

# Including Students with Autism

**Christian Churches Disability Ministry**

[www.ccdmonline.org](http://www.ccdmonline.org)





# Including Students with Autism

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## Introduction

Every person, regardless of age, sex, race, mental, or physical capacity, deserves to know the love the Father has lavished upon him. As the church, we have been given the responsibility of insuring that all people are given the opportunity to experience this great love of God. Whether you are teaching a young child who lives with her family and is part of the public school system or an adult living in a residential facility and working in supported employment, your student can and needs to learn about the love of our wonderful Lord. We pray that this booklet will provide you with useful information about autism and give practical suggestions for inclusion.

## Some Facts

More and more Sunday school teachers are asking how to help students with autism. **The condition is more widely known than it was a few years ago. The increase in cases** of autism has been documented by formal studies, by teacher reports, and by media specials. Autism now has its own special education category in the public school list of disabilities. It has gone from being a rare disorder to a common one. Students with autism are diagnosed by the time they are 30 months old and can show signs as early as 12 months. Having a child with autism can have a huge effect on families. The church body needs to provide appropriate services for the student with autism and also a support structure for the family of that student. Providing an appropriate church Bible class can allow parents and caregivers to have a time of weekly spiritual renewal and Christian fellowship with the assurance that their loved one is being cared for and, at the same time, learning how to live a life of faith.



*In this publication, you will see references to children, school, parents, caregivers, and other limiting terms. Know that, with appropriate modification, the suggestions are also pertinent to adults living independently, varying family structures, and those who have been through the school system.*

*Prayerfully consider each suggestion as it may apply to each individual student.*

## Definitions and Descriptions

The most widely accepted definition of autism is the one used by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which became law in 1975 and was amended in 1997. IDEA defines autism as:

*A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, usually evident before age 3 that adversely affects a child's educational performance.*

That is the textbook definition. Here is how autism impacts students and their development. Individuals with autism will have deficits in three main areas of development: communication, socialization, and interests and activities. Every student with autism is different and will display different characteristics and deficits.

- **Communication deficits.** The communication skills of a student with autism can range from using no spoken language to having advanced language skills. One third of individuals with autism will not develop verbal language skills while others develop limited skills. Echolalia is common among students with autism. Echolalia refers to a student repeating or echoing spoken language. It can take two forms:

(1) Immediate echolalia occurs when they repeat phrases or questions they have just heard.

(2) Delayed echolalia occurs when students repeat phrases heard a while ago. This often takes the form of repeating lines from movies, books, songs, etc.

Students with autism who are verbal commonly have trouble initiating and participating in conversations. They also will not use gesturing or facial expressions when communicating. Students who are non-verbal may use an alternate communication system like pictures or a voice output system.

- **Socialization deficits.** Students with autism will not relate appropriately with people, events, and objects. They often will avoid eye contact. They are not being offensive when they do not look at you. Making eye contact can be very difficult and require a lot of focus to make and maintain. They may often use peripheral vision in order to look at people or objects and so may stand beside people rather than in front of them. Students with autism often do not recognize or want to participate in social interactions with others. Students who are verbal are more likely to share topics of interest to them (like information about cars, dinosaurs, etc) rather than participate in a two-way conversation with another person.

- **Deficits in interests and activities.** Students with autism are often limited in their interests. They also tend to prefer the function or a characteristic of an object rather than the object itself. For example, a student with autism may like objects that spin, have wheels, have buttons he can push, make a certain noise, light up, etc. It is the function of the object that attracts them not necessarily the object itself. They also tend to like to repeat doing the same activity over and over for long periods of time. They may repeatedly line objects up in rows, talk about the same topic over and over, click on the same icon on the computer to make a certain noise, etc. Students with autism like sameness. They like the physical arrangement of a room to stay the same, follow the same routine for grooming, eating, traveling, and like to have the schedule of their day remain the same. If there is a change they will react negatively to it. Most students with autism engage in self-stimulatory behaviors like hand flapping, grinding their teeth, rocking, spinning etc. Students with autism become very focused on this behavior and are not able to interact with the environment around them while the behavior is occurring.





