

Hidden Disabilities - Supporting Parents

Hidden disabilities, also known as invisible disabilities, are disabilities that are not immediately apparent to the eye but impact a person's life in one or more areas. They are part of every category of disability, including physical, emotional, developmental and more. However, it is the hidden disabilities that impact behavior, like ADHD or autism, that are often most misunderstood by others, which can lead to assumptions and judgement. For parents of children with hidden disabilities, these assumptions can feel heartbreaking. Below we look at four common experiences of parents and learn how we can help.

Parent Experience 1 - Many parents have been told that their child's behavior is their fault. Because hidden behavioral disabilities can be difficult to diagnose, sometimes it can take years for a child to get the right diagnosis. When this happens, parents often know that their child is struggling but can't explain why to others. Many times this leads to assumptions that the child's behavior is a result of poor parenting. Understandably, this can give many parents a fear of being judged and can lead to isolation.

The best way to help is by never making assumptions. If you don't understand why a child acts the way he does or why a family parents differently than you do - that's OK. You don't need to understand. You just need to be kind. Get to know the family and develop a real relationship. When a parent does open up to you, let them share at their own pace.

Parent Experience 2 - Parents are often learning about their child's behaviors as they go. This means that they are not going to have all the answers to every issue. So if a child is struggling in your classroom, instead of seeking a solution from parents - seek a partnership. This means invite them in to talk through issues together, set a tone of collaboration where the end goal is to agree on a plan, and then keep the communication open.

Parent Experience 3 - Parents want you to see the good stuff too. Parents of children who have hidden disabilities really, really love their children. And they want you to really, really love them too. So look past behaviors and discover the God given gifts and talents underneath. Be sure to tell parents about the great things that you see in their child.

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Parent Experience 4 - Supporting parents means standing up for them too.

The truth is that there will be people who do not understand hidden disabilities. If you see someone speaking judgmentally about a family when they are not present, or excluding them from an activity, then shut that down. Make it clear, in a kind way, that church is for everyone and everyone should be included and treated with respect. Speaking up isn't always easy, but it is always right.

One More Thing...

Think about a time when someone made an assumption about you. How did that make you feel? How do you wish they would have treated you instead?

**“Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you.
This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.**

Matt 7:12

Always remember the Golden Rule!