



Training Volunteers to Include Children and Students with Autism

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by:

- Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts;
- Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities;
- Symptoms must be present in early developmental period (typically first two years of life);
- Symptoms cause significant impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of current functioning.

The term “spectrum” refers to the wide range of symptoms, skills, and levels of impairment or disability that children with ASD can have. Some children are mildly impaired by their symptoms, while others are severely disabled. The latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) no longer includes Asperger’s syndrome; the characteristics of Asperger’s syndrome are included within the broader category of ASD. Almost half (46%) of children identified with ASD has average to above average intellectual ability. Sources: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/> and <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>

Why is training important?

Alleviates family concerns for their child’s care
Provides culture-shaping opportunity for church, address families’ fear of acceptance
Eases volunteer anxieties
Problems are proactively navigated, risk of hurt bodies and hurt feelings decrease

Who needs training?

Special needs ministry volunteers
Special needs buddies and one-on-one helpers for inclusive environments
Children’s ministry and student ministry small group leaders and volunteers
Church security team
Anyone in contact with first-time visitors: host team, greeters, welcome desk, parking lot attendants

What should we talk about in training?

Pointers for family conversations

Establish responsibility for getting participant information from parents.
Establish responsibility for addressing sensitive situations with parents.
Listen to parents’ description of their child’s abilities and needs.
Ask questions if you need more information from parents. (Don’t be afraid to ask, *respectfully!*)
Identify each student’s abilities and strengths, be sure to find activities they can achieve or enjoy.

What should we talk about in training?

continued

Pointers for working with individuals with special needs

Accept each individual as a child of God who is uniquely and wonderfully made!

Don't talk about the individual in front of them as if they are not there.

Teach others to be accepting and loving by setting a good example.

Give short, clear guidance. Single-step, tangible instruction is best.

Use extra patience. If you're frustrated they'll be frustrated.

Look for opportunities to offer praise and encouragement. Be positive!

Set limits and stay firm. Boundaries provide safety to the individual and others.

Students appreciate the opportunity to feel in control. Offer choices of 2 or 3 acceptable options.

If a student is frustrated assist them, but let them do what they are capable of doing themselves.

Engage participants in activities with their peers.

Play and have fun! Your students are more likely to enjoy themselves if you are enjoying yourself.

Crisis Prevention Techniques

Be proactive. How you initiate and respond to interactions can prevent problems.

Be sensitive to and empathetic to students, paying attention to what they may be communicating.

Get on the student's level, talking to them in a calm, quiet voice.

Show that you understand what a student is feeling by clarifying or repeating what they are expressing.

Ask them to tell you or show you what they want.

Set and enforce reasonable boundaries.

Clearly define limits incorporating choices and consequences statements (if/then or first/then)

Create a reward or reinforcement reminder using an activity, action, or item the students wants or likes.

Ignore challenging questions; redirect the individual when possible.

Avoid overreacting and remain calm.

Walk with the individual or try distracting them/re-engaging them.

If a situation is *beginning* to escalate, call for help.

Physical techniques are absolute last resort! Used *only* when threat is present for harm to self or others.

Use the least restrictive method of intervention possible.

Be mindful of sensory needs. Students may be frustrated yet not be consciously aware of their own needs.

Possible solutions for sensory needs:

- Retreat to a quieter, less busy, or less bright environment
- Take a walk
- Swing on a swing
- Jump on a mini-trampoline
- Offer a weighted blanket or other tool associated with deep pressure
- Provide a healthy, parent-approved snack (sudden hunger occurs as some medicines wear off)
- Catch a nap on a beanbag (sleep disturbance is common among individuals with special needs)

Favorite Tools & Resources

For the church environment The Inclusive Church: theinclusivechurch.wordpress.com

Leading Special Needs Ministry, Amy Fenton Lee (Book)

Special Needs Smart Pages, Joni and Friends (Book)

For training *Surviving to Thriving: Successfully Including the Child with Special Needs*, Amy Fenton Lee (DVD)

For activity ideas Pinterest: pinterest.com

For leadership guidance *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, John C. Maxwell (Book)

For parents Friendship Circle: friendshipcircle.org Special Needs Parenting: specialneedsparenting.org

For SOAR Special Needs Ministry: Facebook: SOAR Special Needs Ministry at Grace Church

Twitter: @SOARSpecialNeed

Pinterest: SOAR Special Needs Ministry

You Tube: SOAR Special Needs Ministry

Google+: SOAR Special Needs Ministry