## Autism Spectrum Disorders

In addition to the diagnosis of autism, the following names are also used:

- **Pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)** this title is used if a student has some symptoms of autism, but not enough to carry the classical diagnosis. This can also be called atypical autism. The student exhibits mild autistic-like characteristics or symptoms.
- **Asperger syndrome** describes students with autistic behaviors, but who have good language skills and average to above average IQs.
- **Childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD)** is used to describe students who appear to be developing normally for a few years, then lose skills and begin to show autistic-like behaviors.
- **Rett's syndrome** means the student has inadequate brain growth, has seizures, and autistic behaviors. Rett's syndrome happens to girls.

Autism may occur with Fragile-X syndrome, Tourette syndrome, learning disabilities, and Attention Deficit Disorder.

### Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome is being diagnosed more frequently in children now than ever before. Students with Asperger Syndrome are typically extremely verbal, but display autistic symptoms such as difficulties with social exchanges, abstract and nonverbal language, language comprehension, and eye contact. They have trouble navigating the "social world" and can often be loners. They do not understand the impact of their words on other people and may say things that hurt other people's feelings. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome will often fixate on a certain topic that is of interest to them and learn all they can about it such as dinosaurs, math skills, cars etc. They like to talk about that one topic but will have one sided conversations about it leaving little room for the other person to participate. Individuals with Asperger Syndrome often have sensory issues with touch, sounds, taste, and light. They also tend to be very literal thinkers (think that people mean exactly what they say) and have a hard time understanding when people are joking. It has been said they "think in pictures" meaning that when a person says the word "dog" they think of a specific dog not the species. Schedules, routines, and sameness in their environment are also very important to them.

### Common Questions

1. **What causes autism?** Although the cause of autism is still unidentified, it is known that autism is a brain disorder present at birth that affects the way the brain uses information. Autism may be a chemical imbalance in the brain, which may include certain genetic factors. There is no medical test available to diagnose autism. A diagnosis is made based on behaviors the stu-

dent exhibits. Observation and interviews are used to obtain the needed information.

2. **How common is autism?** Autism affects 1 in 100 children and 1 out of 70 boys. The diagnosis of autism is increasing.
3. **How severe are behavior problems in people with autism?** The degree of abnormal behavior varies from person to person and can range from mild to severe. In more severe cases, there will be unusual aggressiveness, and in some cases, there is self-injurious behavior.
4. **What is the difference between autism and mental retardation?** Individuals with autism show uneven skill development and deficits in certain areas, especially in communication, socialization, and interests and activities. People with mental retardation show relatively even skill development deficits that affect all areas.
5. **What are “splinter skills”?** The term “splinter skills” refers to an area of high performance that comes naturally to people with autism with little to no training. These skills generally do not carry over to academic success. People with splinter skills are often called savants. Savantism often occurs in areas of math skills, memory feats, artistic and music abilities. Splinter skills do not occur in every person with autism.
6. **What is the IQ level of people with autism?** 25-33% of people with autism have IQ scores in the average to above average range. Most individuals with autism have IQ scores that fall within the scope of mental retardation. It is difficult to get a valid IQ score on students with autism.
7. **Why do students with autism engage in self-stimulatory behaviors?** Self-stimulatory behaviors provide personal pleasure and/or sensory feedback to individuals with autism. We all have repetitive behaviors we engage in like tapping a pencil, tapping our foot, jiggling a leg, popping knuckles, etc. These activities meet a sensory need for us whether it is to reduce stress or keep us awake. We can engage in these behaviors in socially appropriate ways and still be aware of what is happening in the environment around us. When students with autism engage in self-stimulatory behaviors, they become focused on that activity and tend to tune out the world around them. These behaviors serve a purpose whether it is to provide pleasure or calm them when they become overly stimulated. Be sure to find out about the self-stimulatory behaviors a student exhibits and what is the known purpose of those behaviors. Also find out how the parents respond to the student when they engage in the behaviors.

# Teaching Approaches Used with Students with Autism

The following is a list of common strategies and teaching approaches used with students with autism. When setting up a program at your church for a student with autism, parents may mention some of these as strategies they use with their child at home and/or at school. This list is just a brief overview to familiarize you with the strategies.

