



Your Missionettes Club— Inclusive or Exclusive?

by Julie Horner

I'm sorry, but your daughter can't come back to Daisies," I overheard the leader tell Jessica's* parents. Perhaps Jessica, a girl with Down's syndrome, required more attention than the Daisies sponsor was prepared or willing to give. Jessica's parents complied by not bringing her back to Daisies and, eventually, not to church either.

As a sponsor, have you ever wanted to tell a child she cannot come back to Missionettes? Sometimes making sure every child fits in can be a challenge, particularly when the child has a disability. But I still wonder what happened to Jessica and her parents. Does Jessica know Jesus loves her? Did she and her parents find a church that welcomed them? As a Missionettes coordinator, could I have tried harder to include Jessica?

Years later, as a parent of a child with disabilities, I realize how devastated Jessica's parents probably were by that simple act of exclusion. I know how much I want my son to know Jesus loves him and be accepted by others. I've discovered how difficult it is to find a church that truly includes children with

special needs. And I wish I'd have worked with Jessica's parents to better include her in Daisies. Maybe they would have answered helpful questions like these:

What is a disability?

The Americans With Disabilities Act defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits walking, speaking, seeing, or other major life activities.



Approximately 10 percent of school-age children are disabled, so you will most likely have Missionettes with disabilities, either permanent or temporary (such as a broken arm), in your club.

How can I help Missionettes with disabilities feel welcome?

Begin by checking your clubroom for accessibility. Consider making this a club activity by allowing your Missionettes to use a wheelchair, crutches, or blindfold. Can a Missionette who is physically or visually impaired get to your clubroom and move around safely? Is the clubroom environment safe and orderly?

How can I show Missionettes with disabilities that I care?

Making your clubroom accessible goes beyond physical characteristics. A truly accessible clubroom means Missionettes with disabilities are accepted socially, too. Missionettes will most likely follow your lead as you include everyone and help them feel important. Speaking positively to your Missionettes and encouraging them sets the tone for a positive environment. (Keep in mind that you may need to monitor club members' comments to be sure they speak positively and encouragingly to each other.)

Should I ask questions about the disability?

Most children with disabilities and their parents will provide helpful information when you show them you care. Consider adding a "special instructions"

*Name has been changed

area to your registration form that allows parents to share any concerns. When speaking about and to children with disabilities, use people-first descriptors (i.e., not a cripple, but a child who is physically impaired). Often there will be no need to mention the disability at all.

Are there simple ways I can help children with disabilities get more from the lesson?

Begin by praying for wisdom for the best way to meet the learning needs of all your club members. A well-planned lesson and plenty of activities helps keep your Missionettes focused. Think of ways to involve them in the lesson through actions, sounds, and other techniques. Change activities frequently to keep their attention. Consider sitting on the floor for some activi-

ties to allow active Missionettes to move around. Let reading aloud be voluntary to prevent putting children on the spot. Ask another adult or older Missionette to be a partner for the child with a disability if a lot of individual attention is needed. As you get to know your Missionettes, you will learn what works and what doesn't. Contact a special education teacher in your church or local school for more specific tips.

What if a Missionette with disabilities cannot fulfill the badge requirements?

Focus on what your Missionettes *can* do, not what they *cannot* do. Meet with your coordinator to discuss any modifications to badge requirements. Some children with disabilities may need to verbally share their

activity page answers or may not be able to perfectly memorize Bible verses. As a sponsor, you will discover how to best help each Missionette be successful.

Does God have a purpose for children with disabilities?

Yes! In John 9, Jesus acknowledged the man was blind so the work of God could be displayed in his life. What a great view of children with disabilities! Pray for their healing and trust God to complete His perfect will in their lives. Enjoy the opportunity to help them discover and use their talents to glorify God.

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Questions for Further Study—

1. What are some ways you can be more inclusive to girls with disabilities in your Missionettes club?