



Five Ways Families Can Benefit From an Inclusive and Adaptive Church

By **Jeanetta Bryant**

WE WERE THE “LUCKY” ONES. WHEN OUR DAUGHTER WAS DIAGNOSED WITH A LAUNDRY LIST OF ACRONYMS AND LABELS, WE HAD THE SUPPORT OF A MATURE AND THRIVING SPECIAL NEEDS MINISTRY. WE FOUND PROGRAMS THAT WERE TAILOR-MADE FOR OUR CHILD AND ALLOWED US THE OPPORTUNITY AS A FAMILY TO ATTEND CHURCH REGULARLY. AS A MATTER OF FACT, GOD USED HER DIAGNOSIS TO BRING US BACK TO HIM. WITH A VOLUNTEER WHO SHOWED UP EVERY SUNDAY TO BE OUR DAUGHTER’S “BUDDY,” WE SUDDENLY FELT ACCOUNTABLE AND WERE DETERMINED TO SHOW UP CONSISTENTLY.

Showing up regularly ultimately led to me being baptized again as an adult and for us to create a nonprofit that helps parents, pastors, and teachers find the resources to help children with special needs be their best.

I am steadfast in believing the church is a huge factor in helping children and families impacted by special needs reach their full potential, and I have listed five reasons.

- 1. Community:** Isolation is a *real thing*. So many families feel they can no longer attend church, ballgames, recitals, plays, festivals, or other community events because they have a child who may act out, elope, cause a distraction, or, worst of all—harm themselves. It is true this role as a special needs parent can and will be isolating at times, which is even more reason for a church to create a program of support for these families to have time with the community where they can interact, and their child can be cared for. The beauty of social settings not only allows us to understand we are not alone but that there are others on this journey too. It creates an atmosphere where our kids (who may lack social skills) can learn proper engagement behaviors.
- 2. Child friendships:** We often seek other families who understand our unique situations. The church is often positioned to bring families together and create friendship opportunities for children who struggle to engage in traditional friendships. Many of our kids may not converse or

play as we did when we were children, but there are benefits to them participating in “parallel play” and simply sharing space with someone else. These moments allow for growth with other children and in knowledge of God.

- 3. Respite for parents:** One of the most common practices for families with children with special needs is to either alternate who stays home with the child while the other attends church or skip it entirely. This is devastating. Parents need the ability to focus on themselves, to take a break from being the constant caregiver, to replenish their mental and physical capacity. When a church offers a ministry that cares for the child, the parent can relax. They can practice “self-care,” even if only for an hour or so on Sunday. If parents can take time together, it can impact the dynamic in the home, create stronger marriages and relationships, and ultimately help them be better caregivers to the child.
- 4. Love and encouragement:** Who doesn’t need love and encouragement? It is a daily struggle to manage medical care, therapy options, and educational support, along with the emotional toll of worry for the future. Even the best parents will confess that even if they can keep focused on the positive, they still have hard days. When a church family comes together, love and encouragement are a tangible product. There is safety in saying your worries aloud and having others come to your aid. Knowing someone is praying for you and that they care has a pow-



er all its own. The church may not understand or fully appreciate your daily tasks, but they can sympathize and show you they care. On hard days, that is a lifeline!

5. **A deeper relationship with God:** Ultimately, the real “lifeline” is a relationship with God. He is the one who understands, cares about, and fully loves you. The church can provide some benefits of knowing God, but the reality is that once you have the time and capability of knowing your child is cared for, then you can focus on learning about God, deepening your relationship with Him, and start understanding a new perspective. You have a purpose, you matter, and you were created with intention—

so was your child. Find the time. Find a church that can support you or encourage your church to build a program. You are worth it. Your family is worth it, and you have the potential to help others in ways you can’t imagine.

I say all of this to you because these are ways we have personally benefited from a strong Access Ministry program. After countless conversations with other parents, I have found these truths are in their lives too. I wish you the peace and joy that can be found in a church program and a better relationship with God.



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