

Special Needs and Disabilities Handbooks

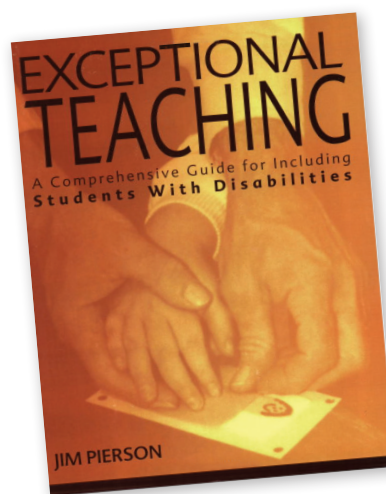
The number of children with “disabilities,” “exceptional abilities” or “special needs” seems to grow every year. Our terminology continues to evolve, creating categories that are as inclusive as possible—words that are not judgmental or derogatory, words that remind us that all children can learn and that not all children learn in the same way. Most of us have heard of autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, visual and auditory impairments, physical impairments, and more. Students in schools have individualized education plans (IEPs) or something similar to meet the variety of challenges they face.

Although our parishes don't keep statistics on such matters, I am certain that if we were to do a poll, we would learn that every parish has members—children and adults—with disabilities. Hopefully, the time has passed in all of our communities when a child with an exceptional ability was kept away from the community or, even worse, discouraged from attending. All of us, including those with special needs, are created in the image and likeness of God, capable of experiencing the love of God and of participating in the life of the Church. There is no intellectual, physical or psychological requirement for being baptized and receiving communion or unction. Admittedly, a much larger discussion needs to be held in the life of the Church about these matters.

Meanwhile, Church school teachers, youth ministers and other parish workers need strategies for ministering to those with exceptional abilities. These three books offered by Christian publishers are a good place to begin until we have developed an Orthodox Christian text. (The Department of Religious Education is beginning to work with people to contribute to such a text.) As “generically Christian,” all three books have a biblical basis and include lessons with biblical themes. Of course, an Orthodox Christian-produced resource would be based on our

multisensory environment and our understanding of the human person. In many respects, our richly sensory liturgical environment and our array of practices and disciplines already creates an inclusive environment and offers many approaches for those with different learning abilities.

In a workshop at the 2011 Orthodox Institute at Antiochian Village, participants were encouraged to purchase *Exceptional Teaching*. Those who already knew of the book sang its praises. I came across the other two books while I was searching online for a copy of *Exceptional Teaching*. All three books had to be purchased used at various prices online. And there are plenty of other texts out there.



Exceptional Teaching: A Comprehensive Guide for Including Students with Disabilities

Jim Pierson (Standard Publishing, 2002)

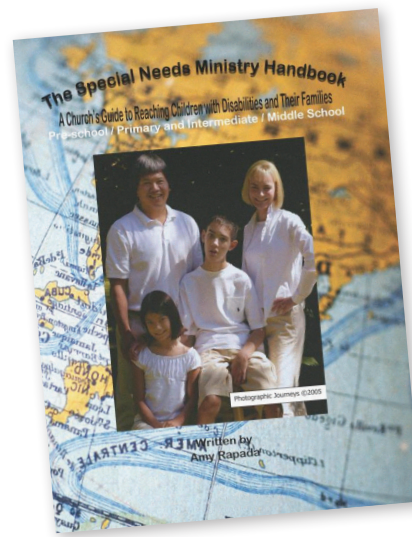
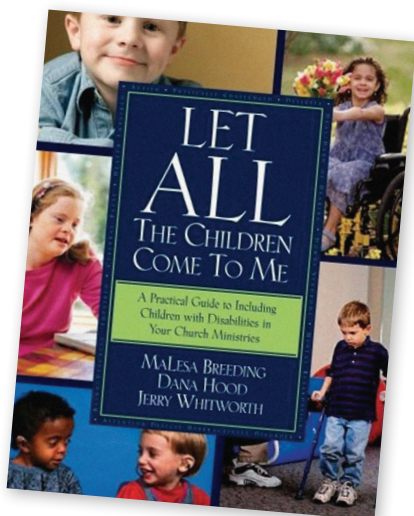
Exceptional Teaching is the most comprehensive and systematic of the three. The sixteen chapters describe a full range of physical, cognitive and health-related disabilities. The table of contents alone will raise your consciousness. Each chapter briefly explains a disability in non-specialist terms and then offers some strategies for including persons with that disability

in your ministry. For example, the chapter on autism reminds us of the range of this spectrum disorder. The chapter includes strategies that can be effective, such as finding tasks that the autistic child can do and involving classmates. The health-related chapters are particularly enlightening. For example, thalassemia or Cooley's anemia is not uncommon among people with Mediterranean ancestry. Depending on its severity, thalassemia can lead to a jaundiced appearance, shortness of breath after strenuous activity, or growth issues. Teachers and youth workers should be aware of how children with this disorder might respond to any planned physical activities or games. In virtually all instances of disabilities, communicating with parents is an essential step that will allow a teacher to better understand what a student is capable of doing, where he or she has limitations, and strategies that the family already uses.

Let All the Children Come to Me: A Practical Guide to Including Children with Disabilities in Your Church Ministries

MaLesa Breeding, Dana Hood and Jerry Whitworth
(David C. Cook Publishing, 2006)

Let All the Children Come to Me is very practical and helpful for a teacher's understanding of disability. It includes creative handouts in a workbook-like format for the teacher's use. This book presents many real-life questions from the classroom experiences of teachers. The strategies are simple and straightforward. For example, the book offers a flow chart about how to modify a lesson to meet the need of a particular student.



The Special Needs Ministry Handbook: A Church's Guide to Reaching Children with Disabilities and Their Families

Amy Rapada (CGR Publishing, 2007)

The Special Needs Ministry Handbook looks more at how to arrange a classroom to better minister to learners with disabilities. This book is helpful because it offers specific strategies for preschool/primary and intermediate/middle school groups. This book has a particularly strong discussion about how to communicate that the parish is inclusive. For example, saying, "We're not really equipped to handle your child's disabilities" communicates a non-inclusive approach. Instead, we should say, "What accommodations and modifications would be most helpful in adapting to your child's disabilities or learning differences?" This book also has reproducible pages for parish use.

No single book is going to respond to all of the questions that those in ministry may have about their exceptional students. We also need to remind ourselves that most of our youth workers and teachers are not experts in these areas. But it is likely that all parishes have someone who is familiar enough with disabilities (e.g., a teacher, a nurse or a physician) that he or she could serve as a resource for a youth or religious education program. All three books emphasize that all students can learn, and that the task of a teacher is to determine what the student can do. They are also very clear in reminding the reader that communicating with parents is the most important step. These three books could spark an important discussion among parish youth workers and teachers about their attitudes and approaches.