

The Unbreakable Boy

Discussion Guide for Churches



provided by <https://OvercomerMinistries.com/>



The church has the opportunity to be a source of **hope** for people affected by disabilities. The Unbreakable Boy shows us the beauty in the world through the eyes of a young man with autism. There's so much joy, but there are times that life tries to break us. God wants to give us "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair". (Isaiah 61:3) With God it's possible to be unbreakable, but not everyone has this hope. The truth is that people affected by disabilities, like Austin, are an unreached people group right here in our own neighborhoods. Together we can change these alarming statistics:

- 1 in 4 adults¹ and 1 in 6 children² in the U.S. have a disability according to the CDC, yet **over 80% of churches don't have a ministry for people with disabilities**³
- People with disabilities are **40% more likely to never attend worship**⁴
- 1 in 3 families have left the church because their child with disabilities was not welcome or included⁵
- More than 90% of church-going parents of children with disabilities cited **the most helpful support to be a "welcoming attitude toward people with disabilities"**.⁶

The Unbreakable Boy has many inspiring scenes and themes.

What resonates most with you and why?

The church is shown as a place of acceptance and support for the entire family.

Is this true for your church?

Is a person with disability known and embraced at your church, maybe even literally known and embraced, like Austin was when he ran through the church without his clothes? *(Austin was known by name, scooped up, and hugged. The people at church weren't afraid of him and maybe most importantly, they didn't shame Austin or his parents.)*

What are the social expectations at your church and are they realistic?

Why are these expectations in place? Are they Biblical, social norms, or traditions?

Does your church culture allow for people of all abilities?

Neither the church or the pastor is portrayed as perfect or as having all the answers. We don't have to have all the answers or be the perfect church to help people through life's messy moments. **What did the church offer that helped all the members of the family heal?**

How can your church come alongside and support families affected by disability?

(Be a friend, Pray with Them, Respite Nights, Meals, Errands, Financially...)

In one scene we see a group from the church praying with Teresa in her home. **How can we as a church be a place of belonging for people affected by disabilities during crisis, but also share laughter, and day to day life together?**

Why is it important to include people of all abilities in all aspects of ministry and church life, even events like camp where it involves some risk?

Being invited is poignant for children, adults and families affected by disability. **Do people in your church feel wanted and missed if they are gone?**

Do they feel like they are included, belong, and can contribute?

What Fruit of the Spirit does Austin demonstrate?

(Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control)

Do you think his disabilities hindered or helped develop the fruit demonstrated in his life? What can we learn from people affected by disability?

Can God use people affected by disability in ministry?

Does your church look at people with disabilities with pity or as a vital part of The Body? Are they recognized as having gifts and talents to share, and as indispensable to the Body of Christ? *(1 Corinthians 12:22 - On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.)*

What is the next step you and your church can take to be more disability-friendly and inclusive? Start with the people God has placed in your life and in your church.

4 Stages To Be More Disability -Friendly:

Awareness

Acceptance

Accommodate

Appreciate

What stage are you at personally?

What stage is your church?

What is your next actionable step?

Here are some practical steps to consider:

1. **Awareness:** Educate yourself and the church body about specific disabilities to gain understanding and empathy and to remove fear of the unknown. **For example, did you learn anything through the movie about Autism or OI that helps you understand some of the behaviors that Austin or the family demonstrated that could be misunderstood as rude or strange?**
2. **Acceptance:** Evaluate and prepare your church. Be intentional about accepting people with disabilities. **Is it accessible for people with the various disabilities listed below? Consider physical accessibility, but also is the teaching inclusive, and even attitudes?**
Physical disabilities: mobility, coordination

Cognitive disabilities: thinking, learning, remembering

Sensory disabilities: vision, hearing, sensory processing issues

Communication disabilities: speech, language

Invisible or hidden disabilities: those not easily observed by others, such as dyslexia, autism, ADHD, mental illness, chronic pain, vertigo, and many more

3. **Accommodate**: Remove the barriers that limit accessibility in all areas and provide accommodations and support. Seek help from professionals as needed, but here are some ideas to help you get started. **Free consultation is available to churches from an experienced Occupational Therapist at Overcomer Ministries:**
<https://overcomerministries.com/service/free-consultation/>

Physical accessibility: Look at all areas of the church and ministry events.