- **TEACCH** - TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children) is a division of the University of North Carolina Department of Psychiatry. This structured teaching approach focuses on helping children with autism increase the understanding of their "world." It works on teaching appropriate social behaviors and interactions. This approach also stresses the importance of organizing and structuring the child's environment. This structure is achieved through using classroom and personal schedules, defining spaces in the classroom according to their function, and using token boards. They work to teach productive learning through the use of positive consequences and systematic and organized teaching. There are many concepts from TEACCH that can easily be incorporated into a Sunday school environment and will help a child with autism to successfully participate. We will discuss these later in the "Suggestions for Teachers" section of this booklet. For more information on TEACCH go to <http://teacch.com/>
- **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)** – The PECS program is a communication system developed by Pyramid Educational Consultants. This program uses picture cards to communicate wants and needs. It is an approach in which students are taught to initiate communication by giving picture cards for desired objects without verbal prompts. As they become more proficient in making requests, they are taught to discriminate between pictures and form sentences to make requests. These cards are usually stored in a PECS book which is a three-ring binder that holds pictures which are velcroed into it. This can be a very effective communication tool for students with autism who are non-verbal. With continued use of the PECS program, some students develop verbal communication skills and no longer need to use their book. A student can easily use their PECS book in a church setting with some staff training provided by the parents. See more information about PECS at <http://www.pecs.com/>
- **Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)** – Applied behavioral analysis is a teaching technique in which skills are broken down into small tasks that are then taught in a highly structured manner. It provides rewards for desired behaviors and ignores, redirects, or discourages inappropriate behaviors. In ABA, token boards are commonly used as a way of showing how much work needs to be done in order to receive a desired reward. This teaching style is used in the school setting as well as in home programming. ABA principles are used as a part of many different teaching approaches
- **Discrete Trial Training** – This teaching concept uses ABA principles by presenting a skill to be learned in a structured way that emphasizes rote learning. This ap-

proach can be used to teach imitation, communication, socialization, and compliance (following directions) skills. In discrete trial training, the child is given numerous “trials” all day long that allow him to practice the skill.

- **Social Stories™** – Social Stories™ are stories written to address specific skills, situations, or concepts with which a student is struggling. These stories help students understand social situations and other people’s perspectives. They answer the questions of who, what, when, where and how regarding social interactions. They also give concrete explanations of the student’s expected behavior. If a student has been using social stories at school, you may be able to incorporate stories in the church setting as well. For example, if a student with autism is having trouble with keeping his hands to himself, a story could be written about it. Parents and the student’s school teacher may be able to work together to write a story to work on issues that occur at church. For more information on Social Stories™ visit <http://www.thegraycenter.org/>

## Suggestions for the Teacher

This section lists practical ideas for teachers including students with autism into their class.

### Arranging the classroom environment

Divide your classroom space by function. An area for circle time (music and story time), art, snack, free play, etc. You can mark these areas by the way you arrange the furniture or by using masking tape on the floor to define the boundaries of the space. Different colored rugs on the floor could also be used.

Use carpet squares or tape on the floor to define the area in which the child is supposed to sit during circle time.

Provide an area in your classroom where the student can go and “regroup” if he becomes overly stimulated or just needs a break. It may be a chair away from the group, a bean bag, etc. Talk with the child’s parents to determine what would work best.

### Communication Issues

Most students with autism will have difficulties with communication skills. Before a student enters your class, be sure to get as much information as possible from the parents or caregivers regarding their communication levels and style. Do they have any verbal skills? If so, at what level? Do they use a communication system? If so, what kind?

If you have a student who uses a communication system (like picture cards or a voice output system) at home and at school, they need to use it at church as well. By denying them use of that system, you are taking away their ability to communicate. Have the parents come in and train volunteers on how the student uses the system and how to respond. For example, if you have a child using a picture system, it is important to let the child initiate the picture exchange and not have the adult verbally prompting them.

The other students in your class will be very curious about the communication system the child with autism uses. Take time to explain the system to classmates and show them how to respond. For example, when the child gives one of them a picture card of a crayon, they are to take it, say “I want crayon,” and put the picture card back in the book. Encourage the other students in the class to engage the child with autism in ways that allow him to use his system. He needs to learn he can communicate with other students, not just teachers when using it.

