



Special LifeKids and Their Buddies

Sensitivity Training for All LifeKids Leaders

The best part of what we do every weekend is teaching kids from different backgrounds, with different social skills, emotional needs, sensory needs, cognitive abilities, and physical abilities how much Jesus loves them! LifeKids values, teaches, and loves kids uniquely in the same way God uniquely loves each of us. Some of the kids we're trying to reach, though, need more support than you're able to give as a small group leader. That's where LifeKids Buddies step in.

First, let's learn about LifeKids Buddies.

Have you seen a LifeKids Buddy? Do you know what they're doing?

1. **A one-on-one Buddy provides one-on-one leadership and attention to any child who needs additional support.** Buddies consistently work with and get to know the child so the child will feel safe. The child will be safer, too, because there is an extra set of hands and eyes to monitor the child's needs. A one-on-one Buddy may support a child for several weeks, months, or years as needed.
2. **On-Call Buddies work with the Coach.** They can work with any new families who attend church with their special LifeKid. They work with the Coach to identify and work with kids who may need extra support. **Example:** Any child can have an "off" day, causing them to display challenging behavior that requires extra support. At the discretion of the Coach or LifeKids staff, the Buddy on-call can work with you in your room to offer support to a child so you can focus on your small group more easily. They may step in and out of your room to help other kids as needed.
3. **A Buddy partners with the whole family.** It's stressful for moms or dads who are constantly called away from the church experience to pick their child up from LifeKids due to challenging behaviors. A family with a Buddy can enjoy peace of mind while they're at church, because the Buddy works closely with them to learn what works at home, day care, or school, and helps apply those methods to offer a consistent, effective experience for the child.
4. **A Buddy is not always needed.** The goal of a Buddy is to provide one-on-one support for *only as long as it's needed*. A child may have a developmental breakthrough in LifeKids at any point. When they're able to stay in the room using the same supports as their peers, their Buddy can begin to work with a new family who needs them.

5. **LifeKids Buddies aren't meant to follow around every child with differences.** A parent dropped off a child into your room and mentioned they have autism. Do you need a Buddy in your room? Probably not.
- Buddies are an incredible blessing to kids who need them, but *they're not a catch-all, mandatory support system* to be called in simply because of a child's diagnosis. Many children with differences don't demonstrate challenging behaviors and may just need more time to get used to their new environment.
6. **Buddies reinforce the curriculum to a kid at the kid's level.** A Buddy will figure out what their child is interested in and will use that as their starting point for bringing Scripture and God's love into the child's world. Creative strategies include:
- Learning ways to communicate with a child who is non-verbal
 - Singing to a child who doesn't respond well to speech
 - Drawing a picture of Jesus and telling the child God loves them
 - Using a sensory toy to help a child calm and refocus

Can you tell me about the kids a Buddy might work with?

It's worth repeating: A child may have an identified difference or disability, but that does not always mean they need a Buddy. Buddies are assigned to any child who is dysregulated and demonstrating their emotional, cognitive, or sensory systems are overloaded for any reason. **For example:** A two-year-old might be dealing with a head cold one weekend. That child may require extra assistance to be able to stay comfortable. This list will give you some examples of a few of the special needs many of our kids who have a Buddy display.

1. A child has an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

- This child may have difficulty with language. They may not be able to speak, and may not understand all the words they hear. A child with autism may have an enormous vocabulary, but may be unable to talk about anything outside of their special interest area (such as dinosaurs or trains).
- This child may not have age-appropriate social skills like sharing, turn-taking, waiting in line, etc. They may not understand that the adult in the room is also the authority in the room. They may have no interest in playing with other children (or you).
- This child may become easily overstimulated by their senses. They may seem to over-react to smells or become very upset if they touch something sticky. They may strongly dislike touch, even a gentle one. Or, they may crave deep pressure like a bear hug.
- They may engage in repetitive play, where they want to repeat an activity they like nearly endlessly. For example, they may like to flick a light switch on and off for hours or sit on the floor and rock back and forth.

2. A child has a vision impairment.

- This child may be blind, have low vision, or have a modified field of vision. They may need support to follow visually cued directions, to move around the room, to interact with other kids, or to follow along with videos.

3. A child has a hearing impairment.

- This child will have hearing loss. They may hear your words very faintly, or they may hear no sound at all. They may need support to follow aural directions, to interact with other kids, or to follow along with videos.

4. A child has a physical disability.

- This child may come to LifeKids in a wheelchair, have braces on their legs, or have other mobility or dexterity limitations. *Many kids with physical disabilities do well in our rooms without the extra support of a Buddy. Some may have other needs and will benefit from extra support.*

5. A child has a significant Attention Deficit Disorder and/or Hyperactivity Disorder.

- This child may not be able to focus or may become distracted very easily.
- This child may be hyperactive, have difficulty calming down after stimulating physical activity, or may be restless when transitioning from free-play to more structured group activities.
- This child may have trouble complying with requests and directions quickly. It may be difficult for them to switch focus from what they're doing to what you have asked them to do.

6. A child has Sensory Integration Disorder or a Sensory Processing Disorder.

- This child's senses work together in atypical or unexpected ways.
- They may have difficulty processing more than one sense at a time. For example, they may have to alternate between watching your face and listening to your words.
- They may dislike a gentle pat on the head, but love rough and tumble play (or vice versa).

7. A child has a seizure disorder.

- This child has a neurologic condition that may cause a brief disruption in the function of their body or mind. They may blink, fall asleep, convulse, need to be reoriented to time and place, have a change in mood, or have their behavior affected.
- They may need to wear a helmet to keep them safe in case of a fall.

8. A child has Down's Syndrome.

- The child will be behind their peers developmentally. They may have fewer words or be less coordinated than the other children in the class, or they may have trouble taking turns and interacting with peers in a socially appropriate way.
- About half of children with Down's Syndrome may also have a vision or hearing problem.

9. A child has a history of neglect or abuse.

- They may have severe trust issues.
- They may need extra support to feel safe and secure in their surroundings.
- They may respond to adult authority in their classroom in unexpected ways. For example, they may obey instructions given only by leaders of a specific gender or be overly timid or defiant around adults.

Help me know what to say to a parent of a special LifeKid.

Let's make sure our church is the place where every family feels cared for and welcomed, regardless of how much care they need. **Remember:** Always feel free to bring in a Coach or staff member to speak with a parent for you—especially if you don't know the parent well.

Here are some phrases to avoid and some great phrases to try instead!

- **Don't:** We had to get a Buddy to help your daughter today.
 - **Do:** *We loved getting to know your daughter and spending time with her today. She responded well to the one-on-one support we were able to provide for her. One of our Buddies worked with her to help her transition from free play to movie time. She did great with that extra support!*
- **Don't:** I think your child has: a developmental issue, autism, special needs, ADHD, behavioral problems, etc.
 - **Do:** *How do you usually get your child to respond to you at home?*
 - **Do:** *How do you usually handle (name behavior) at home?*
- **Don't:** I think your kid needs a LifeKids Buddy.
 - **Do:** It is not appropriate to have this conversation with a parent at pick-up. If you feel a child in your room does need a regular Buddy, **speak with your Coach or a LifeKids staff member** after all your kids have been picked up.
- **Don't:** I don't know *how* you do it!
 - **Do:** *You're a great parent. I sure do love your kiddo! We're so glad you're part of our church.*