

WHO IS WELCOME?

The Bible makes it clear. All children are welcome. And a way should be made for all children to come to Him.

Luke 18:16

“But Jesus called the children to Him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’”

So how do we make sure all children feel welcome and all children can be welcomed at our Children’s Church?

Entrance and arrival

The very first seconds of arrival can set the tone. A nicely decorated entrance, a friendly smile, someone to help new families get orientated, and of course an environment that makes the child eager to stay while giving the parent peace that their child will be cared for and will be safe.

Accessibility

Be mindful of what your practical setup communicates: can children with physical disabilities access the venue and feel comfortable. E.g. are there ramps or toilets for wheelchairs and walkers? Are caretakers welcome to help a child needing assistance? Can a child who is blind sit close enough to be able to hear, or a deaf child out of the sun so they can lip read.

Relationship is key! Show love above all else.

No matter the child the best way to support them and their families is through love. It does require investing time and effort to connect not only with the children but also with their parents. Some practical ideas can be:

- Some children long for one-on-one time. Sit somewhere everyone can see and have a cup of juice with them as you chat away.
- Set up chill zones, such as playdough or building blocks, for times when children feel overwhelmed.
- Let love be your first response. Don’t let a firm lecture on behaviour, methods of correction or a punishment, like no biscuit, be your go to.
- Remember many children come from broken homes and are desperate to be loved. In our experience, love tops all else every time.

- Your actions show children what it means to be welcoming and inclusive. Be a role model: love them, and they will learn to love others.
- Encourage children to include everyone, making others feel valued and accepted. You will be amazed out how accepting they can be, especially with a little guidance.

Make difficult decisions with love

Children's Church is all about helping children get to know and love Jesus. There will be times when you need to make difficult decisions to ensure this mission is not hindered. For example, even if a child's emotional or learning level aligns with the group, their physical development or maturity may differ, so we must be extra careful with boundaries, age limits, and supervision to protect all children.

We have had to have some very hard conversations with parents. For instance, an 18-year-old may still love attending, but their rough and physical play can put other children at risk. In other cases, we just don't have enough leaders to provide a child with the one-on-one support they need without compromising the care and supervision of the rest of the group. Always consider how the parent and child are feeling as you gently explain why and offer solutions where possible.

Our hearts are called to love and serve. As you seek the Lord and ask Him for wisdom and guidance, He will sustain you and give you understanding. We are not trained professionals, but we can do our best with what God has called us to do, always from a place of love.

1 John 4:7

"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God."

1 Corinthians 13:13

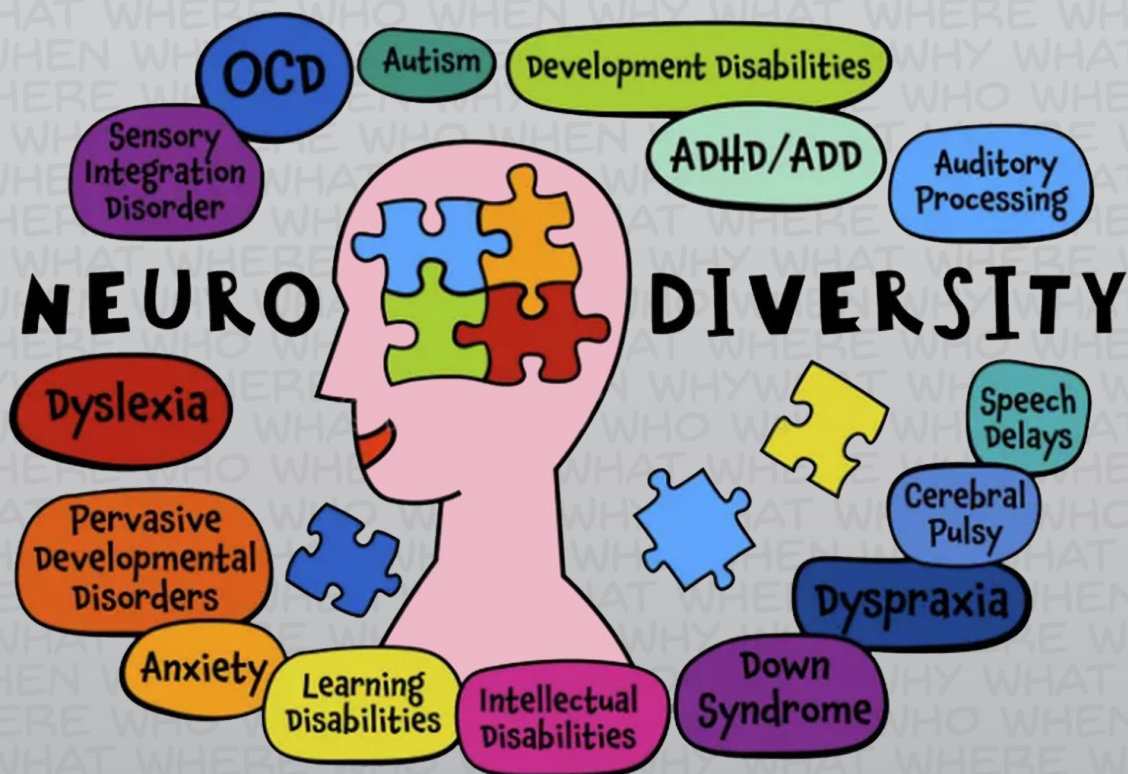
"And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."

