



baptist
care sa



9

autism-friendly

CHURCH

Engage, affirm, challenge

“When the church attempts to function without all of its parts, the ‘body of Christ’ becomes disabled.”¹

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong developmental disorder with various levels of difficulty in social interaction and communication, unusual responses to sensory experiences, and restricted or repetitive thought patterns and behaviours.

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go”

Joshua 1:9, Holy Bible (NLT)⁵



Some people live relatively ordinary lives, while others require continuing support. People on the autism spectrum may have sensory interests and/or sensitivities leading to the avoidance of certain sounds and textures. Some have intellectual impairment or learning difficulties. An estimated 1 in 70 people live with ASD and males are four times more likely to be affected than females.²

Some people with ASD need extra support and encouragement in social situations. Some struggle to know how to respond in social situations when processing social cues such as body language, facial expressions, voice tone. While some children are content to play alone and can be absorbed in their own activities, others may experience difficulties making friends because understanding other people's feelings and motivations can be difficult. Older children can be wary from experiences of rejection or bullying.³ We need to do the best we can to create a warm and accepting environment.

HOW THE CHURCH CAN RESPOND

This guide discusses some tips and resources your church can use to welcome and journey with people with ASD in your church.

You are encouraged to meet with the person with ASD and their family because each person's needs differ and their journey is varied. They may be exploring diagnoses, have received a diagnosis, or be years into living with ASD. As the person ages, their situation changes and the way ASD presents in their life also varies, so your church's response needs to be modified over time.

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PERSON WITH ASD

Three key foci⁴ will help you relate effectively with a person with ASD. They include:

ENGAGE – ‘We want you here’

Everyone should feel safe and secure at church. Presence and engagement are foundational for all relationships. Seek to purposefully and carefully engage the person to show them 'it is good to be with us' and 'it is enjoyable to do things with us'.

AFFIRM – ‘We like you just the way you are’

Find ways to express to each person their unconditional value. Your worth and value isn't based on what you can or can't do, rather we are all loved by God and your church family love you too! We must reflect God's love in our words, actions and responses in an ongoing manner.

Get to know the person's unique passions and gifts. Continue to nurture their strengths with thoughtful, age appropriate challenges so the person stays engaged, stimulated and growing.

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH ASD

Kara provides tips from her experience with her son Tom that will help your church support a child with ASD.

LEARN AND PLAN

- **Get to know the person with ASD:** Teachers found out Tom's passions and gifts. They asked me how best to respond to him, what he likes and dislikes. They learnt about our family and asked if his siblings could benefit from mentoring and respite. They wanted to know who the main carer was and if we had any support from family or others.
- **Learn a bit about ASD:** I don't expect anyone to read a lot, but it helps if people working with Tom know a bit about ASD and how it impacts him and our family. Each child is unique and so is each child with autism.
- **What is the goal?** Discuss this with the family so expectations between the church and our family are clear. Set specific goals to include Tom in activities within children's programs and broader church life. This helps identify how tasks can be modified to support reasonable engagement.
- **Check in with the parent/care giver:** Is anything happening that may impact on Tom today? If I know, I can prepare Tom for those changes.
- **Consider a buddy:** People with ASD enjoy a consistent environment with a dependable structure and people who can mentor them through church life. Tom's buddy recognises cues that Tom is becoming overwhelmed and needs a break. Having more than one buddy allows flexibility when his buddy is away.

SOCIAL

- **Role model inclusion:** How your church includes and responds to Tom sets the expectation and tone of your church and provides an example for all to follow.
- **Help children be inclusive:** Try activities that promote inclusion so children understand Tom, and learn that everyone is unique and welcomed.
- **Social support:** Tom needs support to navigate unspoken social rules. While eye contact and reciprocal conversation are difficult for him, he always enjoys a friendly smile.

