

NCPD
Disabilities Ministry Toolkit
Teen Group Plan

The key concepts of this program are:

- Get a partner and keep the work and the teens in prayer
- Get pastor/parish approval
- Make it spiritual first, then social
- Build community with parents of teens who have a disability
- **Find professionally trained adult volunteers**
- **Store confidential records in a secure file in the parish**
- Find Catholic peer mentors at local schools
- Get liability, privacy waivers; get child protection training as needed

The goal is to provide a spiritual community for teens with and without disabilities in your parish. This community might meet monthly to come together for Mass, a meal and an activity. The purpose of the program is to be supportive and inclusive **spiritually**...to make the parish a real home for young persons who have developmental or physical disabilities. A secondary but equally important goal is to introduce more “typical” peers to see the face of Christ in all persons, including those with a disability.

This plan was developed by the disAbilities Ministry at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Washington, DC. (www.blessedsacramentdc.org) We thank Rev. Msgr. Thomas Duffy, our former pastor who helped inaugurate this ministry, Rev. Msgr. John Enzler, our current pastor of Blessed Sacrament, the pastoral staff, professional volunteers, the teens and their families for their support in serving all God’s people.

The Teen Group should be an opportunity to develop or improve social skills and pragmatic language skills. There are limited social opportunities for teens with disabilities, so Teen Group helps fills that void. The program also provides much needed respite for parents, so they are encouraged to enjoy an evening of fellowship together from time to time.

Another guiding principle is to enable teens with disabilities to do the same type of social activities as their fellow teens without disabilities engage in on a Friday or Saturday evening, i.e. bowling or a movie. The last event of the season should be particularly special and memorable. A limo ride to a restaurant has been a highlight of the last session of our Blessed Sacrament Teen Group.

First and foremost, after you pray about this venture, find at least one partner, three more would be ideal. You should not undertake this project alone. It will take at least two persons to create the program and move it forward successfully.

Begin by consulting with your pastor and any related staff---DRE, Youth Group Coordinator, Social Concerns Minister, Health Ministry, etc. Get their approval to explore the idea with families in the parish and in surrounding parishes. You should also talk to the Parish Council and if there is a parish school, the school's principal. All stakeholders need to be consulted early. You might want to reach out to your diocese's disability ministry director or director of deaf ministries, to ask for support and guidance. Much of the workload would need to be carried out by the coordinators and group directors and not parish staff, unless, of course, the parish staff has the capacity to take on a new project.

The program has a Catholic imprint, so all teens in the program should be baptized Catholics, hopefully receiving some of the sacraments. Some young persons with disabilities have not been fully catechized, so that may be a starting point for your efforts. More information on sacramental preparation and catechesis can be found at the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, at www.ncpd.org.

You will also be recruiting more typical peer mentors from high schools in the area, so start contacting the local Catholic high schools, Best Buddies programs Newman Centers and religious education programs. Some of these students usually need service hours, which the Teen Group program coordinator should be able to authorize. Peers like to volunteer with their friends, so try to encourage the more typical teens to volunteer together.

Teens will need some training to help them better understand disabilities, to ensure they understand when it's appropriate to limit a teen's behavior, to understand how to help an individual with a disability without "doing it all for them." This training should involve a brief overview of the *Pastoral Statement of US Catholic Bishops on Persons with Disabilities* (found at www.ncpd.org), as the Pastoral explains the church's foundational teachings. The NCPD webinar on the 30th Anniversary of the Pastoral Statement held on August 13, 2008, has further information on the history and related church documents. Those resources are in the "Webinar" section of the NCPD website.

Consider asking the peers make a firm commitment to participate in the Teen Group for at least one season. Individuals with disabilities rely on the predictability of situations.

This model requires that you first build some kind of community around the idea of a peer group for teens who have disabilities. That process may take several meetings or months to achieve. Begin with one or more "Town Hall" meetings at your parish. Find out *what kind of disabilities* the potential teens in the program

have, so you will know what kind of services and volunteer support they will need. Of course, the embedded goal of every meeting is to enrich relationships and build community; so begin always in prayer and then create a structure to make every meeting count. (See “Ministry of Meetings” in the Toolkit for more information.)

Next, look for adult volunteers who have *specific training* in supporting the kind of young persons likely to be in your group. *This is key to the success of the program.* These volunteers might be special educators, physical or occupational therapists, paraeducators, respite providers, ABA trained facilitators, nurses etc. The emphasis here is on a team of volunteers who work professionally with the population you will be serving. These volunteers can be recruited through your parish, local online networks, undergraduate or graduate programs at local universities, private practices, and so on. Parents of children who tend to “wander” will feel much more secure leaving their child in the hands of volunteer professionals. One or two of these volunteers will become your Program Coordinator(s). A good rule of thumb is to have 1 adult chaperone for every 10 teens plus one more adult so that in the event of an emergency, there is at least one adult supervisor.

Develop an application form for parents. Include relevant contact information, health concerns, information on feeding, toileting, medication, behavioral issues, communication issues, privacy language etc. **These records must be collected in conformance with your diocesan guidelines (HIPPA will apply), be kept confidential, and be housed in a secure file at the parish.** You might need to consider providing a “one-on-one” for some teens; make sure you ask on the application if the student has this kind of service at school. Look on the web for templates for this kind of application. Have it reviewed by a parish staff member before distributing it. A liability waiver will have to be crafted; again, look for this kind of material on the web, or ask your parish or parish school if they have boilerplate liability language. Child protection training may be required by your parish or diocese; contact parish staff and get the volunteers certified early in the process. And have a unified cell phone list of parents and teen phone numbers, and make sure all parents have the cell phone contact information for the volunteer leaders and coordinators.

Hold a “Getting Started” event with parents, teens and peer mentor teens, volunteers and parish staff. Brainstorm ideas for events, places to go, etc. Enlist a parent to coordinate contact with other parents and process applications. Make sure you keep the parish informed of your progress by submissions to bulletin, parish newsletter, etc.

Your first event should be very simple...a Mass, a meal and an activity (age and stage appropriate, of course). Best practices might include staying at the parish center the first time, so that the group can get to know one another by doing something like preparing sandwiches for a soup kitchen or making and sending

cards to a nursing home. Travel off site needs to be planned carefully. Some events might involve walking to a movie theater nearby, but others might require the use of transportation such as buses. Your parish school would have information on how to arrange for private transportation. For a group over 10 teens, carpooling is not practical, at least not in major urban areas. School bus rentals tend to be the cheapest alternative. Discuss with the pastor and or parish finance council whether the parish can underwrite the cost of a bus. Otherwise a fundraising drive will be necessary.

Costs come in to play when planning these events. User fees provided by parents, possibly the parish or a donor are likely sources of money for your program. Even if you charge \$30 per outing, it's less than the cost of an evening of babysitting. Ensure you provide some sort of sponsorship for those who cannot afford the cost. Low income families who have a child with a disability particularly need the support and welcome of a Teen Group, but they are sometimes inadvertently overlooked. They don't apply, because they think they can't afford it. The teen volunteers may or may not be asked to pay for their own meals, tickets, etc. But the adult volunteers should not be expected to pay, so the user fees must incorporate these additional costs. Accurate record-keeping of receipts is essential. Have a plan to create an account at your parish to take in user fee funds and pay out expenses.

We wish you success in this venture! We pray that this work may bring all of us closer to Body of Christ.

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