

THE ONE WHO CAN'T SIT STILL

(and Other Kids We're Desperate to Love)



Making Church Groups Work for
Children and **Teens** with **Additional Needs**

SARAH THRIFT

“A grace-filled, deeply practical guide for anyone who has ever felt overwhelmed at the thought of including children with additional needs in their ministry. Sarah Thrift offers not a one-size-fits-all formula but a Christ-centered framework for seeing and serving every child as fearfully and wonderfully made. This is a book the church has desperately needed.”

RYAN FRANK, CEO, KidzMatter

“While reading *The One Who Can't Sit Still*, I could easily picture kids and teens at my church who need extra support to feel comfortable and participate—the ones who fidget through the sermon, or hang back at the edge of the youth group circle, or need a little more patience than our usual routines allow. Sarah's clear examples and practical advice will help us help them, giving ministry leaders concrete tools and proven solutions. I know this book will make our churches more welcoming places for the kids who need that welcome the most.”

SANDRA PEOPLES, Author, *Accessible Church*

“If you serve in children's or youth ministry, please read this book! Sarah Thrift brings years of ministry experience, clear theological thinking and a careful understanding of life as it is experienced by the child or young person with additional needs. This is a book full of practical help, genuine compassion and love for Jesus.”

MEL LACY, Executive Director, Growing Young Disciples

“A must-have resource for any group or individual involved in church ministry. Sarah skilfully combines practical wisdom, biblical reflection and a refreshing willingness to challenge our assumptions. Whatever stage or size of ministry you are coming from, this will motivate and challenge you to think carefully and lovingly about how to welcome and support every individual who comes into your care.”

BEN PEARSON, Youth and Kids Ministry Lead, Keswick Ministries

“The perfect guide for any Christian leader who wants to include young people who have disabilities in church life, especially children and teens with social, emotional and behavioral needs. Sarah Thrift makes it clear that such young ones are not problems to be managed but people to be celebrated! I recommend this hands-on volume that’ll help you offer every child hope, dignity and a special place in the body of Christ.”

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends
International Disability Center

“For any children’s or youth worker or church leader looking to turn their community into a place of radical, accessible welcome and belonging for everyone, this book is an indispensable guide. It moves church teams from a place of fear of additional needs into a space of joyful, confident and faithful ministry for all. I really love this book and can’t recommend it highly enough.”

MARK ARNOLD, Additional Needs Lead, Urban Saints

“*The One Who Can’t Sit Still* is thoughtful, realistic and practical. Sarah Thrift encourages us to begin by being observant and getting to know our children and young people well, so that we can find the best ways to help them meet Jesus and engage in our groups. She offers lots of wisdom and helpful suggestions, and provides space to pray for the children we meet with week by week. This is a book I’ll be dipping into again and again.”

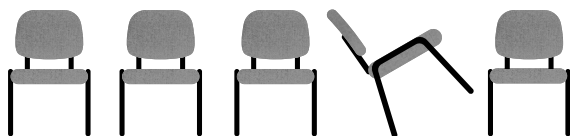
SARAH BRADLEY, Associate Minister (Youth, Children
and Families), Holy Trinity Platt

“Blending theology and practical suggestions, this wonderful book calls us not to be experts but to love each needy young person in front of us. It is God-centred, thoughtful, honest and pastoral. An excellent resource for every kids’ and youth ministry volunteer—and for every church leader!”

ANDY MASON, Mission Director, Co-Mission

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the  goodbook
COMPANY

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*To my wonderful husband, Adam, and my
faithful church family—thank you for all your
prayers and support.*

INTRODUCTION



The moment something clicks in the mind of a child. The deep conversation with a troubled teenager. The day you see a young person act in a Christ-like way, even though it's tough. These are the moments that make children's and youth ministry a joy!

But it can also be a difficult, exhausting and hidden area of ministry. You plan ahead, cut out your crafts, and prepare a fantastic Bible talk with great visual illustrations... only for two children to cry, one to hide under the table, several to have a fight and another to look you dead in the eye and tell you it's boring and they'd rather be *anywhere* else. And we always need more resources: more money, more space, more felt-tips and glue (where does it all go?) and, most of all, more people to help.

In the midst of all that, how do you honestly react to the thought of adding in a young person who has serious learning difficulties or a limiting physical disability, or who is neurodivergent and struggles with social interactions? It can feel overwhelming, can't it?

You want to include them, but it just seems so hard. *If only I knew more about how to handle this*, you think.

How do you protect the child who repeatedly runs out of the room for apparently no reason during group time? How can you disciple the teenage girl who can't read or the boy who won't make eye contact? How can a youth group welcome someone who can't regulate their emotions and is liable to hit someone when they lose a game? What can it look like for a boisterous afterschool club to include someone who finds loud noises very upsetting? And what about all the acronyms that people use to sum up some of these challenges—ASD, ADHD, PDA, EDS? How can you know what all of these mean and what to do?