#### Communication Issues *Continued*

Students with autism have trouble generalizing concepts in a new environment. Because church is a different environment for them, they will have to learn to use their communication system there as well. It may take some time for them to consistently use their communication system at church just like they do at home and at school.

If you have a child who is using a communication system, let the parents know if there are picture icons that the child will need specific to your class; for example, a Bible picture or pictures specific to the story you are studying. As students become more proficient with their systems, they learn to answer comprehension questions. They may need a picture of a basket or a donkey to answer possible questions related to a Bible story. The child's teacher at school can be a good resource to get needed icons.

#### Sensory Issues

Students with autism often have sensory issues that need to be taken into consideration. They may be hypersensitive to sound, light, and touch. They can also be sensitive to smells and tastes.

Many students with autism are picky eaters. Their sensitivity to smell, taste, and the texture of their food impacts what they will and will not eat. If you have a snack time in your class, check with the student's parents to find out what they will eat. Many students are also on special diets so parents may want to send in specific foods for their child to eat during snack time.

Some children with autism will avoid tactile activities. They do not like to touch certain textures with their fingers. They will become upset if they get glue on their hands or if they have to finger paint. Many also do not enjoy coloring or playing with play dough. Talk with the parents about tactile issues and how to handle them.

Some students with autism are bothered by fluorescent lights or bright lights. Discuss this issue with their parents and adapt the lighting appropriately.

Students with autism may have trouble with things being too visually stimulating. They may look at things through their peripheral vision in order to lessen the stimuli. Since eye contact can also be an issue, do not require them to make eye contact all the time. Allow them to look at your mouth or shoulders or other objects in the room when you are talking to them.

Because the student with autism may not enjoy being touched or having you invade his space, do not approach him directly. Without looking at him, gently back into his space. Look to his side, or stand with your side to him when you are speaking to him.

Sounds often hurt the ears of a child with autism. Avoid the reaction to unavoidable sounds by muffling the bell or buzzer with tissues or duct tape; put slit tennis balls on the ends of the table and chair legs or install carpeting. These sounds or even the fear of them can cause inappropriate behavior.

## Behavior Issues

Limited communication skills can often cause behavioral issues with students with autism. They may act out inappropriately because they do not have the skills needed to communicate another way.

All behavior is communicating something. You may need to examine the behavior to understand what they are trying to communicate. Input from the parents regarding behaviors the child exhibits and why and how to respond to those behaviors will help to successfully include the child in church activities.

As a general rule, behavior has four functions:

- ◆ to get attention (or something they desire),
- ◆ to avoid or escape (usually something they do not want or do not want to do),
- ◆ to get pleasurable sensory feedback or
- ◆ to lessen pain.

Figuring out the function of the behavior being exhibited can help to develop a plan for dealing with it. Have the parents help you with this process.

Do not let the student's behavior overwhelm you. Working with his parents, develop a plan for dealing with his behavior. Target the behaviors that are the most disrupting to the class.

Do not pressure the student to do things he does not want to do. Give him a choice.

Follow the parents' and school's leads in dealing with self-stimulatory behaviors. Everyone in the child's life should use the same approach.

Children with autism who fidget can be calmed if they briefly wear a padded vest. The pressure helps to calm the nervous system. Discuss with the parents the best method to calm their child.

Find out from the parents what calms a student if he starts to become upset. He may need to take a walk, take a break away from the others in his special chair, etc. Try to redirect behavior before the student becomes really upset.

### **Classroom Management**

Training a volunteer to work with the student will allow for modifications that need to be made without disrupting the flow of the teacher's instruction and interactions with the other students.

Develop a special handshake, a word, or a gesture and use it every time you greet your student.

Prepare him for the experience. Take the student to the classroom when no one is there. Talk to him about what will happen. Allow him to explore the space. Give the student time to adjust to his new classroom space and the people in it.

Because many students with autism think in pictures, develop a picture and word schedule for the routine of the class. It will be especially useful when the student changes from one routine to another. That is often tough for him.

Keep your class routine as predictable as possible. Students with autism require structure. They have trouble predicting the sequence of events and can become agitated. If there is to be a change in the schedule or normal routine, try to prepare the student in advance.

