

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Teacher Training Article • Spring 2019 • Jennifer Overstreet



Description

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a term given to a group of complex brain disorders. These disorders may be grouped under several subcategories including autism, pervasive developmental delay not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome. These disorders present varying degrees of difficulty with social interactions, verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors.

Characteristics

Each child with ASD has unique characteristics and behaviors. One child may feel pain with light touch while another may crave constant touch. Another child may not talk at all while still another may never stop. Every child is different, which adds to the difficulty in understanding autism.

Accommodations and Supports

Ordinary sights, sounds, smell, tastes, and touches, many that we don't notice, can be painful and overstimulating for children with ASD. A busy, noisy church environment may cause them to withdraw. Offer an alternative activity or a place to retreat during loud games such as popping balloons or anything involving yelling.

When senses are overloaded, children may experience a meltdown or blow-up. Some children seek to regulate their senses by flapping their hands or talking to themselves, while others may run away, find a corner, or hide under a table. This isn't meant to be belligerent, but self-protecting.

Triggers may be unique to each child. For example, turning off lights without warning can frighten a child and cause a meltdown or panic attack. The best way to avoid this is by prevention. Talk to the child's parent regarding specific triggers. Word Aflame Curriculum and ABLE Ministry have developed a Spiritual Individualized Education Plan that can help facilitate this conversation.

Hyper-acute hearing can make church services painful. If possible, lower the volume or offer earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones to dampen the sound. Stage lights can be overwhelming, so an alternate room with a volume-controlled speaker may be beneficial.

The Author's Story

My two boys have ASD; the oldest is mildly affected by autism (he is what some would refer to as high-functioning), while the youngest has greater challenges. They have both been baptized and filled with the Holy Ghost. Many prayers were prayed, and God orchestrated it all in the special way only He can.

The oldest child helps in the church's audio-visual department and children's church. The younger child is not able to help as much, although this doesn't stop him from being quite the prayer warrior.

Our family has helped several other families have faith for their own children. God can do anything!

Some children with autism may have difficulty making or maintaining eye contact. In some cases, making a request for eye contact can increase a child's anxiety. It is usually preferable to reduce anxiety triggers to maximize learning potential.

Listening and understanding can be difficult. Rather than speaking to the child across the room, come closer to gain attention before speaking. Give directions in simple words.

Give advance notice as to what will happen next. At times children may not realize an instruction is for them if you don't mention it directly to them. Have a second teacher act as an interpreter, letting them know what to do. This works particularly well in larger settings. For example, the children's pastor asks the children to worship. This may need further explanation for children with ASD. Ask them if they know what that means and then give them specific instructions such as, "It's time to raise our hands and pray."

People with ASD can have a highly sensitive sense of smell. Warn the child if something you are using or serving is pungent.

Some children with ASD are on special diets. Coordinate any snacks with a parent or guardian beforehand.

Practical Tips

Use concrete, black and white terms when speaking or giving instructions. Idioms, puns, nuances, inferences, metaphors, allusions and sarcasm are often lost on a child with ASD.

Make boundaries but don't set limits on what is possible. Boundaries and consistency are important. Children with ASD often function better in structured play activities that have a clear beginning and end. At times they may have a hard time understanding or remembering the rules. A gentle reminder or simple explanation of the rules can help.

Some children with ASD are imitators. It may be easier for them to learn by watching what others are doing and then mimicking them. Don't simply tell them to do something, but also show them how to pray, worship, and sing.

Anticipate their needs. If they have attention problems, don't plan an activity that requires them to sit quietly for thirty minutes. On the flip side, don't assume they are incapable of sitting quietly. Look for ways that will help them succeed. If keeping their attention is a problem, using them in the lesson might be one solution. They may surprise you.

Give options or multiple choices instead of open-ended questions. Children with ASD are often unable to describe their feelings or tell you what they need. At times they can sound like a little professor, but they may not be able to answer an unscripted question.

If a child is nonverbal, look for signs of communication. Be alert for body language, withdrawal, agitation, or other signs that tell you something is wrong.

Use pictures. Showing rather than telling is an excellent way to teach.

Lots of patience and practice helps them learn. Use YouTube videos, pictures, hands-on activities, and apps (YouVersion's The Bible App for Kids is excellent) to teach the lesson.

Children with ASD often struggle with relationships and interaction with other children. It may seem like they don't want to participate; however, this is not always true. They may simply lack the skills to communicate. Reading social cues such as facial expressions, body language, or the emotions of others is difficult. They may need coaching on appropriate courtesy and language. Help them to start a conversation. Encourage other children to invite them to play along. They might be delighted to be included.

Resources

www.thearc.org
www.laughslifeautism.com
www.nationalautismresources.com

The Out-of-Sync Child by Carol Stock Kranowitz
The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun by Carol Stock Kranowitz
Thinking in Pictures by Temple Grandin
101 Games and Activities for Children with Autism
Spectrum by Tara Delaney
Autism Every Day: Over 150 Strategies by Alyson Beytien
Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew
by Ellen Notbohm
Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism by Barbara J. Newman

Connect with ABLE

If you have questions regarding special needs, contact ABLE (Accepting, Believing, Loving, Embracing). ABLE Ministry is a program of the Ladies Ministries Division of the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) and is dedicated to assisting the special needs and disabled populations within the church and the community. ABLE is committed to increasing awareness about disabilities in the community, the church, and the world. They strive to provide the strength, support, and assistance necessary to meet the needs of those affected by disabilities; physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Facebook: ABLE Ministry UPCI

Website: <http://ladiesministries.com/programs/able>

For further information, email ladies@upci.org or call 636-229-7895



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