For example, sudden loud noise may be painful for some children and result in distress.

• If the child and parents agree, devise a way to allocate a ‘buddy’ to work with the children who need one to one help. This may mean drawing up a rota for helpers. Try to keep the number of adults rostered to help a particular child to a minimum, eg two working alternate weeks. If the group is older their ‘buddy’ could be another member of the group.

• Provide some training on disability for those involved in children’s work.

• Work as a team (children’s workers, helpers and parents) discovering what is and is not working and share that with others who work with them.

• It’s best, wherever possible, to include children in the child’s peer group. Make sure you have enough helpers, not just one assigned to the child with a disability.

• Have a church policy on inclusion of those with disabilities.

Ground rules

• Don’t worry if all the children are not engaged in group activities at all times. It’s fine if a child is doing something different with an adult elsewhere, rather than being in a group that will make them anxious and potentially disruptive. Remember you are trying to show them what Jesus is like, which can be done by enjoying being with them, lying on the floor doing a puzzle and listening!

• Make sure that you are working somewhere that is physically accessible. This includes making areas clutter free.

• Some children will need routine, especially those with any degree of autism. For these children, ensure that they know what is about to happen – write it down or use photos or pictures to explain – tell them when the activity is coming to the end, and make sure they have the same working area or seat.

• If a child has hearing difficulties make sure they sit near the front so that they can see the leader’s face clearly and ensure that the leader does not have their back to the light. If the loop system is available, check that it is working for the child. Try to reduce background noise. Be aware that small-group discussion can be difficult for deaf children.

• Be aware of visual impairments and think about where a child should sit and how visual material is presented. Some pictures may be too busy for some children. Some children may need pictures or writing presented very close to them or to one side.
• Have rules on display that the children have contributed to, so they are clear about why they are needed. Make sure the children all know them and the consequences of breaking them – be consistent! Remember to praise good behaviour and show that you value contributions and participation at any level.

• Expect good behaviour from all children but be tolerant of unusual behaviour. For example, someone may be listening even though they are not looking, or doing something else. Some children may need to move about quite regularly. Understand that some unusual behaviours are part of disabilities and not just children being ‘naughty’. For example, when a child with Tourettes Syndrome has sudden outbursts of shouting your reaction can make a big difference – increased anxiety will increase the behaviour that is a part of the disability.

• If a child is displaying challenging behaviour, rather than give them attention, redirect them or change the activity. It is even better to pre-empt behaviour problems and give a favoured activity before they start displaying challenging behaviour. There may be jobs that the child can do to make them feel valuable and also to withdraw them from situations that they may find difficult to cope with, eg clearing up, making drinks or handing out newsletters.

• Build an environment where children feel free to ask questions. This includes asking about how and why others are different to themselves. This will stimulate healthy conversation that will help them to value and not fear others that are different. These questions are not always easy to answer, so it is best to talk simply and honestly with them and remember never to talk about a child with a disability as if they are not there.

Use your senses
Be creative about adapting activities or ideas, thinking about all the children in the group. Take a multi-sensory approach to your sessions – this will help many of the children. Have relevant and motivating things to look at, feel, listen to, smell and taste. Here are some ideas:

• Visual material, such as puppets, can capture attention and imagination as well as bring to life spoken words. Think about the size of puppets so that they can be seen but are not frightening. Carefully chosen pictures, posters and photos can all help to make spoken language clearer. Children can participate in telling stories using pictures on a magnetic board or fixed with Velcro.

• For children with visual impairment and/or profound disability, the use of objects and tactile aids can help them to make sense of what is happening. Object cues can be used to let them know what is happening, eg a tambourine may be given to them when it is time to sing, or a Duplo house when it’s time for them to be collected by their parent or carer. Craftwork and banners may be tactile.

• Or you could use different smells. Be creative – if a child’s mother uses a certain perfume, you could use this to remind the child of their mum. Perhaps the children could decide on a favourite smell to signify God who is love. If you choose to use aromatherapy oils, please check which ones are safe to use with your group.