*Some students may need their own personal schedule that shows the order of their activities. Interview their parents to see what is used at school. Often the parents and school teacher can help you to develop an appropriate schedule for church use.*

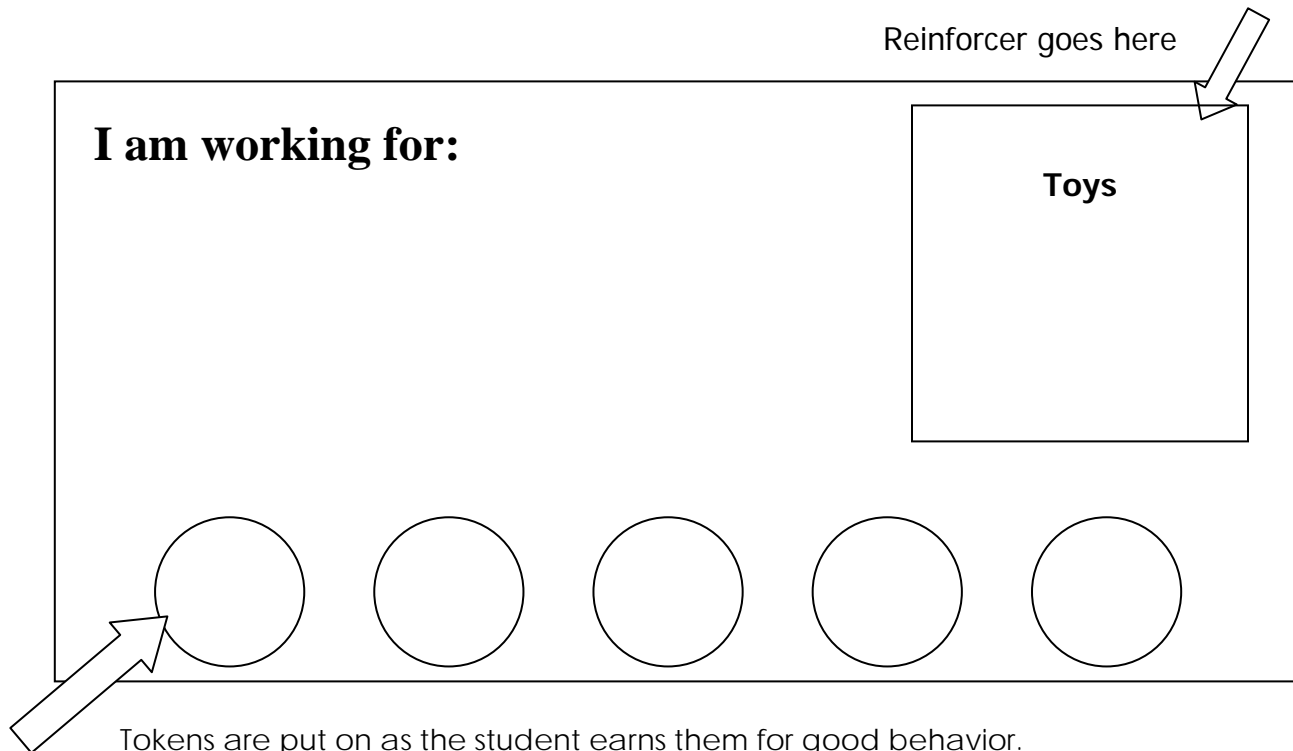
Some students with autism will have trouble transitioning from one activity to another. Again, talk with the parents to see if this is an issue and what they do at school and at home. Give the student advance notice that an activity is about to end. For example, tell them there are five minutes left before changing activities.



Transition objects or cards can be used to aid in changing from one activity to another. Allow the student to carry the object or card that shows the next activity to the designated area for that activity. Once there, the object or card is put in a determined place (a basket, piece of velcro on the table, etc.) The object or card helps him to be aware of what is coming next. Talk to the parents to find out what is done at school and at home.

Token cards can be used to encourage appropriate behavior and completion of assigned tasks. The child earns tokens (can be pennies, bingo chips, etc.) as she exhibits the appropriate targeted behavior. The tokens are attached to the token board using velcro. When the student has earned the predetermined amount of tokens (usually ranges from three to five) she gets to participate in a desired activity (looking at a book, taking a break, etc.) This method is used quite often in schools. Have the parents show you how it is used at school and consider what reinforcing activities can be used as rewards in your setting. If you do not have the materials to make a token board, the parents may be able to get the child's school teacher to help make a board for use at church.

