

# How Do I Love My Neighbor Who Has a Disability?



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# Why Do I Feel This Way around People with Disabilities?

## Separation from the Disability Community

Most of us probably grew up in a school where the special education program was separated from general education. If you grew up in church, your church (statistically speaking) probably did not have any resources for people with intellectual disabilities. If they did, these resources were probably also separated. These separations are often an effort to create a safe and supportive environment for individuals who might require varying levels of support. Though these efforts to provide support are well-intentioned, because we live in a broken world, this separation can lead to some unintended outcomes:

- 1) If we don't have a close friend or family member who has a disability, we most likely do not interact with the disability community. It's not something we intentionally avoid, we just don't often cross paths due to the differences in our daily lives. If you don't often interact with anybody who has a disability, it can be something that is intimidating or uncomfortable. This is simply because it's unfamiliar! If you have experienced discomfort around people with disabilities, know that this is a common experience that comes from separation in our society based on ability. This is not how God intended for the world to look, and this separation will not exist in heaven!
- 2) Separation can also lead us to believe that we need some kind of special training to be able to "successfully" interact with people who have disabilities. We live in a very performance-based culture. If we are unfamiliar with something and are not sure how to do it, we may avoid doing that thing. Whether that is because we are uncomfortable, or because we just want to make sure we are doing things correctly, this avoidance is common.

**If you are familiar with the above feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, or fear, you are not alone! These are very common experiences that are often a result of societal structure. Know that interacting with people who have disabilities and their families is much more simple than we think it is! People who have disabilities are created in the image of God, and that is the most important thing to keep in mind. This resource contains some guidelines on how to lovingly and respectfully interact with your neighbors who have disabilities.**

# What Scripture Should We Keep in Mind When We Think about People with Disabilities?

## **People with Disabilities (Just Like Us) Are Created in the Image of God**

*“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)*

Each one of us has value because we were created in the image of God, and we are loved by our creator! What a relief that our worth and dignity is not tied to any ounce of performance we muster, or something that we produce. If we were to sit still in a chair for the rest of our lives, interact with nobody, and do nothing to make the world look more like heaven, we would be loved no more or no less by our heavenly father. Our worth is in His love for us, and nothing else! Rest in that identity as an image-bearer of God. Remember this identity as you look at each person around you, including those who have intellectual or physical conditions that make their life look differently than yours.

## **The Beauty of the Body of Christ**

*“If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose. If all were a single member where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.” (1 Corinthians 12:17-20)*

Just like you would not disqualify someone from being able to glorify God with their life because they have a cancer diagnosis or lost their foot in a car crash, we should not disqualify somebody who has intellectual disabilities or somebody who is neurodivergent. God will equip each of us to do the work that He has called us to do, and what a gift that we get to do this work alongside one another! Each of God’s children has an important role to play in the Body of Christ that was uniquely designed for them by God! If every one of us was a gifted singer and sang in the choir each Sunday, who would be in the congregation to hear it? If everybody was serving as a greeter at the doors, who would be walking through them? When you see people that don’t have the same gifting as you do, that means that God has a different role for them to play. People who have intellectual disabilities have gifts that people who are neurotypical do not have. They can teach people about God’s character in ways that people who are neurotypical would not be able to! God’s design for the body of Christ is so beautiful, and what a gift to be able to experience God in new ways through neurodiversity and diversity in ability!

# How Do I Interact with a Parent who Has a Child with a Disability?

A medical diagnosis is very personal. The family you want to be-friend may be very comfortable talking about their child’s diagnosis, but it might also be something they are still processing or do not want to discuss. You won’t know what they are comfortable talking about until you know them better! Try to build a friendship first, before asking questions that can be sensitive like this. A child’s medical diagnosis should not change how you treat a child or their family, so this information is not necessary for the forming of your friendship! Leading with the same questions that you would ask a parent who appears to have typically functioning children is a great way to begin forming a friendship

## What Questions Are Okay to Ask?

Things to Avoid:	Instead Try:
<p>“What is your child’s diagnosis?”</p> <p>“Does your child have a disability?”</p> <p>“Do you think that your child might have ____?”</p>	<p>“What is your son’s name?”</p> <p>“What school does your daughter go to?”</p> <p>“What do they do for fun?”</p> <p><u>If you can tell that they might not communicate in the same way that you or your children do (example: using a speech device, American Sign Language, or picture communication cards):</u> “What is the best way for me to communicate with your daughter?”</p> <p><u>If you think there might be a difference that is important to know before your children interact, here is another option:</u> “I would love for our kids to be friends. What does interacting with or playing with other kids look like for your son?”</p>

Note: If you are questioning whether or not you may need to approach or communicate with a child differently, it IS okay to ask questions, but keep this in mind → Knowing somebody's medical diagnosis does not actually give much information about how to interact with that person. One diagnosis can present completely different from person to person. There are questions you can ask that give you better information on how to interact with somebody that are also more respectful and less intrusive than inquiring about a medical diagnosis.

Examples of appropriate questions: "What is the best way for me to communicate with you daughter?" or "Is there anything that would be helpful for me to know when interacting with you son?" → these are both questions that give the parent an opportunity to share what they are comfortable sharing, and give you an opportunity to learn about this specific child better.

# How Do I Approach and Interact with a Person who Has a Visible Disability?

There is nothing wrong with talking to somebody about their disability. Asking questions is okay too, but it's a good idea to prioritize a friendship with a person first and ask questions like this later. They might consider their diagnosis a core piece of who they are and may want to talk to you about their diagnosis. But, keep in mind that not everybody feels this way. Acknowledge their personhood first. Prioritize friendship first, and ask questions about their disability later if you have respectful questions. You do not need to ignore somebody's disability or pretend like it doesn't exist. But each person who has a disability is a person with a disability... not a disability.