• Building story boxes to go with Bible stories could bring stories alive for many children. For example, a box made for the story of Noah could include: a hammer, wood and nails, a boat, people, pairs of various animals, water spray, a bird, a leaf, a globe. When the story is told the props and sound effects can be used to create the environment.
• Many children with learning disability enjoy music and will like joining in singing times. Some may like to just ‘sing’, others may like to play an instrument such as a shaker or wave a flag. Action songs are good for all children as they can participate even if they cannot sing well. Songs with repetition and echoed lines can work well and can be great teaching tools for helping children remember God’s truths. Make sure action songs are appropriate for the age group you are working with, perhaps using recognised signs from British sign language or the Makaton signing system that is used in many special schools.

• Using food at relevant times can make Bible stories more memorable and provide aids to learning. For example when telling the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, have fish and bread. For another Bible passage you could actually make bread! Be aware of any food allergies the children have though.

• There are passages in the Bible that illustrate to us the importance of human touch. Jesus touched people who would have been shunned by society. Think about how touch could be used appropriately to illustrate your session. For example, could group members wash each other’s feet like Jesus washed the feet of his disciples? Be aware of what will work with your group and at all times consider child protection issues.

Mission underway

• Make the sessions as inclusive and accessible as possible. Prepare each session with a range of abilities in mind and give all children the opportunity to join in. Make the teaching relevant to them by relating it to their experiences.

• Be big in your body language, and use gestures and recognised signs to help gain attention and understanding.

• Too much spoken language can confuse children, so keep instructions short and simple, and don’t try to include too much teaching. Getting one or two main points across clearly is probably enough for each session. It may be the helper’s role to simplify the message for the child and make it appropriate for them.

• For the most part, activities are best kept short because attention spans in the group may not be long. However, for some children, leaving an activity before they are ready may be very difficult and even upsetting. If you know that this is the case for a child in your group, they should be allowed time to complete an activity whilst others move on.

• Avoid the use of abstract ideas and metaphors with children with learning disabilities as you would with younger children. These can be taken literally and create confusion. For example, ‘Jesus is the light!’ and ‘The only way to God is through Jesus!’

• Try to avoid making a child with a disability stick out. Have seating all at the same height if possible, and make helpers seem a part of the group and not attached to the child.

• Try to have a range of activities available on the same theme and age appropriate but requiring less developed skills. Make sure there are ‘hard’ and ‘easy’ tasks when doing a group activity.

• Unobtrusively, give children with learning and physical disabilities options about joining in – they may be happy to watch at times, they may want to do the same as everyone else, or they may prefer to do something similar which they find easier. Although a child may not be able to speak they could push a button to make something work, hold up a picture, or communicate using signs or gesture, eg during a drama activity.

• Some children may only be able to read at a low level or not at all. Those children with learning disabilities who read are often very proud to be able to do so and should be given opportunities to use this skill at their level within the sessions. Others may feel embarrassed and should not be singled out or made to feel different. It might be that when using written resources you could have a simplified version using less words and age appropriate pictures to help.
Mission achieved?
Friendship is vital for those with profound learning difficulties in order for them to understand God. For some children we might not ever know for sure what seeds have been sown and are growing. For some their eventual faith might be limited to knowing that God loves them, disabilities and all. This knowledge can and has brought about changes in the lives of many that are obvious to those close to them. Some children will never be able to make a usual response as this necessitates a more intellectual understanding and more communication skills than they have. However, as I watched a young person with a learning disability worshipping recently, and witnessed the joy with which she danced and waved her flag, I was in no doubt that she had found God for herself!

Denise Abrahall

Further resources
Top tips on Welcoming special children, Scripture Union (ISBN 978 1 84427 126 9)
Through the Roof – are an organisation helping to equip churches for inclusion. They produce leaflets and run training events.
Call them on: 01372 749955
Visit them at: www.throughtheroof.org
BUild – (Baptist Union Initiative with people with Learning Disabilities) have produced some simple books for young people with a low reading level.
Call them on: 01235 517700
Email them on: mailto:info@baptist.org.uk
Causeway Prospects – do a lot of work with adults with learning difficulties in groups set up around the country and have produced some resources.
Contact them at: Prospects, PO Box 351, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 7AL.
Call them on: 0118 950 8781
Visit them at: www.prospects.org.uk
Scripture Union – check out our en:able website for help with special needs.
Visit us at: www.scriptureunion.org.uk/enable
A Place Called Acceptance, Kathleen Deyer Bolduc, Bridge Resources, (ISBN 1 57895 098 8) is an easy to read resource guide.