Believe me, I get it. Having worked as a church-based children's and youth minister for coming up to 17 years, I know these highs and lows well. I know that for paid ministry leaders and busy volunteers alike, the idea of including those with additional needs in our church activities can easily feel out of reach.

This book is designed to give you the tools you need. But first let me encourage and reassure you. You don't need to (in fact you cannot) be an expert in all types of disability or additional need. The biggest and most important thing you can do is something you're already doing: caring for each individual child or young person that God has put into your sphere.

The psalmist's words apply to every one of us:

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made ... I know that full well. (Psalm 139:14)

God knows each and every child and young person who comes near our churches. He made them, and he loves them. As we seek to help them, we have the potential in God's good grace to transform the lives of countless children, young people and their families—and we have the real hope of seeing lives won for eternity.

One Size Does Not Fit All

The aim of this book is to help you to include children and young people with additional needs in the mainstream activities of your church as much as possible.

What do I mean by “additional needs”? I am purposefully using this term to encompass a whole variety of things:

- Learning difficulties such as dyslexia
- Neurodivergence such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Disabilities affecting development or intellect, such as Down's Syndrome
- Physical impairments and disabilities such as sight or hearing loss or mobility issues

The focus will largely be on those who have less severe disabilities and who are able to be supported in mainstream educational settings but struggle in church groups and services. But I am not going to go diagnosis by diagnosis in this book. There are many overlapping challenges felt by young people with very different diagnoses, or no diagnosis at all. Instead we

are going to look at how we can figure out what will work for each individual.

God created all people to be unique and different from every other person. We have our own tastes, skills, likes and dislikes, things we struggle with and things that help us to flourish. That's true whether we have additional needs or not.

It's also true about our churches. Perhaps you have your own building or perhaps you meet in someone else's. Maybe your building is 600 years old, and planning restrictions mean that you're not permitted to add permanent ramps or accessibility aids—or maybe it's newly built and well equipped with modern amenities. You might be at a tiny church plant in a deprived area or a large church in a leafy suburb.

This uniqueness is wonderful, but it means that there are no quick fixes! I can't give you one-size-fits-all answers on how to include children and young people with additional needs in our groups and churches. In one way, I know that that's disappointing—we all love a quick fix—but in another way, it's incredibly freeing, because it means that you don't need to become an expert.

You may have come to this book wanting a better understanding of a specific condition such as ADHD or autism. Maybe you've got a child whose behaviour you just can't manage or whose disability is excluding them from your group. Maybe you're aware that there are young people who haven't even tried coming to your group because they know they could never cope with it. This book will help you to meet these young people where they are and support them to be part of

what you're doing. But it cannot give you the definitive, foolproof fix you might be looking for, because no child or church is exactly the same. Instead, I want to help you to step back and understand a breadth of challenges that young people may face—whether they have a formal diagnosis or a more subtle or even temporary need. We'll think about what it's like to experience those things, how to identify which children and teens might need extra support, and what that support might look like.

It's worth saying again that our job is not to become experts. It's simply to love, serve and seek to understand the particular children, young people and families that God places into our communities—and to bring them into contact with his glorious gospel.

How to Make the Most of This Book

This book is meant to be practical. It contains many different suggestions and ideas for things you can do to support children and young people with additional needs. You won't be able to do them all! Don't go too quickly, or it will feel overwhelming. Take your time.

It may be helpful to have specific children or young people in mind as you read. Stop and pray for those individuals as you go through. Consider what two or three things might help them the most; then pick the easiest one and start with that.

You might like to read this together with others who serve in kids' and youth ministry so that you can share ideas, inspire one another and pray together.

Time to Reflect

In Luke 14, Jesus sees the Pharisees selfishly reject those in need. In response, he tells a parable of a banquet in which the invited guests fail to attend. It's a reference to the heavenly banquet described in Isaiah 25:6—the host is God, and the guests are the religious insiders who have rejected Jesus' teaching. Who will God invite to be part of his kingdom instead? Take a read of what happens next.

Read Luke 14:21-24

- In verses 21 and 23, who does the master send the servant out to invite? Are these people insiders or outsiders?
- The master tells his servant to *compel* them to come in. Why might they need to be compelled instead of simply invited?

The “poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” might represent any kind of religious outsider—it's a big theme in Luke's Gospel that “insiders” such as the Pharisees are cast out and “outsiders” (sinners and Gentiles) are welcomed in. But we need to see that those who are literally crippled or blind or have other unseen disabilities are also today's outsiders, who have less access to the truth of Jesus.

