



Differently-Abled Children Prayer Guide

THE ISSUE

Approximately one billion people in the world are currently living with some sort of physical or mental disability. The World Report on Disability states that 1 in 10 of this population are children, and 80% live in developing countries.¹ Children with mental, physical and social differences suffer strong discrimination, especially in poorer countries. Considered a curse or a sign of bad luck in some cultures, children are often hidden, removed from the family, or killed when they start to display signs of differences.² These children may not be registered at birth, preventing them from accessing social services or legal protections that would help them survive. 90 percent of differently-abled children will most likely not go to school and will live in isolation.³ Even in higher-income countries, differently-abled children are 3 to 4 times more likely to receive abuse.⁴

Children that cannot perform the “normal” physical, social or mental functions as other children are often not accepted for their differences, but are seen as “less-than”. Rather than being seen as unique and capable, they are considered less functional, less able, and less complete. For many cultures, with this comes a sense of failure leading to shame.

Many religious paradigms see these children as a curse on the family. Spiritually they may be shunned and even considered dangerous to interact with. The family feels shame, because they believe this shows their neighbors that the spirits, or gods, or God wanted to curse them, meaning they are somehow a “bad” family.

Even if the parents, relatives, teachers, or community do love the differently-abled children in their lives, often there is a neglect that comes from a simple lack of understanding how to handle the mental, physical or social differences. Or it feels too burdensome to care for the physical needs, or takes too much patience and effort to work through the mental or social complications of the differences. So the parent, relative, teacher, or caretaker for the child doesn't always respond in an appropriate manner.

It takes more time, attention and resources to care for a child with different needs.³ Especially in situations of poverty, these may seem too limited to invest in the differently-abled child, leading to neglect of the child's needs.

The stress on the family at times leads to husbands leaving the family or becoming alcoholics to handle the ‘shame’ of having a differently-abled child. Many mothers may face the difficulties of raising the child alone or even face enduring violence for bringing such a child into the family. They may become depressed or even try to commit suicide as a result.

ROOT CAUSES

False religions, superstitions or cultural beliefs might cause people to believe that children born with differences are a result of a curse on the family or bad karma. In order to let the superstitions or karma play out as it should, the child may be neglected or discriminated against as part of the punishment for his or her past life. If the religion teaches that a child is different because of a curse, he or she becomes a shame to the family and must be removed in order to save the family's reputation. In countries like Japan and Uganda, differently-abled children are seen as "contaminated," a stigma which carries into their adulthood and can even be passed onto their family members.⁵

A performance based- society defines "less capable", "less functional" as a failure to perform adequately in society. Often status, respect, worth and value are defined by how much a person can do, in an evaluation system that doesn't allow for the differences in children. What is possible with the physical difference or mental difference doesn't match up to the performance level that society expects, and so the child is considered a failure, consciously or unconsciously.

HOW TO PRAY

Pray that **the differently-abled** would no longer be removed from society, but that they would be valued as loved by God. Pray for greater revelations of God's unconditional love for all people. Pray for the safety and protection of these children from all physical and emotional harm. Pray against any shame, rejection, or condemnation differently-abled children might feel because of their differences. Pray that these children would grow up in confidence and courage, feeling loved and valued by God and by their communities.

Pray that **mothers and fathers** would see the worth in their child's differences. Pray that they would be bonded to the differently-abled child so that whatever challenges come, they would continue to defend their child and protect her or him from discrimination or abuse. Pray for grace, patience and love to fill them as they interact with their children. Pray that mothers and fathers would find the support they need to raise their differently-abled children counter culturally, loving them for their differences and empowering the children to thrive beyond their perceived limitations.

Pray that **churches** would recognize the need for greater diversity within the church body through involving the differently-abled members, seeing them as vital members to the health of the church. Pray that the church body would be active in supporting families who have differently-abled children.

Pray for **organizations** who work to train parents, teachers, and caregivers to serve the differently-abled. Pray for organizations that provide support to families who need it. Pray for organizations who educate communities on the value of differences. Pray for more services and support organizations to serve the needs of the differently-abled and their families.

Pray that **governments** would recognize the needs of the differently-abled and that programs would be developed to help care for and empower those who are at risk of marginalization, especially in developing nations. Pray for an awareness to grow generally in society about the value and worth of differently-abled children. Pray for more opportunities to open up for work or training to help integrate the differently-abled into society.

SPECIAL SIBLINGS

I was at a meeting when a pastor asked me about my family. As I shared about both my children, as well as the special needs of my family, his response was “How does your other child feel about the special needs child?” I was pleasantly surprised. It was a question hardly anyone ever puts to me.

