

## Starting a Disability Ministry - Positive Behavior Support

Creating churches that support students who have social, emotional, and behavioral differences, like those who have intellectual and developmental disabilities, starts by learning the basics of Positive Behavior Support (PBS)!

### **PBS 1 - Set EVERYONE Up For Success**

The first way to make church more supportive for students who have disabilities, is to make it more supportive for everyone! That's right, the success strategies that are essential for students who have intellectual and developmental disabilities are actually helpful for every student. So, the best way to get a disability ministry initiative started is by incorporating positive behavior support into every classroom. Start by understanding what can lead to challenging behavior to begin with, like feeling anxious. Then identify common anxiety triggers and look for ways to reduce them. Reducing anxiety triggers reduces challenging behavior.

### **Anxiety Triggers and How To Reduce Them**

- 1. Not Knowing What To Expect** - Feeling confused can cause students to feel stressed and act out in ways that are not helpful. Reduce confusion by setting very clear expectations about what students are supposed to do and how they are supposed to behave as they do it.
- 2. Transitions** - Abruptly switching from one activity to the next is hard for most people, but extremely hard for many students who have intellectual and developmental disabilities. Preparing them for the switch ahead of time by incorporating both verbal and visual reminders can ease the transition and reduce anxiety.
- 3. Sensory Overload** - Environmental stimuli that feel overwhelming, like loud volume, crowds, fragrances, tight clothing, and bright or flashing lights can increase anxiety, especially for people on the Autism Spectrum. This can actually lead to the fight, flight, or freeze response. Reducing stimuli where you can and having a quiet area available can help students feel calmer.

### **PBS 2 - Have Classroom Tools Available**

Classroom tools, including sensory items and visual communication aids, can help a LOT when it comes to creating a calm classroom. But, this is only if you have them available when and where you need them. So, put a "Buddy Box" in each of your classrooms.

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### PBS 2 - Have Classroom Tools Available Cont'd

Buddy boxes are boxes filled with items that a disability ministry “buddy” may use when helping a student. Some items meet a student’s sensory needs, while others help with communication. Both are very important for support.

#### Buddy Box Items:

**Sensory Items:** Fidgets, Weighted Items, Oil and Water Toys, Noise Cancelling Headphones, etc.

**Visual Communication Items:** Visual Schedule, First/Then Board, Visual Timers, To learn more about Classroom Tools and how to use them, please watch: Wonderful Works Talks - Supportive Resources with Jen Owens. To create your own classroom tools, please visit the online Adapted Discipleship Library or visit [wonderfulworks.net](http://wonderfulworks.net).

### PBS 3 - Students Who Need Further Support

The first step to creating environments that positively support students is to train all of your volunteers in positive behavior support techniques. However, some students will still require either a one-on-one buddy or a special education classroom. So, the best way to support these students is by reaching out to their family, learning more, and planning together.

If a family calls the church before bringing a student in, consider gathering specific information about the student with an intake form, such as the Disability Ministry Child Information Form, before they start. Then call the family and work together on a plan for how to introduce their child to your church and how best to accommodate them in the classroom. If a family brings a student in, who needs accommodation, without contacting the church first, be sure to make them feel welcome and also ask a few important questions at the door. Having a Disability Ministry Quick Question List can help you remember what is important to ask.

To see many of the techniques we discussed today in action with real students and real teachers in a real classroom, check out Wonderful Works Disability Ministry in the Classroom video.