



Suggestions for Religious Leaders

- Ask new members of your community in a respectful way if any accommodations could enhance their child's participation.
- Use sensitive language in your language in newsletters, sermons, and conversation. Instead of stating "autistic person", say "person with autism". This is called "person first language".
- Do not tolerate bullying, teasing, or insensitive remarks about the child with autism or their family.

Autism Facts

- Autism may also be called autism spectrum disorder, ASD, PDD, PDD-NOS, or Asperger's
- Autism affects males four times more often than females
- Approximately half of all individuals with autism are nonverbal (unable to speak)
- Some individuals with autism are highly intelligent, speak very well, and live independent lives
- Some individuals with autism become easily upset in unfamiliar situations and unscheduled interruptions
- Individuals with autism have a higher rate of epilepsy than their typical peers
- Individuals with autism may have extreme reactions to seemingly commonplace objects or events (i.e. balloons at a birthday party)

- Recognize that although the child with autism may not be able to communicate in the same way that others do it does not mean that they do not understand what is being said.
- Acknowledge and accept the child's strengths as well as their difficulties.
- If you have multiple families that are affected by autism or other disabilities, you may want to start a support group within the church.

These resources can also be helpful in tools in facilitating inclusion for children with autism in religious communities:

- Neurodiversity.com online resource list of books and articles
- Disabilitiesandfaith.org multid denominational handouts, articles, and suggestions that promote inclusion
- Autismspeaks.org Autism books, articles, and other resources for families and religious personnel on their website
- <https://louisville.edu/education/kyautismtraining/> Useful information for families and professionals. Family Guide is comprehensive resource to services and supports

For more information:

Kentucky Autism Training Center
College of Education and Human Development
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292

Office: 502-852-4631 Toll free: 800-334-8635 ext. 852-4631
E-mail: katc@louisville.edu

Website: www.louisville.edu/education/kyautismtraining/

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& HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Building Supportive Communities of Faith for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Families



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What is autism?

Autism is a neurological disorder with a variety of symptoms that affect each individual in different ways. People with autism may have difficulty in communication and social interactions. Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are known to be more common than previously thought and affects people from all walks of life. It is estimated that 1 in 110 children are diagnosed with autism each year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.)

The need for religious inclusion

Religious participation is often regarded as an important part of the lives of many American families. A 2010 Gallup poll indicated that approximately 80% of Americans reported that religion was important in their lives. Despite the central role that religion plays in the lives of many, individuals with autism spectrum disorders and their families often face numerous barriers that prevent active participation within a religious community.

Researchers have documented the existence of attitudes and routines that prevent individuals with disabilities (including autism spectrum disorders) from participating in religious settings. Sadly, numerous families have reported that they have been instructed to leave religious facilities, teach their child with a disability about religion on their own, or have been told that the individual with a disability cannot participate in certain religious practices. However, many religious communities are very accommodating and can better include children with autism and their families with the right supports.

Myths about autism:

- *Autism can be cured-* There are many therapies and treatments available to assist individuals with autism in their daily lives. However, there is no cure for this disorder.
- *People with autism do not feel emotions-* Like anyone else, people with autism experience love, frustration, sadness, and joy. Often these individuals express their emotions in ways that may be difficult to understand but that does not mean that they do not have feelings.
- *Individuals with autism are all geniuses-* All children have their intellectual strengths and weaknesses and having autism does not change that. Although some people with autism may have incredible academic gifts (such as a very strong memory or mathematic ability), they often also experience challenges in other areas of their life related to their disorder.
- *Bad parenting causes autism-* Outdated theories once suggested that emotionally distant parents caused autism. However, this has been long disproven.
- *People with autism do not want friends-* People with autism often have difficulties knowing how to act in social situations. This can make it hard for them to make friends but does not mean that they are not interested in having friendships with others.
- *Individuals with autism don't speak-* Individuals with autism vary in their communication abilities or may use alternative means to communication (e.g. sign language, electronic device, pictures). Some individuals may not be able to verbally speak whereas others may speak very clearly. Regardless of ability, many people with autism have trouble understanding subtle aspects of language such as sarcasm and irony.

Suggestions for Family Members

Parents and other family members can act as advocates to better their experience within their religious community in the following ways:

- Speak with the religious leaders about your child's needs and how to better support and involve your child. Difficult behaviors, sensory differences, and accommodations the child uses in addition to your hopes for your child's involvement should all be addressed.
- Practice with your child at home religious routines and review what to expect. Ask to tour your place of worship when it is empty to better prepare your child for what to expect.



- Bring small, quiet toys and favorite objects to keep your child busy during the service.
- If your child is a picky eater or special dietary needs, prepare favorite snacks for your child so they can participate in religious meetings and gatherings with others where food is provided.