

# Little Ones to Him Belong

**Making church a welcoming place for all children, including those with special needs.**

JENNY RAE ARMSTRONG



**R**AISING A CHILD with special needs is gut-wrenchingly difficult. But taking a child with special needs to church can be almost as harrowing, a reality I encountered firsthand when my son began exhibiting signs of autism.

Jamison was sixteen months old when my husband left his youth pastor position to take a job with a parachurch organization, moving our young family half a state away. A bright, happy toddler with a Gerber-baby grin and a head full of thick, golden ringlets, Jamison had always been a good baby, content to tag along to ministry events, gaze at his toys, and be passed uncomplainingly from baby lover to baby lover.

That's why the complaints I got from the nursery workers at our new church were such a shock. Jamison had flung handfuls of soil from the potted ficus all over the floor. He dumped buckets of Legos over his head. He refused to listen to the childcare workers, wouldn't even acknowledge them with a glance, and would hit, kick, or bite anyone who came within arm's length of him.

I apologized profusely, chalked his behavior up to stress from the move, and waited for things to get better. They didn't.

It wasn't long before I began seeing the behaviors the nursery workers described at home. My sweet toddler had been transformed into a whirling dervish who demolished everything in his path, shredding cherished books, twisting himself up in the curtains, and smearing the walls with unmentionable substances. He ignored my pleas and threats, acting as if he couldn't hear me, but he clearly wasn't deaf. Certain sounds, such as a toilet flushing, would make him clap his hands over his ears and start screaming. Even bedtime didn't provide respite—I would lie awake in the middle of the night, listening to Jamison run back and forth across his room, wondering how it was possible for a child to survive on so little sleep.

Jamison's bizarre behaviors were brutally exhausting, but it was his screaming jags that really frightened me. My precious, curly-headed baby would scream inconsolably, eyes glassed over and limbs flailing, as unable to express what was tormenting him as I was to comfort him. All I could do was hold him tight so he couldn't hurt himself, sit on the floor, and rock him and sob until he

stopped, sometimes half an hour later.

I had never been so terrified, and I had never felt so alone.

The advice, or rather judgment, that we received from the nursery workers at our new church was crushing and ineffectual: "Well, discipline begins in the home, dear." I left the church every week in tears—finally, we stopped going. It was just too difficult for everyone—for Jamison, for the workers, for me.

Nowadays, Jamison's autism would have been recognized more quickly. Even so, knowing what the problem is does not necessarily make it any easier to deal with. The intensive needs and difficult behaviors presented by children with special needs tend to isolate their families, cutting them off from help and support they so desperately need. Spend enough time talking with affected families and the horror stories will begin to pour out—preschoolers being banned from Sunday school, parents being blamed for their children's disabilities, even pastors attempting to perform exorcisms on people with autism or cerebral palsy.

When our second child was born, we moved back to northwestern Wisconsin to be closer to family and the support they provided. My husband took a position as music

director at Lakeview Covenant Church in Duluth, Minnesota, and Jamison was taken under the wing of "Grandma Marilyn," a feisty retired special-education teacher who trailed him around the church, and took him to McDonald's or the park down the road when things got too hairy. The fierce, protective love Marilyn Norenberg showed my son was like a cup of cool water offered to my parched soul—somebody loved my creative, cantankerous little boy enough to put action to her convictions. Somebody loved him for who he was.

Eventually, my husband left his position at Lakeview to start a music business, and we returned to my home church, Mission Covenant Church in Poplar, Wisconsin. That's when I got reacquainted with Cindy Nelson.

Cindy Nelson's involvement with children's ministries began in 1988, when her husband, Darrell, accepted a pastoral call to Mission Covenant. Averaging seventy-five people in weekly attendance, the church didn't have a staffed nursery.

"One of our children has disability issues, and one of the things that

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was impacting her at the time was just hyperactivity. As a mom, I was looking at the situation thinking, you know what? Something is going to have to change here, or church is going to become a very negative experience for her. And me!” she said, laughing. “But mostly for her, that was my concern.”

Nelson, a physical therapist who specializes in working with special needs children, teamed up with another woman in the church to start a nursery, and she has been engaged in children’s ministries ever since.

“My passion is children’s ministries. I just see it as a huge link to the community. It can be an evangelistic tool—just the way you can impact children’s lives and family’s lives. And that includes families who have kids with special needs, if it’s done right.”

Evidently, Mission Covenant did something right. The tiny country church blossomed into a thriving regional church, and has gained the reputation of being a positive, affirming place for children with special

needs and their families. Nelson’s professional expertise, combined with her personal experience as a parent, has played a large part in making that happen.

“You need to have a strong children’s ministry. That’s key. And then as you strive to meet the needs of kids within that ministry who have special needs, the whole ministry gets better. I believe God blesses that effort.”

Nelson insists that any discussion about how to help special needs children begin with the acknowledgment that every child is a precious gift from God. “Psalm 139 talks about this. God creates us in our inmost being. He knits us together, and every person, regardless of ability or disability, is God’s creation and special gift of life. So you have to start there.”

She adds, “If you take God out of the picture, the human tendency can be to think ‘Gosh, this has been a mistake.’ And we have to never go that way. We may not understand God’s purpose, but it’s not a mistake.”

One of the techniques Mission

Covenant uses to help children with special needs is to create individual plans for children who need extra support, similar to the individual education plans (IEPs) used in schools. Nelson sits down with the child’s parents, the children’s ministry leaders, and a volunteer who works in the child’s class to talk about what’s going well, what could use improvement, and what everyone can do to better meet the child’s needs.

