

Leading Support Groups and Bible Studies



Special needs parents often long to spend time with others who understand their daily challenges. Isolation is a common struggle among parents raising children who have disabilities and among caregivers of adults with disabilities. As your church seeks to serve families affected by disability, you might consider offering some sort of support group or life group that will help them combat isolation, build community, and nurture their souls. All three of the following models can be structured for couples, for moms, for dads, or for caregivers.

The expressed needs of the families and the gifting of your support team are important to consider as you plan. Holding these groups at times when childcare or existing special needs ministries are offered can be a great idea as it allows parents the opportunity to attend without concern for the care of their loved one.

There are three different styles of groups you might consider:

1. **Support Groups** are designed to provide a gathering place where individuals facing similar life-experiences can openly share, pray, and provide mutual support. Gatherings may include a short devotional or spiritual insight, but these groups do not generally focus on studying the Bible. We suggest that prayer is a central component of each gathering. Support groups can be a great outreach to the community. Providing support in a safe environment is a wonderful way to open the doors of the church and share the love of Christ with families affected by disability.
2. **Bible Studies** provide an opportunity for people to gather together for the purpose of studying and applying Scripture. Bible Study groups generally benefit from the sharing of prayer requests and fellowship outside of Bible study meetings.
3. **Life Groups** are a combination of Bible studies and support groups. They generally include a time of studying the Word, but they are designed to help a group of people truly live life together. While some families will prefer to be mixed with other families not affected by disability, others will prefer to meet with families facing the same struggles.

Potential Structure of a Support Group

1. We recommend starting with 15 to 20 minutes of time for everyone to arrive, say hello, and get settled. Providing snacks and beverages help encourage unstructured “catching up.” New groups often benefit from an “icebreaker” to help facilitate conversation.
2. Share a relevant devotion or video that provides a launching point for discussion.
3. Allow 20 minutes to discuss and unpack the material presented, addressing how it relates to families affected by disabilities.
4. Share prayer requests and end in prayer.

General Guidelines

We recommend sharing the following guidelines with the participants in any of these groups to encourage a safe and authentic environment of belonging:

1. Each person's thoughts and feelings are invaluable and should be handled with loving care.
2. Please respect others by keeping a non-judgmental mindset as they share ideas, opinions, and experiences.
3. Please share your burdens as prayer requests so we can pray for one another. God is the ultimate comforter and encourager who desires to meet us in our need.
4. If sharing comes easily to you, please allow God to nudge you when it's time to listen to others. If you are a listener, we ask that you allow God to give you the courage to share when you want to add to the conversation.
5. Many of us come with a heavy heart. If you have a lot on your mind and need to talk more extensively, please don't hesitate to connect with the group leader after our gathering. A group situation may not provide you adequate time to fully discuss your concerns.
6. All of the information shared at these meetings is considered confidential. We want you to share freely without concern that your situation will be shared with others. It is very important to respect the privacy of each family and the privacy of their loved one who is impacted by disability.
7. We understand that sometimes we just need to get something off our minds. You are safe to do that here. In doing so, we ask that all names of schools, teachers, doctors, therapists, etc. are not mentioned.