

Buddy Program Starter Guide

Start with one child and one buddy



A buddy is a trained volunteer who comes alongside a child, teen, or adult with a disability so they can take part in church with their friends. This guide walks you from idea to first Sunday: how it works, the roles, launch steps, screening, training, and every form you need.

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HOW IT WORKS

What is a buddy program?

A buddy helps a person take part in the same room, the same lesson, and the same friendships as everyone else. The goal isn't a separate class. It's **belonging, with support.**

Buddy Coordinator

1 PERSON (OR A PAIR)

- Meets with families and completes the intake
- Recruits, screens, trains, and matches buddies
- Makes the Sunday schedule and covers absences
- Checks in with families every 90 days

Buddy

1 PER PARTICIPANT, IDEALLY 2-3 ON A ROTATION

- Arrives 10 minutes early and reads the About Me page
- Stays with the participant and supports, not does for
- Helps them join in with peers
- Fills in the weekly log for the family

Floater

1 PER WING OR 2-3 CLASSROOMS

- Moves between rooms to give breaks and help
- Is the "second adult" for calm-corner breaks and walks
- Fills in when a buddy is absent
- Great role for new volunteers to learn

FOUR MODELS (MOST CHURCHES USE A MIX)

1-to-1 buddy

One buddy stays with one participant. Best for kids who need steady support for safety, communication, or regulation.

Floater support

A trained helper moves between rooms as needed. Good for kids who mostly do well with small supports.

Shared buddy

One buddy supports 2-3 participants in the same class. Good for kids who need a little help at certain times.

Peer buddy (teens & adults)

A trained student or adult friend sits with, serves with, and hangs out with a peer. Great for youth group and adult ministry.

A BUDDY IS...

- A friend and a bridge to peers
- A helper who gives just enough support
- A calm, consistent face each week
- A partner to the family

A BUDDY IS NOT...

- A babysitter or a one-person separate class
- A therapist or a medical provider
- Someone who does the activity *for* the child
- Someone who is ever alone with the child



"Some men came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four of them."

Mark 2:3 (BSB)

Buddies are the friends on the mat. They make a way so someone can get close to Jesus, together with everyone else.

LAUNCH IT

8-week launch plan

You don't need 20 volunteers to start. Start with one family, one buddy, and one floater, and grow from there.

WEEK BY WEEK

1

Week 1

Get your pastor and ministry leaders on board. Choose a coordinator. Read your child-protection policy.

2

Week 2

Talk with 1-3 families who may want a buddy. Listen first: what would make church work for them?

3

Week 3

Recruit: announcements, bulletin, and personal asks (personal asks work best).

4

Week 4

Applications, references, and background checks, per your policy.

5

Week 5

Train buddies: the Volunteer Inclusion Training plus the buddy do's and don'ts.

6

Week 6

Family intake meetings and About Me pages. Match buddies. Let the child meet their buddy and see the room.

7

Week 7

First Sunday! Buddies send a weekly log. Coordinator checks in with families by phone.

8

Week 8

Debrief with buddies. Adjust the schedule. Celebrate, and plan to grow.

ANNOUNCEMENT (30 SECONDS)

"We believe everyone belongs in God's family, and we want every child and adult to be able to take part here. We're starting a **Buddy Program**: trained volunteers who come alongside people with disabilities on Sunday mornings. No experience needed, just a big heart and a couple of Sundays a month. We'll train you! Talk to [name] or sign up at [link]."

BULLETIN / EMAIL BLURB

Be a Buddy! Our new Buddy Program pairs trained volunteers with kids, teens, and adults with disabilities so they can worship, learn, and make friends right alongside everyone else. Serve 2 Sundays a month. Training provided. Contact [name, email].

PERSONAL ASKS WORK BEST

- Teachers, nurses, therapists, and caregivers
- Grandparents and empty-nesters
- High school and college students (as peer buddies, with an adult)
- Siblings and friends of people with disabilities
- Adults with disabilities, too!

KEEP EVERYONE SAFE

Screening & buddy training

Buddies work closely with vulnerable people, so screen them just as carefully as any children's volunteer. **Always follow your church's child-protection policy.**

SCREENING CHECKLIST

- ☐ Application (in this guide)
- ☐ Two references (not family)
- ☐ Background check, per your policy
- ☐ Attended church for the time your policy requires
- ☐ Interview or coffee with the coordinator
- ☐ Completed Volunteer Inclusion Training
- ☐ Signed child-protection policy
- ☐ For teen buddies: parent permission and always paired with an adult

TRAINING PLAN (ABOUT 90 MINUTES)

- 1 Volunteer Inclusion Training (30 min)**
Facts, words, supports, calm steps, safety.
- 2 Buddy do's & don'ts (15 min)**
The list below, with examples.
- 3 Shadow a Sunday (45 min)**
Watch a class and practice with the coordinator or a floater.
- 4 Meet the family**
Before the first Sunday, with the coordinator.

BUDDIES DO

- Arrive early and read the About Me page
- Greet the child by name, at their eye level
- Use the visual schedule and first/then
- Give wait time and offer choices
- Help them join peers, then step back
- Celebrate effort, not just results
- Stay within sight of another adult
- Write a kind, honest note in the weekly log

BUDDIES DON'T

- Be alone with a child, anywhere
- Talk about a child in front of them
- Do the activity for them
- Use hand-over-hand or hold a child down
- Take away a communication device or comfort item
- Give food or medicine without the family's OK
- Post photos or share stories without permission
- Promise things to families you can't keep

Support, don't take over. Think "as much help as needed, as little as possible." Start with a gesture or picture, then a few words, then showing, and only then gentle hand-under-hand help (after asking). Step back as soon as the child can do it on their own.