The sibling of a special needs child is somehow expected to be really understanding. When mothers are busy caring for the needs of their sibling, they are expected to gently wait, to help out, to tend to them. They have to be forever understanding, and are not even allowed the liberty of having a routine sibling rivalry. Because their siblings needs are ‘more’, they often feel guilty for wanting attention too. We expect the siblings to have perfect love—kind, gentle, never jealous—but they too are children with needs and wishes. I know a child who used to get into trouble if he asked for his favorite food to be made, but when the special needs child asked for it, it was done immediately. He was expected to always understand why he would always stand second place to his sibling. Little did the family realise that the child was getting resentful of his sibling.

Each member of the family is impacted by the disability of a child in the home. Each member may react in a different way. When we as parents are devastated, hearing that our child is different, we generally do not think about the other child who is also devastated by it. His/her life will be changed forever. Even as we struggle to cope with a special needs diagnosis, parents must consider our other children, who may not know how to react, may not understand what is going on, and may sometimes even blame themselves.

To parents I say, do not allow your special needs child to rule the house (believe me, they do try to do that). As Dr. Steven Gutstein puts it for such families, “We are first families. Do not let the disability overtake your family. Let us not have autistic families. Let us have families that have children with autism” (or any other disability for that matter). Parents need to spend one-on-one time with our other children. We can schedule some time exclusively with them where they are allowed to be themselves, without having to give way to the needs of their sibling.

Relatives and friends can play a big role in helping siblings have social relationships not centered on special needs. If it is possible, relatives and friends can also spend some time with the special needs child, so the parents can devote some time to their other child(ren). Whether you are a parent, relative, or friend, you can provide a safe environment for siblings of special needs children to share their feelings and thoughts about life, family, and disability. You will find they have much to talk about when they find someone provides them a listening and non-judgemental ear.

My other child has a foster family who is very close to us and has guided us with our special needs child (as they are doctors themselves). They have argued and fought with us for the needs of our other child, when they have felt we have not paid him enough attention. He spends one weekend a month with them, away from us, where he is the youngest and pampered to the hilt. He loves it. I praise God for friends like that, who have stood by our son and us. This is what the church is there for.

Churches, families and friends—I’m speaking to you with deep vulnerability now—as you reach out to families with special needs children, PLEASE try not to give unsolicited advice. For the most part, parents know what needs to be done. It’s doing it, day in and day out, that is difficult. What they need is someone to stand by them. One of the most painful things for me was to hear from some concerned person that another special needs child improved because the mother worked so hard with the child, and that is what I needed to do. After spending so much time, energy and effort, what I heard was, “You are not doing enough.”

God’s primary unit of a society is a family. Let us show our love to the ‘special families’ by undergirding, supporting and encouraging them into being what God intends them to be. And let us also remember the ‘special sibling’ who often gets overlooked in our care for the special needs child.

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 4:10-11

God created the differently-abled

Leviticus 19:14

Sinful to curse

2 Samuel 9:7-11

Differently-abled as valued citizens of the Kingdom

Psalms 139:13

Beauty in God's Creation

Matthew 15:29-31

Jesus' heart is to heal His people

Luke 18:35-43

Jesus is willing to heal through faith

John 9:1-3

Differently-abled show God's works

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Church's need for differences

2 Corinthians 12:9

Weaknesses made strong

RESOURCES

Reconciledworld.org/in-his-image/

Elim Christian Services
<http://www.elimcs.org/>

Church of the Brethren
<http://www.brethren.org/disabilities/documents/prayers.pdf>

DisabilitiesandFaith.org

"Culture and Disability"
<http://www.luc.edu/faculty/twren/phil389&elps423/c&d.htm>

"Five Prayers for the Special Needs Child"
<http://www.talkingmom2mom.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Five-Prayers-for-the-Special-Needs-Child.pdf>

SOURCES:

1. Global Partnership for Education, "Children with Disabilities."
<http://www.globalpartnership.org/focus-areas/children-with-disabilities>
2. Humanium, "Disabled Children: The Situation of Differently-Abled Children."
<http://www.humanium.org/en/disabled-children/>
3. Deb, Sibnath. Child Safety, Welfare and Well-being: Issues and Challenges. p.223
4. Sullivan, P. & Knutson, J. (2000). Maltreatment and disabilities: A population-based epidemiological study. Child Abuse & Neglect, 24 (10), 1257-1273.
5. Michael Eskay, Samantha Gardner, and Suzgo Nyirenda. "Culture and Disability." Loyola University Chicago, 1998.
<http://www.luc.edu/faculty/twren/phil389&elps423/c&d.htm>