

Walking Alongside Families

Show up, and keep showing up



A care and support guide for pastors, care teams, and church friends. It covers welcoming a new baby with Down syndrome, supporting a family after any diagnosis, hospital stays, meals and practical help, respite nights, prayer, and where to find trusted resources. Care isn't a program. It's showing up, again and again.

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A NEW BABY OR A NEW DIAGNOSIS

Celebrate the baby first

When a baby with Down syndrome is born, the family needs the same thing every new family needs: joy, meals, and people who love their child. Treat this birth like every other birth. Say **“Congratulations!”**

TRY SAYING
INSTEAD OF

Congratulations!
What’s the baby’s name?

I’m so sorry.

She’s beautiful.
Can I hold her?

Did you know before she was born?

How are *you* doing?

God only gives special children to special parents.

I’d love to bring dinner Tuesday.
Does that work?

Let me know if you need anything.

I don’t know much about Down syndrome, but I want to learn.

At least they’re always happy.

We’re praying for you, and we’re here.

Everything happens for a reason.

DO THE NORMAL THINGS

- Send a card and a gift like you would for any baby
- Announce the birth the way you usually do (with permission)
- Plan a baby shower or dedication celebration if your church does that
- Use the baby’s name, not “the Down syndrome baby”

LET THE FAMILY LEAD

Some parents feel joy right away. Some feel shock, worry, or grief for the future they expected, and then joy. All of this is normal. Listen more than you talk, don’t fix feelings, and follow their lead on what to share.

FOR ANY DIAGNOSIS

The same care applies when a family learns their child is autistic, has another disability, or when an adult receives a new diagnosis. Ask how they’re doing, offer practical help, keep inviting them, and remember that their child is still exactly who they were yesterday.

A PASTOR’S NOTE

Families sometimes hear hurtful theology, such as disability as a punishment or a lack of faith. Gently counter it with the truth that every person bears God’s image (Genesis 1:27). If questions about prenatal testing or hard choices come up, lead with compassion, listen, and meet privately.

WELCOME-BABY BASKET

- A baby book or blanket with the baby’s name
- A meal gift card
- A card signed by the kids’ ministry
- A children’s Bible for later

IN THE FIRST YEAR

- A card at 1 month, 6 months, and 1 year
- Meals after any hospital stay
- A 3/21 card or fun socks on World Down Syndrome Day

KEEP INVITING

- To small group, even if they can’t come
- To serve, when they’re ready
- To connect with another family (with permission)

PRACTICAL HELP

Help that actually helps

“Let me know if you need anything” puts the work on the family. Instead, offer something specific with a day and time.

PRACTICAL HELP MENU



Meals

Set up a meal sign-up. Ask about allergies, and use disposable containers.



Rides

To appointments, therapies, or to pick up siblings from school.



Sibling care

A fun afternoon for brothers and sisters, who often get less attention during busy seasons.



Home help

Laundry, a grocery run, yard work, or cleaning. Say exactly what you'll do.



Company

Sit with them at an appointment, or come over for coffee. Loneliness is common.



Remember dates

Surgery dates, diagnosis anniversaries, birthdays, and 3/21. A text on a hard day means a lot.

HOSPITAL STAYS

About half of babies with Down syndrome are born with a heart condition, and many have surgery in their first year. Kids and adults with disabilities may also have more hospital stays.

- Ask before visiting. Keep visits short, and stay home if you're sick
- Bring things for the parents: snacks, a phone charger, parking money, a gift card
- Offer to sit in the waiting room during surgery
- Care for the home front: pets, mail, siblings
- Keep caring after they come home. That's often the hardest part

SAY IT LIKE THIS

“I'm going to the store Thursday. Can I pick up groceries for you? Just text me a list.”

“We'd love to take Sam to the park Saturday morning so you can rest.”

Care for the caregivers. Parents and caregivers of people with disabilities often carry a lot, for a long time. Check in on them as people, not just as parents. Invite them to things, include them in serving if they want to, and help them get time to rest and worship.

RESPITE

Parents' Night Out plan

A few free hours for parents to have dinner, rest, or spend time with each other or their other kids, while their children have a great time at church. It's one of the most loved things a church can offer.