FORM

Buddy volunteer application

Thank you for wanting to serve! Please fill this out and return it to the Buddy Coordinator.

About you

Name _____ Date _____
Phone _____ Email _____
Address _____ Birthday (if under 18) _____

Serving

I'd like to serve with:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| ☐ Preschool | ☐ Elementary | ☐ Middle school |
| ☐ High school | ☐ Adults | ☐ Wherever needed |

I'm interested in:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| ☐ 1-to-1 buddy | ☐ Shared buddy | ☐ Floater |
| ☐ Peer buddy | ☐ Sensory room helper | ☐ Substitute / on-call |

I can serve:

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| ☐ Every week | ☐ 2 Sundays a month | ☐ 1 Sunday a month |
| ☐ Midweek / events | ☐ First service | ☐ Second service |

Experience & heart

Do you have experience with people with disabilities (family, work, school, friends)? No experience is needed.

Why would you like to be a buddy?

References & screening

Reference 1 (name & phone) _____

Reference 2 (name & phone) _____

- ☐ I agree to a background check as required by church policy
☐ I have read and will follow the child-protection policy
☐ I will complete buddy training before serving
☐ I understand information about participants is private

Signature _____ Date _____

Parent/guardian signature (if under 18) _____ Coordinator use: approved on _____

FORM · COMPLETE TOGETHER

Family intake

The coordinator fills this in with the family, in a relaxed conversation. It pairs with the **About Me** page in the Adapted Kids Ministry Guides.

About the participant

Name _____ Preferred name _____

Age / grade _____ Parent / guardian _____

Phone _____ Email _____

What they love

Favorite things, people, songs, topics, and activities:

Communication

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| ☐ Talks in sentences | ☐ Uses some words | ☐ Signs |
| ☐ Pictures / picture cards | ☐ Communication device or app | ☐ Gestures / body language |

How they say yes, no, "help," and "I need a break":

What helps

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| ☐ Visual schedule | ☐ First / then | ☐ Headphones |
| ☐ Fidget | ☐ Movement breaks | ☐ Quiet space |
| ☐ Extra time | ☐ Seat near the door | ☐ A familiar buddy each week |

Signs they're getting overwhelmed, and what calms them:

Health & safety

Allergies / diet _____ Medical needs _____

Bathroom help needed? _____ Tends to run off? _____

Mobility / equipment _____ Emergency contact _____

Goals for church

What would make church a win for your family? Anything we should avoid?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Photos OK to share (with the family's review) | ☐ OK to share this form with assigned buddies |
|--|--|

COORDINATOR TOOLS

Buddy match sheet & schedule

Match on personality, interests, and consistency. Two or three buddies who rotate is often better than one who serves every week and burns out.

MATCH SHEET

PARTICIPANT	CLASS / ROOM	MODEL	BUDDY A	BUDDY B	NOTES

MONTHLY SCHEDULE · MONTH: _____

PARTICIPANT	WEEK 1	WEEK 2	WEEK 3	WEEK 4	WEEK 5
Floater(s)					

GOOD MATCHES

- Shared interests (trains, music, animals, sports)
- A calm, steady personality for kids who get overwhelmed
- Same buddies each month for consistency
- Buddy and family can communicate easily

WHEN A BUDDY IS ABSENT

- Buddy texts the coordinator as early as possible
- Floater or on-call buddy steps in
- Tell the family before they arrive, if you can
- Show the child a photo of today's helper

PRINTABLE

Weekly buddy log (2 per page)

Buddy fills this in after church and sends it home. Keep it kind and honest. Share anything serious in person.



My Sunday with my buddy

Name: _____ Date: _____ Buddy: _____



Today we learned:

A great moment:

Something that was hard, and what helped:

Next week, let's try:

Today I...

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ sang or danced | ☐ prayed |
| ☐ heard the Bible story | ☐ made a craft |
| ☐ played a game | ☐ had snack |
| ☐ took a break | ☐ made a friend |

How was today?



Talk about it at home:

My Sunday with my buddy

Name: _____ Date: _____ Buddy: _____



Today we learned:

A great moment:

Something that was hard, and what helped:

Next week, let's try:

Today I...

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ sang or danced | ☐ prayed |
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| ☐ took a break | ☐ made a friend |

How was today?



Talk about it at home:

CHECK IN & GROW

Program evaluation

Every 90 days, ask families and buddies how it's going. Small, quick adjustments keep a program healthy.

FAMILY SURVEY

QUESTION	YES!	MOSTLY	A LITTLE	NOT YET
My family feels welcome at church	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/loved one is part of the group, not separate	☐	☐	☐	☐
The buddy understands what helps	☐	☐	☐	☐
We get helpful updates	☐	☐	☐	☐
We're attending more often than before	☐	☐	☐	☐
What's working best?	What should we change?			

BUDDY SURVEY

QUESTION	YES!	MOSTLY	A LITTLE	NOT YET
I feel prepared to serve	☐	☐	☐	☐
I know who to ask for help	☐	☐	☐	☐
My schedule feels doable	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel part of a team	☐	☐	☐	☐
I'd invite a friend to be a buddy	☐	☐	☐	☐
What's working best?	What should we change?			

COORDINATOR: TRACK THESE

- ☐ Number of participants and buddies
- ☐ Attendance before vs. after joining
- ☐ Buddy retention (still serving at 6 months?)
- ☐ One story of belonging to share (with permission)

CELEBRATE YOUR BUDDIES

Say thank you often: a note from a family, a buddy appreciation Sunday, fun socks on 3.21, or a certificate from the Volunteer Inclusion Training. Buddies who feel valued keep serving.