- The people in verse 23 have been driven to the very edge of society. Can you think of any ways in which those with disabilities find themselves on the edges of life today?
- Imagine yourself sitting at a heavenly feast, with Jesus as your host. Alongside you are those with additional needs whom you've had the privilege of welcoming into your church. How can this image encourage and challenge you as you begin this book?

Before you read on, take a moment to pray. Ask God to help you to get excited about being part of his mission to fill up his house with all sorts of different people!

ARE ADDITIONAL NEEDS REALLY NEEDS?



It's often easy to recognise when someone has a physical illness, injury or impairment. Perhaps they use a wheelchair or they wear glasses. But it can be less easy to identify those who have invisible disabilities or understand what's going on behind a child's or young person's behaviour. We can end up asking why they can't behave like everyone else or feeling that they shouldn't get special treatment.

This book is not about convincing you of the reality of additional and behavioural needs, but I do acknowledge that this can be a question and even a topic of contention among a leadership or volunteer team.

In recent years, mental illness has been increasingly recognised as genuine illness. Where, in the past, someone with flu may have been advised to rest and recover while someone who had depression was just told to cheer up, there is now much more awareness of the reality of mental illness as true illness, even if it

seems invisible or hard to understand. In the same way, additional needs such as sensory processing disorder, autism, ADHD and developmental delay are real needs, even if the reasons for them are invisible, and we can't just expect people to get better or change their behaviour easily.

Additional needs may affect someone's impulse control and their ability to regulate their emotions. They can affect how someone experiences and interprets different types of sensory input. They can impact social interaction and limit a person's understanding of social norms and cues. These are all real impairments. A person who looks fine on the outside may be really struggling beneath the surface.

As the church, our job is not to diagnose or make judgements about the diagnoses being made, but to share the good news of the gospel. In many ways, then, it doesn't matter if the children and young people in your care have a diagnosed additional need or not. The real questions are these:

- Are they struggling during group time?
- Is something causing them discomfort or distress?
- Is something stopping them from being able to engage with the truth of God's word?

Ultimately, how can we love, serve and help them so that they can experience the love of Christ and put their trust in him? That's what I want to help you to do through this book.

1. DISABILITY AND THE HEART OF GOD



Did you know that if those affected by various disabilities were to be classed as a people group, they would be among the least reached group in the world? This is because disability cuts across all age, gender, religious, political, social and cultural boundaries—and because those with disabilities are often hidden within our societies, finding it harder to access things the rest of us take for granted. That can include mainstream schools and local churches. The result is that a high proportion of people with additional needs are unreached by the gospel.

But the good news of Christ is unstoppable! The gospel also cuts across age, gender, religious, political, social and cultural boundaries—and, importantly, across all abilities. The gospel is for everyone.

God cares deeply for the marginalised and excluded (often summarised in the Bible as widows and orphans or the foreigner and the poor), and he wants his people

to do the same. He describes himself in Psalm 68:5 as “a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows”. And in Isaiah 1:17 he commands his people, “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” This is exactly what we see Jesus doing again and again in the Gospels.

When we seek to love and welcome those with additional needs then, we reflect the heart of God, and we get to be part of something bigger than we can imagine. There is an unreached people group where you live! That gives you a huge opportunity to be part of God’s rescue mission for the world.

In this chapter we are going to look at three important truths about the way God sees those with additional needs. Perhaps you are tempted to rush on to the more practical chapters. But I want to encourage you to pause. This chapter sets the vision for why we are doing what we are doing. Without this foundation, we’re liable to get tired out and give up, even if right now we feel excited and passionate. We need to take time to soak up who God is and understand what he thinks about people with additional needs.

Created and Valued

For those with many kinds of additional needs, one of the biggest barriers to belonging is other people’s attitudes. According to the disability charity Scope, 72% of disabled people have experienced negative attitudes in the last five years, and one in three disabled people feel there’s a lot of disability prejudice. 49% of

working-age adults feel excluded from society because of their condition or impairment, and, sadly, 87% of parents of disabled children have felt judged by others.*

But God values those with additional needs—because God values all people who bear his image. The Bible is clear that all men and women are created in God's image, without exception (Genesis 1:26-27). This fact is irrefutable and unchangeable. If we are human, we are made in God's image. That makes us incredibly special!

*You have made [human beings] a little lower than
the angels and crowned them with glory and honour.
(Psalm 8:5)*

And God takes this very seriously:

*Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their
blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made
mankind. (Genesis 9:6)*

People matter! All of us. No one is excluded on any grounds. We are all precious image-bearers of our great God, whatever our abilities.

