

Is Attitude A Barrier?

by Chandra McMahon, Western Iowa Synod Disability Resource Team

How welcoming are we to those who are different from ourselves? This is a difficult question to answer. My name is Chandra McMahon. I am married and have three children, ages 13, 11, and 8. My 11-year-old daughter, Josie, was born 3 ½ months early, suffered brain damage at birth, and has cerebral palsy. We are active members at Bethany Lutheran Church in Emmetsburg.

Churches have done a great job removing physical barriers. Josie uses forearm crutches or a walker to get around. She can get around our church without any problems. There is an elevator, the communion rail is on the floor, handicap bathrooms are available, and other modifications have been done that allow her and other people with physical disabilities to be included in all parts of our congregation.

What I would like to focus on is attitudes toward people with a disability. We have had a great experience with our home church, but when we visit other churches we are often ignored or stared at. What can we do to make everyone feel welcome? In my opinion, the best thing anyone can do is to be friendly. If you could start relationships with people with disabilities, eventually they will feel comfortable asking or accepting help from you.

When our daughter was born, it was an emotional roller coaster for us. She spent 72 days in NICU. At the time we lived in Virginia. Our church family was all we had since all our family lived in Iowa. What did they do to help us? They were available to listen. Just by coming up and asking how we were doing let us know they cared. If we wanted to share we could, but we didn't feel we had to share if we weren't able to at that time. This opened up relationships and I knew I could call someone when I needed to talk.

When Josie was nine months old, we moved to Iowa and started going to our current church. This church family was there to help support us through Josie's diagnosis. It is very difficult to find out your child will never be "normal." We went through the stages of grief. We have had 10 years to accept that Josie will not be able to run or play like other children, but still have times we are grieving.

Josie is currently going through the stages of grief. She has realized that her disability is permanent, and she is asking the "why me?" questions and is angry some days with the "it's not fair" attitude. People with disabilities did not ask to be disabled. They have dreams and hopes that sometimes cannot come true because of the disability. The church family can play an active role in befriending people and helping them come to terms with the disability.

Our church family has been great. Josie is included in as much as she can be. Even though Josie is going into fifth grade, she reads at a first-grade level. Sunday school teachers have been great to change and adapt materials for her. At first I felt I had to be her Sunday school teacher each year so she wouldn't be a burden to other teachers, but then I realized she is missing out on learning from other Christians.

The people who sit around us in church each Sunday are wonderful. Josie loves to sing as loud as she can but doesn't know some of the words. She will pretend to read by having a hymnal in front of her, but she makes sounds during the verses and then sings the words to the chorus. No one glares or makes her feel bad that she isn't singing the correct words during the verses. This is her way of praising God, although it is not the way most people expect. That accepting attitude of people at our church has made our family feel at home.

What can we do to make sure others feel accepted? It isn't just about removing the physical barriers. The attitude we have will make the difference if people with disabilities and their families feel welcome. Please try to make all people feel welcome.



Josie with her brother and sister.