## How Do I Start the Conversation?

Things to Avoid:	Instead Try:
<p>Starting the conversation by pointing out their difference</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "Tell me about your wheelchair."</li> <li>● "Is that a speech device?"</li> <li>● "Are you diagnosed with _____?"</li> </ul> <p>Speaking to somebody differently because of their appearance:</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Speaking to an adult in a similar tone you would use when speaking to a child (often referred to as "babytalk") because they appear to have an intellectual or physical disability</li> </ul>	<p>Lead with the same questions you would ask anybody else!</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "What's your name?"</li> <li>● "Is this your first time here?"</li> <li>● "How has your week been?"</li> </ul> <p>→ Adults with physical or intellectual disabilities are often treated like children because people think they cannot understand what is going on around them. You can speak to adults with disabilities in the same way you would speak to any typically functioning adult.</p>

## What If They Can't Talk to Me?

If somebody doesn't communicate in the same way you do (maybe they use a speech device or American Sign Language) or if they are unable to communicate in any way, you can still communicate to them!

Things to Avoid:	Instead Try:
<p>Not communicating with them at all</p>	<p>Open-ended questions might not be beneficial, but you can still communicate!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example:</i> "It is so good to see you! I hope you are having a good day!"</li> </ul> <p>Yes or no questions can be helpful!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example:</i> Did you have fun at the basketball game?</li> </ul> <p>Pointing, explanation, narration, and pictures!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Example:</i> *point* "Do you see that soccer field over there? Well, tonight my daughter is going to play her first soccer game on it! (explanation) We practiced on it yesterday, and she was so excited! She scored 3 goals! (narration)" *show a picture of your daughter playing soccer* (pictures)</li> </ul>

### Why?

Why would I try to communicate with somebody who cannot communicate back to me? Because they are a person who has value, created in the image of God, and deeply loved by God, just like you! What an opportunity to show the love of Jesus - a love that gives and expects nothing in return. (Though you may find that this individual blesses you much more than you could have imagined.)

*"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* Luke 14:12-24



## What Is Person-First Language?

**Person-first language** is a way to communicate the value of a person over their disability. It is an acknowledgement and recognition of personhood before disability. Many people prefer person-first language, because they believe that it is more honoring to the dignity of a person, and does not diminish a person's identity to their medical diagnosis alone.

### How Do You Use Person-First Language?

Things to Avoid:	Instead Try:
Disabled person	Person who has a disability
Wheelchair-bound	Audrey, who uses a wheelchair
Autistic person	Laura, who has Autism
Blind person	Carter, who is blind

Note: Person-first language is widely accepted as respectful, but it is not everybody's preference. Some people view their diagnosis as the core of who they are, and prefer to be referred to in that way. The way to get to know somebody's preference is to get to know them, and to ask questions! (Remember, disability is not a dirty word, and it's okay to ask questions! But forming a friendship first can be a more respectful and meaningful approach to individuals and families affected by disability).

# How Do I Answer My Child's Questions About Disability?

Has your child ever pointed and asked a question that felt disrespectful towards somebody with a visible disability? If so, you're not alone, and it's okay! Kids have a natural curiosity about the world around them, and these questions can be a great opportunity to teach!

Things to Avoid:	Instead Try:
<p>Quieting your child's questions (shushing)</p> <p>Telling your child not to ask questions like that</p>	<p><b>Answering their questions like this:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Child: "Why do they use a wheelchair?"</b> Parent: <i>"Just like you use your legs to get around, some people use wheelchairs instead. Not everybody moves around in the same way that we do."</i></li> <li>● <b>Child: "Why do they carry that thing around with them?" (referring to <u>speech device</u>)</b> Parent: <i>"Do you know how you and I use our mouths and our voices to talk to each other? Some people use a speech device instead. That is their voice!"</i></li> <li>● <b>Child: "Why do they carry that thing around with them?" (referring to <u>sensory device/toy</u>)</b> Parent: <i>"Remember how you used to take your blanket with you to church because it made you feel better? It's kind of like that - she might bring that with her because it is comforting to her."</i></li> <li>● <b>Child: "Why does his face look different than mine?" or "Why does their arm look like that?"</b> Parent: <i>"Not everybody looks the same. God created us each to be a unique person, and God makes no mistakes! They might look different than you, but they are created in the image of God just like you!"</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Emphasizing similarities and encouraging interaction.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "You love dinosaurs and he has a dinosaur on his shirt! Do you want to go ask him what his favorite is?"</li> <li>● "You walk like this, and he walks like that! It's okay that you do things differently, you can still play together!"</li> </ul> <p><b>Being honest when you don't know!</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "I am not sure. I have never seen _____ before. But, just like you, they were created in God's image and they are loved by God!"</li> </ul>

## **Why?**

There may be a clear medical diagnosis or birth defect that is obvious to you. When speaking with a younger child, a detailed explanation is not necessary. Emphasize inward similarities, importance of kindness and friendship. Emphasize that this person is also made in God's image just like they are! Make sure they feel good asking questions next time something like this comes up! This will help them learn that there is nothing to be afraid of, and to see every person's value! (Help them see a potential friend, not a medical diagnosis!)

When kids ask questions like this, it can feel embarrassing because we don't want anybody to feel disrespected. Though it may feel uncomfortable, this is your opportunity to shape how they see the world around them. Help them see people with disabilities through a biblical lens! It is better to answer your child's question, or try to figure out the answer together, than avoid the topic or person altogether.