SENSORY

- **Be sensory friendly:** People with ASD may be under or oversensitive to sensory input. E.g. loud noise, flashing light, touch, smell, taste and texture. Tom dislikes messy play and lumpy food. Find out from Tom or the family what helps Tom respond well when he is confronted with things that upset his sensory system.
- **Physical touch:** Individuals with ASD may be over-sensitive or under-sensitive to touch. When coupled with poor body awareness the person with ASD can avoid physical touch or seek out sensory input by touching excessively. Respect for personal space is an important concept to teach and reinforce.
- **Quiet area:** Tom benefits from having a safe, quiet place to retreat to when he needs a break. He can sit there with some preferred objects from his sensory box.

COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING

- **Sequence activities:** Tom is helped by a sequenced visual schedule. Unplanned changes turn Tom's world upside down, so planning ahead can reduce or prevent any upset.
- **Break things up and be flexible:** People with autism may benefit from movement breaks. Tom likes to get up and move regularly. We often get the whole group moving so he's not alone.

- **Use simple language and pictures:** Tom takes things literally. His strength is visual communication so keep language simple and use pictures. Communicate one idea at a time and allow Tom time to respond.
- **Reduce open-ended questions:** It is easier to use closed questions, or give Tom limited choices, rather than using open-ended questions.
- **Behaviour management:** Tom has an agreed behaviour management plan if he is at risk of self-harm or harming others. E.g. Tom has a fear of balloons. Using them can invoke a flight fight response. It helps that key people know how to respond if Tom becomes overwhelmed. The plan is reviewed regularly.
- **Be creative:** If something isn't working, regroup and try another way.
- **Pray:** Please pray for our family and especially for Tom.
- **Affirm and celebrate gifts and achievements.**

"I have a son Tom who is on the Autism Spectrum. I value the support we receive from our church. I often juggle appointments for Tom and some Sundays I arrive feeling tired and depleted after a busy week. I can share the joys and the sadness I sometimes feel with others. Our church accepts Tom and me without judgement or criticism. Our 'Sunday School' meets Tom's needs by providing him with headphones and sensory toys, a quiet space and a caring, positive, non-judgmental and encouraging buddy, and a teacher who understands ASD."

Kara (parent of Tom with ASD)

RESOURCES

There are many resources to support inclusion of people with ASD into church life. A few are presented below but more at www.baptistcaresa.org.au/connections with live links to the relevant websites.

Anabaptist Disabilities Network, many resources, <http://www.adnetonline.org>

Autism resources, www.faithability.org/disability/autism

Champions club: special needs curriculum, <https://www.championsclub.org/>

Johnson C, 2018, 'Champion', USA: Thomas Nelson <https://www.amazon.com/Champion-Miraculous-Journey-Through-Changing/dp/0785218408>

Church 4 every child, resources, <https://church4everychild.org/>

Lifeway, special needs resources, www.lifeway.com/n/Ministries/Special-Needs

Newman BJ, 2015, 'Autism and your church', USA: Faith Alive Christian Resources

NSW Baptist church, special needs ministry, <http://baptistcfm.org.au/children-and-families-at-church/children-with-special-needs/>

Key Ministry, Special needs parenting blog, <http://www.keyministry.org/>

Two Minutes to Spare? <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/mission-ministry/faith-in-action/disability/>

REFERENCES

¹ Hubach, S. 2006, Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability, P & R publishing

² Autism Spectrum Australia, viewed 1 April 2019, <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/about-autism/what-is-autism>

³ Asperger's Disorder (Autism Level 1) and Spiritual Development, viewed 29 March 2019, <https://www.keyministry.org/church4everychild/2017/1/4/aspergers-disorder-autism-level-1-and-spiritual-development>

⁴ Woods M, C3: Comfort, Confirm, Challenge...Part Two, viewed 29 March 2019, <https://church4everychild.org/2012/04/12/mike-woods-c3-part-two/>

⁵ Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 2007, Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All Rights Reserved.