(Parking lot, entrance, foyer, sanctuary, halls, classes, various levels of the building, playground, stage, baptismal, and bathrooms.)

- **Are the tables and chairs the proper height for people of varying heights and abilities?** It is hard for anyone to sit still in a chair when their feet are dangling.
- Check for correct table height for a person using a wheelchair, to allow easy access for the arm rests and footrests.
- **Are there options of seating with arm rests?**

Inclusive Learning: **Is information taught in a variety of ways, responses encouraged in multiple formats (written, typed, spoken, drawings...), multisensory learning and teaching encouraged?** Universal Design benefits everyone and this is also true for learning.

<https://overcomerministries.com/universal-access-to-the-gospel/>

Sensory-Friendly Environment: **Is your church too loud, too bright or too crowded for people with hypersensitivities?**

- Consider providing sensory tools like inexpensive noise-reducing headphones and alternative seating, like wobble seats, to allow for extra movement.
- Be sensitive to bright colors and busy patterns on the floors, ceilings or walls which can be overstimulating and distracting.
- **Does the room echo, is there noise from another area or irritating noise like the buzz of fluorescent lights?**
- **Does anyone need a sign language interpreter, captions, or hearing loop?**

- **Is the lighting optimal?** A person with low vision or light sensitivity may need accommodations, such as lamps or light covers.

For more information on how to be sensory-friendly, watch these free videos:

<https://overcomerministries.com/resources/training-videos/sensory-tools-videos/>

<https://overcomerministries.com/sfc>

Communication Support:

- Provide digital supports like text to speech and voice to text.
- Allow extra time for a person to talk and take the extra effort to understand.
- Pay attention to gestures and body language.
- Become familiar with a person's alternative communication device.
- Talk to the person, not the interpreter or caregiver and assume competence and understanding.

Hidden or Invisible Disabilities: Assume that there are people in your church with hidden disabilities and be intentional about creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for people of all abilities. For example, don't call on people to read or speak aloud, ask for volunteers. Be understanding of personal needs such as sitting near or far from the speaker, needing a fidget, wearing headphones, or using a calming strategy.

4. **Appreciate:** Use the gifts and talents of everyone in the church. Encourage people to serve in their strengths and offer support to one another in their weaknesses, we all have strengths and weaknesses.

References:

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3. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/let-no-special-need-hinder-the-spread-of-the-gospel/>
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5. Carter, E. W. (2021). Spirituality and supports for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. In L. M. Glidden, L. Abbeduto, L. L., McIntyre, & M. J. Tassé (Eds.), *APA handbook on intellectual and developmental disabilities* (pp. 419–442). American Psychological Association.
6. https://church4everychild.org/2016/02/09/WHAT-ARE-THE-STATS-ON-DISABILITY-AND-CHURCH/#_EDN7



Bio:

Charla Holst, OTR/L, serves as founder and President of Overcomer Ministries, Inc. where she provides Christ-Centered Occupational Therapy Consultation, training, sensory regulation tools and resources to churches and ministries to overcome obstacles to Jesus. Her vision is for people of all abilities to have access to learn about Jesus, worship with fellow believers, grow in discipleship and serve in ministry. Charla and her husband Dave have 2 adult children, and they have worked together in ministry for over 3 decades of marriage. She is an active member of her local church as Disability Ministry Leader and Children's Bible Study Teacher. During Charla's 32-year career as an Occupational Therapist, she has authored 3 books: Empowering Occupational Therapy, All That I Want To Be and Control Is My Goal. She is currently collaborating to write an inclusive Bible curriculum utilizing the Universal Design for Learning framework. You can find all the Overcomer Ministry disability ministry resources for free at <https://OvercomerMinistries.com>.



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