“The thing that is really, really good about this is that it opens up communication. What can happen in a church setting is there might be problems, but the workers are afraid to say anything, because they don’t want to offend anybody. Or the parents don’t exactly like what’s going on, or could see something that would work better, but they’re afraid to say anything because they don’t want to step on toes. You know, that whole nicety thing that we can do in churches that doesn’t help anybody.”

Clear communication, by contrast, builds up relationships and creates

## WHAT YOUR CHURCH CAN DO...

**HERE ARE SOME TIPS** for making your church and children’s ministry a more welcoming place for children with special needs and their families:

**Don’t operate in crisis mode with your staffing.** If you’re continually calling at the last minute trying to find volunteers for the nursery, or helpers for the first-grade Sunday-school class, it’s going to be harder to absorb the extra challenges special needs children present.

**Invest in adaptive tools and toys that make church a pleasant experience for children.** Chunky, adaptive art supplies, noise-canceling headphones, and picture schedules are inexpensive and alleviate common frustrations. Autistic children release anxiety on motion toys such as exercise balls, Sit ‘n Spins, and small trampolines, and feel safe in the small, cozy spaces created by tunnel toys, impromptu blanket tents, or inflatable ball pits.

**If at all possible, have one consistent person in the nursery every week.** All young children benefit from the stability provided by a known caretaker, but it is absolutely essential for many children with special needs. Hiring a person with a background in early childhood education to oversee the nursery for a few hours every Sunday is an excellent investment in your church’s youngest members.

**Recruit people who are willing to be “on call” once a month, and page them out of the service when assistance is needed.** This allows exhausted, depleted parents to sit through the service, a huge blessing to struggling families. If you have volunteers willing to work one-on-one with special needs children every week, that’s even better.

**Use a pager system to provide peace of mind for parents and children’s ministry volunteers.** If a pager system isn’t in the budget, cell phones set to vibrate will do the trick too.

**If your building is not handicap accessible, do what you need to do to make it work for the people you serve.** If that means moving the third-grade classroom from the church basement to a screened-off section of the foyer, or having a handy member of the church install rails in the bathrooms, do it! Even if the solution is messy and less than ideal, going joyfully out of your way is a tangible way to express God’s love to a family in need of some extra love and care. ■

understanding.

“Then everybody realizes, wow, we all love each other, and we all love this child, and so does God! And now, we need to figure out what we’re going to do.”

The team begins by looking at resources the church already has in place, and how they might be used to meet the child’s needs. Maybe it’s a person—a volunteer who is fluent in sign language, or an early-childhood special-education teacher who would be willing to train nursery workers. Simple, inexpensive supplies like adaptive crayons for children with cerebral palsy, or picture schedules for children with autism, are easy fixes that can make a world of difference.

Next, they look at resources they don’t currently have, and pray about how they might provide them.

“In children’s ministries you always feel like there are only so many resources, people, finances, or knowledge. You can get overwhelmed when you’re in leadership. That’s why you’ve got to pray. Because at that point, it’s probably not our problem to fix,” Nelson says.

Even if a church can’t provide all the resources a child needs, brainstorming solutions makes the family feel valued, and puts everyone on the lookout for ways that God may be trying to fill the need. If someone knows that a child struggles with the noise levels during junior church, for example, they may view the noise-canceling headphones sitting unused in their woodshop in a different light.

One of the trends Nelson has noticed over the past two decades is the sharp upswing in autism diagnoses. According to the Center for Disease Control, one out of every 110 children in America struggles with autism spectrum disorders, and their numbers are rising.

“Autism is a huge, huge thing,” Nelson says. “If the church isn’t getting this one figured out, we are totally missing an opportunity and an obligation.”

She continues, “The average

church volunteer has probably heard about autism, and they may know somebody who has autism, but actually working with a child who has autism, they can be thinking, ‘Okay, I can’t do this.’”

Mission Covenant uses a multi-



**Jamison Armstrong, who is autistic, thrives at his church because it welcomes children with special needs.**

pronged approach to support their autistic kids and the families and volunteers who care for them.

“We have a couple of people in our church who are gifted in working with kids who have autism. They wear a pager, and if we have an issue, they’re paged out of the service to come and help us. We use pagers, period. It lowers the stress level for everyone—Mom’s not sitting in the service worrying, the staff isn’t feeling abandoned.”

They have also consulted with autism specialists, and provided training sessions for children’s ministry volunteers.

“It might take somebody like [an autism specialist or special-education teacher] just spending a Sunday morning looking and seeing with different eyes. Maybe there’s somebody in the church family who has that training and background, and they need to be identified and brought in. Or maybe there’s somebody in the Covenant church the next town over who would be willing to come over

and help.”

Nelson encourages churches to explore such options even if they don’t have a child with autism in their children’s ministry. “If you make an opportunity for your church body to learn about autism, that would be incredible. And open it up to the community! You never know who you may touch—a family who needs Jesus.”

Ultimately, that is what really matters—doing whatever it takes to reach children and their families for Jesus, even when it presents significant challenges, or complicates what is otherwise a straightforward, well-oiled ministry machine. The Gospel of Mark presents a clear picture of Jesus’s heart for vulnerable children and their hopeful, hurting families: “People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.’ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them” (10:13-16, TNIV).

By God’s grace, let us become churches that stop hindering and start blessing. ■

## RESOURCES

*Covenant Disability Resource Manual (free for churches)*  
[www.covchurch.org/formation/departamental-ministries/disability-ministries](http://www.covchurch.org/formation/departamental-ministries/disability-ministries)

*Joni and Friends*  
[www.joniandfriends.org](http://www.joniandfriends.org)

*Autism Speaks*  
[www.autismspeaks.org/community/resources](http://www.autismspeaks.org/community/resources)

*The Pencil Grip*  
[www.thepencilgrip.com](http://www.thepencilgrip.com)