**GCCHM Leadership Certification**

**Level VII, Course #2**

**TIPS FOR WORKING WITH SPECIAL-NEEDS TEENAGERS**

**Linda Mei Lin Koh, GC Children’s Ministries**

**(Presenter’s Notes)**

**INTRODUCTION**

Nine years ago, John Pape and his family received some crushing news. His son Drew, who was almost 2, had a little-known genetic syndrome called 22q. It’s a micro-deletion of the 22nd chromosome (they don’t understand it, either). On the one hand, they were relieved to finally have a diagnosis that explained his missed developmental milestones. On the other hand, something was wrong, and they were devastated. (Search “22q” to learn more about our family’s struggle.)

He has asked God many times to heal his son. He has prayed and wrestled with this a lot. However, today, he’s blessed and even thankful for the lessons he has learned on this journey. They’ve helped him become a better parent and youth worker. Here are 10 tips he’ll like to share:

1. **Treat Kids with Special Needs as Normal Whenever You Can**

* Like most boys, Drew loves monster trucks and hates school. He isn’t the same as other kids, but who is?
* He can’t do everything, but he can do most things.
* Encourage special-needs kids to participate whenever possible.

**2. Be Honest When the Fit Isn’t Good**

* Like most youth groups, it can get a bit crazy. Games such as dodgeball are potentially dangerous when kids can’t protect themselves.
* Either have an adult sit and watch the game with a student or choose another game.
* For the most part, parents prefer honesty about any risks that might be involved.

**3. Focus on Teenagers’ Strengths, Not Their Limits**

* Every kid knows a lot about something. Find each young person’s specialty and let them use that knowledge and skill. For example, “my son isn’t afraid to read out loud, so I call on him to read when I can.”

**4. View All Aspects of Youth Group from The Perspective of Special-Needs Kids**

For example, Tina,\* a high schooler who’s in a wheelchair, couldn’t reach the snack counter in the youth room, so they made some adjustments.

**5. Encourage Friendship—and Be a Friend**

* Every kid needs friends. For special-needs kids, friends are tough to find.
* Leaders need to get to know the young person, too.
* Work to find something you both enjoy.

“One of the coolest things I’ve seen at church was when a kid took Sam\*, an autistic boy, under his wing and led him to a small group. Later I pulled that kid aside and thanked him for being a friend to Sam. I struggled to befriend Sam until I found common ground with him (Pokémon Go—don’t judge!).

**6. Enjoy the Journey**

Sam now loves coming to youth group, which is a first for him. Another first: In a reindeer race, he was pulled around the gym on a bed sheet. His team won and had a blast. Sam came to a lock-in, spending his first night away from home. He raked leaves for his first service project. That’s a lot of firsts we’ve experienced together, and we’ve enjoyed everyone.

**7. Realize That Caring for One Person Communicates Care to Everyone**

* When you show students that special-needs kids are welcome and valued, you let everyone

know they’re welcome and valued.

* Kids without special needs will realize they’ll always be accepted, no matter what they’ve done.

**8. Remember That Special Needs Mean Special Abilities**

* Recently in Sunday school, kids were asked to name a compassionate person they knew. They named, “Drew Pape.” Because Drew has been through a lot, he’s very kind and soft-hearted. He has a heart of gold.
* His father probably couldn’t raise such a compassionate kid without this syndrome. He might have cared too much about his athletic abilities or academic performance.

**9. Please Ask.**

* If you don’t understand a behavior or notice physical or social differences, talk to a parent.
* Heartfelt inquiries let people know you care. It’s better to have an awkward conversation than for a young person to be ignored or stared at.
* Don’t treat special-needs kids and families like the plague. Your kid won’t lose any chromosomes hanging out with my kid.

**10. As A Church, Embrace Special-needs Families**

* Educate yourself about the condition. Search online or ask for information. Pray (for the young person, the family, schoolwork, doctor visits, and their future). Be there when you can; send a card when you can’t. If an event is being held for the condition, support or attend it.
* Kids who are different shouldn’t feel unwelcome. That’s unacceptable (see Luke 14:12-14). As the body of Christ, we can do better.

**Jesus specialized in special-needs ministry; let’s follow his example.**