

How to Make Every Family Matter

COMING ALONGSIDE FAMILIES WITH OUR WORDS

The words we use can unintentionally offend or cause families more pain. Consider the words you use, and think about where you might need to make some changes.

Instead of this . . .	Say this!
<p>Leading with the qualifier or condition . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foster kid• Adopted kid• Special needs kid• Mentally challenged/handicapped kid• Special needs family	<p>Put the child and family first!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kid in foster care• Kid who was adopted• Kid with special needs• Kid with special needs• Family with special needs
<p>Words/phrases that imply quality or 'otherness' . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Is this your <i>real</i> child?"• "What happened to his/her <i>real</i> parents?"• "Are you going to have your <i>own</i> kids too?"• "How do your <i>other</i> kids feel about having a sibling with special needs?"• "She looks completely <i>normal</i> to me!"	<p>Consider:</p> <p>These are hard questions to hear. Adopted and foster children are <i>real</i> children. Adoptive and foster parents are <i>real</i> parents. Parents don't see a difference between their children with special needs and siblings who don't. Even though our intent isn't to be hurtful, special families shouldn't be made to feel like they are <i>other</i>. And questions like these probably don't need to be asked.</p>

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RECONSIDER THESE PHRASES.

“God won’t give you more than you can handle.”

(When a family is under a lot of stress, this isn’t helpful. And to special families, it can feel like God does give more than we can handle which is why we should on Him for strength and community for support.)

“You’ve been blessed with a special angel.”

(True, but there are moments when the family doesn’t feel so blessed. And that’s okay.)

“You are lucky to have them in your family.”

(For families with special needs, this can make parents feel guilty for not feeling more thankful for their situation—situations that can be emotionally, physically, and even financially costly.)

“They are lucky to have you.”

(For children who are adopted or in foster care, this can be confusing and even hurtful as the trauma and loss they experienced didn’t feel like luck when they were going through it.)

“I could never be the incredible parent that you are in these circumstances.”

(This can accomplish the reverse by making a parent feel guilty for not being perfect. Families in special circumstances aren’t superheroes. They are regular families, and that’s how they want to be seen.)

“You’re stronger than me. I could never be a foster parent. Too painful. I’d get too attached.”

(Foster families aren’t stronger. They’re made up of flawed people. And love and loss are the reality. But foster parents are open to loss if it means that vulnerable children get to experience love.)

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MEET PARENTS AND FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE

While we can unintentionally hurt special families with our words and questions, the answer isn't to avoid the topics of special needs, adoption, and foster care altogether. So invite discussion in ways that allow parents to share on their own terms with statements and questions like:

Tell me about your family!

(This is open-ended, and it gives special families permission to share what they want to share.)

How do you feel about this?

(Let them feel how they feel. Then come alongside their emotions with an appropriate response. Don't assume a parent is happy or sad about something. Let them tell you. If they're happy, be happy with them. If they're hurting, hurt with them.)

How can I pray for you?

(The family might have an answer to this question. That's great. But if they don't have one at the ready, don't force a response. Instead, let them know that you'll be praying for them regardless and make yourself available should they ever have something specific that they need prayer for.)