God even takes the credit for creating what we consider to be disabilities. In Exodus 4, when Moses protests that he can't speak to Pharaoh because he isn't a good speaker, God responds by saying:

*Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes
them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes
them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? (Exodus 4:11)*

* www.business.scope.org.uk/article/accessibility-and-disability-facts-and-figures (accessed 13th Feb. 2026).

If God takes the credit, then we can certainly know that those with disabilities and additional needs are no mistake. They haven't been forgotten or rejected or punished by God. They are created by him, under his sovereign hand, with his good plan in mind.

Spiritually Needy

At the Fall (Genesis 3), sin and its terrible consequences tragically damaged our world. Where there should be health, there is sickness; where there should be life, there is death; where there should be a loving welcome, there are closed doors and hard hearts. Most seriously of all, the Fall has left all people spiritually dead and deserving of God's wrath (Romans 3:23). Just as there is no difference between each person bearing God's image, there is no difference in the spiritual impact of the Fall upon each one of us.

When meeting a man who'd been born blind, Jesus made it very clear that those with additional needs are no more sinful than anyone else, nor are they being punished for specific or generational sin. He explained:

Neither this man nor his parents sinned ... but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:3)

Yet the greatest and most urgent need of those with additional needs, as with all people, is the forgiveness of sins. We see this played out in Jesus' own ministry as he meets a paralysed man in Mark 2:1-12. When the man's friends lowered him through the roof to Jesus' feet, they must have been surprised that Jesus

didn't immediately heal him but instead talked about forgiving sins! But for Jesus, the matter was clear: the man's greatest need was salvation.

Here is the wonderful challenge for us. This man received the forgiveness of sins and eternal life and was healed of his physical disability. Why? Because of Jesus—but also because his friends carried him to the house, negotiated a stretcher up steps on the side of a building and dug a hole through a roof, without care for cost, embarrassment or effort.

What can motivate us to follow their example and put in the effort to share the gospel with people who have additional needs? It's knowing that without Jesus, they will not be right with God. Their level of understanding, if they have intellectual needs, may be different to our own—but they *must* be given the opportunity to turn to Christ.

Part of the Body

What's more, it seems clear from the Bible that when we fail to include those with additional needs, we are missing out on wonderful gifts that only they can bring to the church.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compares the church and its members to a body:

Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving

greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

(1 Corinthians 12:22-25)

Much like a human body, the church has parts which are vitally important but which are hidden from view. The world may consider these parts weak or unpresentable, but in fact they are given special honour by God and are indispensable.

The point is that there should be no division among Christians. Every believer is equally part of the body, and we support each other with the special gifts God has given us. All the parts should “have equal concern for each other” (v 25). In the church, then, our mindset should not be that of the spiritually “strong” people on one side helping the “weak” people who have nothing to offer. Rather, we are a community of people who are all weak in many ways—having all been impacted by the damage of sin—but whom God has also made strong in different ways so that we can help one another.

And so Paul says that the “weaker” and “unpresentable” parts are *indispensable* to the church. They are indispensable in God’s kingdom. They have special gifts to offer for the good of the body.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian living in Germany under Nazi rule—a time when those considered weak, including those with disabilities, were being systematically wiped out. He wrote:

Every Christian community must realise that not only do the weak need the strong, but also the strong

cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship. (Life Together, p. 72)

Without the deliberate inclusion of those with additional needs in our churches, we are not only causing others to miss out on being part of God's family on earth; we are also causing our own churches to miss out on the wonderful gifts that God gives to his people through those with additional needs! They have unique perspectives and life experiences, talents and abilities... and they may even provide us with unique opportunities to stand out from our culture through offering radical welcome and self-sacrificial service.

Going the Extra Mile

Welcoming, evangelising, including and discipling those with additional needs can be daunting and challenging. It does call for change, and it does call us to go the extra mile. But as we put in the extra effort, we reflect something of the gospel effort that God put in for us all.

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

(Romans 5:7-8)

Praise God that in his almighty hands, our small steps, far smaller than Jesus' sacrifice, can change eternal futures.

Time to Reflect

Let's go back to Luke 14—a different part this time. Jesus is at the house of a prominent Pharisee, and he sees how the religious experts seek honour for themselves by taking the best seats at the table (v 7). He warns them that this is wrong. Then he moves on to address their practice of inviting only their friends, relatives and rich neighbours to their parties.

Read Luke 14:12-14

- What are the Pharisees' motives for inviting their friends and rich neighbours? How is this different from Christ's motivations for us?
- These verses are not saying that those with disabilities have nothing to offer us—we have seen that they have wonderful gifts to share. But what is the greater reward in view here?
- What different motives do you have for who you serve and how in your ministry? How do Jesus' words challenge and encourage you?

Ask Jesus to give you the same motivations as he had when he came to welcome and include those who cannot repay him.