THE BASICS

- **When:** once a month or once a quarter, about 3 hours
- **Who:** kids with disabilities *and* their siblings
- **Cost:** free for families
- **Ratio:** 1-to-1 buddies for kids who need them, plus floaters; always two adults in every room
- **Registration:** 2 weeks ahead, with an About Me page for each child
- **Safety:** screened, trained volunteers; your child-protection policy; a nurse or medically trained volunteer if you can

BEFORE THE NIGHT

- ☐ Recruit volunteers (buddies, floaters, check-in, kitchen)
- ☐ Collect registrations, allergies, and medical info
- ☐ Match buddies to kids
- ☐ Plan simple stations and a visual schedule
- ☐ Set up the calm room
- ☐ Text families a reminder with the schedule

SAMPLE EVENING (6:00–9:00)

5:45	Volunteers arrive, huddle, and pray. Read About Me pages.
6:00	Check-in. Parents drop off and head out.
6:15	Welcome games and free play; calm room open.
6:45	Dinner (allergy-friendly, labeled).
7:15	Stations: crafts, music, movement, movie corner.
8:15	Wind down: story, snack, and quiet activities.
8:45	Pickup with a quick, happy note for each family.

MEDICATION & CARE NEEDS

Only give medicine if your church policy allows it, with written instructions and a trained person. Otherwise, ask families to plan around the evening. Bathroom and feeding help follow each family's plan, with two adults.

MAKE IT SPECIAL FOR PARENTS

A coffee shop gift card, a local restaurant discount, or a simple "Enjoy your night!" card at drop-off. Send a photo (with permission) of their kids having fun.

ORGANIZE CARE

Care team roles & meal sign-up

Even a small team of 4-6 people can surround a family with care. Share roles so no one burns out.

CARE TEAM ROLES

Care Team Leader

Keeps the list of families, organizes help, and makes sure no one falls through the cracks.

Meal Coordinator

Sets up meal sign-ups and passes along allergies and preferences.

Prayer Partners

Pray regularly and send notes or texts. Keep requests private.

Visitors

Visit at home or the hospital (with permission), and bring company and small gifts.

Practical Helpers

Rides, errands, yard work, and sibling outings.

Connector

Links families with other families, community resources, and the buddy program.

MEAL SIGN-UP

For (family) _____

Address _____

Drop-off time _____

Allergies / dislikes _____

Number of people _____

Cooler on the porch? ☐ yes ☐ no Visit OK? ☐ yes ☐ drop and go

DATE	NAME	PHONE	WHAT I'M BRINGING

Tip: A free online meal-sign-up site works great too. Whatever you use, include allergies, the drop-off time, and a note like "Please don't expect a visit; just leave it at the door" when families need rest.

A SIMPLE CHECK-IN RHYTHM

- Week of a birth, surgery, or diagnosis: daily texts, meals
- First month: weekly check-ins
- Ongoing: monthly, plus hard dates and celebrations

KEEP IT PRIVATE

Share family news only with their permission, and only with the people who need it to help. Prayer requests can be shared as "a family in our church" unless they say otherwise.

PRINTABLE

Prayer cards (4 per page)

Write a short prayer or encouragement, and mail or hand-deliver it. Great for care teams, small groups, and kids' classes.



We're praying for you!

Dear _____,

With love, _____

"Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Galatians 6:2



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TRUSTED RESOURCES

Where to point families

You don't have to have all the answers. These organizations do great work. Local groups are often the most helpful of all, so find yours and add them below.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS)

ndss.org

Information, advocacy, and resources for every age.

National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC)

ndsccenter.org

Family support, conferences, and a helpline for new parents.

Global Down Syndrome Foundation

globaldownsyndrome.org

Research, medical care guidelines, and education.

Autism Society of America

autismsociety.org

Information, a national helpline, and local affiliates.

The Arc

thearc.org

Advocacy and local chapters for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Joni and Friends

joniandfriends.org

Christian disability ministry resources, training, and family retreats.

LOCAL RESOURCES (FILL IN)

Look for your local Down syndrome association (in Central Ohio: DSACO, dsaco.net), autism groups, county developmental disabilities board, early intervention program, children's hospital family resources, and parent support groups.

ORGANIZATION	CONTACT	WHAT THEY HELP WITH

FAMILIES IN OUR CHURCH WHO'D LOVE TO HELP

Experienced parents are often the best encouragers for new ones. With their permission, keep a short list of families willing to connect.

Organization details change. Check websites before sharing. Listing an organization does not mean it endorses Celebrate 3.21 or this guide. Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.