

SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disability

A 2008 survey by Mencap found that 73% of people are unable accurately describe the meaning of 'learning disability' even though it is a significant issue. Children with special educational needs, or who are physically or mentally disabled, need additional help to access school life, to learn, or both. For some, this need will be lifelong. There are four areas of defined special need: communication and interaction; thinking and learning; social; emotional and mental health problems, and physical needs, including sight and hearing difficulties. Disability is also a defined area of need.

'People with special needs are often marginalised in society'

Schooling is not the only area of life affected by a family with a SEND child. Families themselves need support to meet the additional physical and emotional demands placed on them. People with special needs are often marginalised in society and social events can be difficult, especially if a child's behaviour is interpreted as naughtiness by those around. Few churches understand and are genuinely inclusive of SEND children and young people, making church attendance stressful and difficult for parents and causing further isolation.

How are SEND children supported?

Around two per cent of children have significant difficulties that cannot be met by a school without additional support. These children are assessed very early in life by a team of education and health professionals. A statement then details specific support needs, allowing parents to make decisions about the most appropriate setting for their child, either in a special school or in a mainstream school with support.

What if I have a SEND child?

All parents want their children to grow up and live independent, active and useful lives. Realising that your child may not run, play, talk, see, hear or make friends like other children is a shock as you find yourself suddenly having to navigate an unknown world. Each child, though, is a special gift from God, made in His image: 'For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ... all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be' (Psalm 139:13,15). God has a purpose for each of His children.

For parents whose children's needs are not severe, making a decision is more nuanced. A diagnosis can also become a label and labels are for jars, not people. It may help the school,

but does it help your child? Ask why assessment is needed, what specific help will be available if a need is found. A label, if it's allowed to become an excuse rather than a reason, could actually hinder development. Make the decision that is correct for your child, not for your child's school.

How can I help?

If you are the parent of a SEND child with severe needs, be available to share your experience with other parents when they first find themselves in a similar position. Be there as they come to terms with a diagnosis and help them as they start to plot a course through the maze of SEND support. Talk to your church about effectively including SEND children and young people in the life of the church.

'Show them ... how to respect and extend God's love to all their peers, however different they may be'

Many people have strong views about terminating the lives of the disabled during pregnancy and these social attitudes are reflected by children in school. It's not unusual for SEND children to be called names or even told that they should never have been allowed to live. SEND young

people are at significant risk of being bullied – 58 per cent of physically disabled, 62 per cent of learning disabled and 67 per cent of autistic/asperger's students reported being bullied in the 2015 Ditch the Label survey www.ditchthelabel.org/annual-bullying-survey-2015

Talk to your child about disability, explaining how each person is loved and valued by God. Show them by example how to respect and extend God's love to all their peers, however different they may be. Read together the story in Luke 14:12—14 and explain that God is asking us to behave differently and not just to mix with socially successful people. This is hard in a society which measures worth by material success. Read, too, the story of Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9. Social attitudes clearly change little – he described himself as a stray dog, but David welcomed him into his own home and ensured that he was cared for and treated with respect.