What is Neurodiversity?

The most effective way we can support and welcome all children is to understand them better. Merely changing our language to be more inclusive using terms such as "typical" instead of "normal" can make a huge impact on children and families alike. You have probably heard the word "neurodivergent" so let's take a closer look at what this means.

"Neurodiversity" simply means that human brains are wired differently. It is a biological fact, much like diversity in eye colour or personality.

Some children think, learn, or process the world differently like those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia but they can also overlap from one into the other.



Our heart needs to match God's heart for each child. We aren't just "tolerating" differences; we are embracing how God designed each child because His work is marvellous.

Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvellous - how well I know it. Psalm 139:14

What does this look like?

Understanding what this can look like helps us avoid wrongly labelling a child as misbehaving and puts us in a better place to accommodate them.

- *Constant movement:* The child may fidget or be unable to sit still.
- *Speech:* They may be very talkative, non-verbal, or have irregularities in their speech.
- *Social difficulties:* The child may have trouble understanding or interpreting social norms and cues, such as asking inappropriate questions, touching others inappropriately, or struggling to grasp social hierarchy or authority.
- *Coping mechanisms:* They may cover their ears, shout, avoid situations, sit on the outskirts, take frequent toilet breaks, or engage in stimming behaviours.
- *Self-image:* The child may be self-conscious, have low self-esteem, and be emotionally sensitive.
- *Difficulty with transitions:* They may struggle with arriving, going home, or changing activities.

Each neurodiverse child is unique

Every child has a unique profile which can change based on the environment.

Thinking of neurodiversity as a line from "low" to "high" functioning, ignores a child's specific strengths.

Autism isn't linear.



Rather, think of a spectrum, like a colour wheel. One child may have high verbal skills but struggle with sensory input, while another might be non-verbal but have incredible focus and joy.



How can we help?

Understanding neurodiversity is essential and so is knowing a child's strengths and challenges but it cannot stop there. We need to take that knowledge and use it to help them thrive in their relationship with Jesus.

These are some ways we can help:

- Keep noise levels down; avoid shouting or raising your voice.
- Allow them to fidget or to do their coping mechanism, as long as it doesn't distract others.
- Gently encourage but do not force involvement.
Validate their answer even if it's wrong E.g. "I hear you and I see how you could think that but..."
- Be mindful of seating. Grass is very prickly if you are sensitive to touch. Big groups of people are overwhelming. Let them sit on the edges or stand.
- If a child has a meltdown, stay calm. Move them to a quiet area and try breathing exercises like box breathing.
- Avoid public display of correction.

How can you support parents?

Keeping open communication and building relationships with parents is essential. Here are some other practical ways:

- Consider what the parents are going through. They often feel exhausted, judged and can struggle with mental health such as depression and anxiety.
- Gain a better understanding of neurodiversity. Once we realize this is not a naughty child nor bad parenting our interaction with parents change from judgement to support.
- Your compassion, support, care and love goes a very long way.

How can parents support you?

Our role as Children's Church leaders is to always partner with parents, they take lead and we support. Parents play an important role in helping us accommodate their children. Here are some things to consider:

- Parents know their children best. Ask parents ahead of time what strengths and difficulties they face.
- Ask questions like: "How will they react to ... "; "What do you do when..."; "How could we have handled this better?".