### Token Board



<i>Classroom Management Continued</i>
Use a visual cue along with verbal directions. Have a picture card to represent common directions like sit down, be quiet, stand up, line up, hands in your lap, etc. The visual cue will help the child with autism to process the request being made.
Keep your directions simple, short and to the point.
Avoid asking, "Would you like to color these pictures?" Say rather, "We are going to color these pictures. We are so excited."
As time goes by, expect more of the student.
Students with autism do not catch onto the social cues of what behaviors are expected in certain areas of the room. You will need to teach the behavior that is expected for different activities. A poster with the behavior expectations and picture prompts posted in each area will help to remind them of what is expected. For example, in circle time, have a poster that shows; sit, hands in lap, listen, etc.

<b>Teaching Strategies</b>
Involve the student with autism in the class. Find tasks/jobs he can do.
Use his peers to interest him and demonstrate appropriate behavior.
Many students with autism are good at art, drawing, and computer skills. It is good to emphasize and encourage these talents.
Many times persons with autism become fixated on one subject. In the classroom environment, use these fixations to motivate them to learn. For example, if they are fixated on maps, show them on the map the location of your Bible lesson.
Some students with autism sing better than they speak. They often respond more readily if words are sung to them, or spoken in a whisper.
Some non-verbal students cannot process visual and auditory input at the same time; they should not be asked to look and listen at the same time.

Group instruction times can be difficult for the student with autism, especially younger students. When first attending class, he may only be able to sit in story time for a few minutes. Token boards can be used to help him see when he has earned a break. As he sits appropriately in group, give him tokens for the board. When the board is full, allow him to have a short break, and then have him come back and rejoin the group. Have him then earn another break. If the lesson time lasts 20 minutes, he may stay in the group for three-five minutes, earn a break, come back and stay for another three-five minutes. This is not as disruptive as it sounds, especially after the student learns the approach. When he does well for the three-five minutes, extend the amount of time he stays in group to five to seven minutes. Explain to the other class members what is going on and why. Usually, once they know, it is not a big deal and the student coming in and out of the group does not distract them. Find out from the parents the appropriate amount of time to expect him to stay in the group. The same can be done for art and other activities.

Use visuals during stories to help keep the student's attention. Objects corresponding with the story can be used. If a child is using a communication device, have matching picture icons on a board or velcroed into the book that you can use to prompt the child in answering comprehension questions.

When a child completes a non-preferred activity, allow him to participate in a preferred activity for a few minutes.



# Steps toward Inclusion

## Pre-Inclusion

1. **Visit the student and his family in their home.** Observe the student's behavior, interactions with family members, and communication style. Does he communicate verbally, using a communication system or a mix of both? Ask what certain behaviors mean; how does he act when he is nervous? Frightened? Tired? How does he communicate his bathroom needs? Does he have an unusual attachment to a certain object? Can it/should it be carried to Sunday school? Find out what sensory experiences cause him to react; is he sensitive to bright light? The sound of a furnace coming on? Sirens from the street? How do the parents calm him in these situations? Is he sensitive to touching certain textures like things that are wet or sticky? Does it bother him to get glue on his fingers or finger paint? Ask about his eating habits and preferred food. Students with autism are often bothered by the texture of some foods. How long can he attend to activities? What is reinforcing to him or are preferred activities for him? Observe the techniques the parents use and adopt their behavior control methods.
2. **Assemble the Inclusion Team.** This team should include the minister, Christian education staff member, parents of the child to be included, parents of a non-disabled child, the Bible school-teacher, teaching assistant, and the buddy or peer-helper that is matched with this child. This team should develop a Christian Individualized Education Plan (CIEP). The CIEP should be a written agreement including the following items:
  - Description of the student's ability
  - Medical information including current medications, impending surgeries or procedures, and activity restrictions
  - Allergies and dietary concerns
  - The student's present levels of performance in the areas of academics, behavior, socialization, communication, and self-help skills
  - Specialized equipment used by the student
  - Current goals and objectives written for the student's school IEP
  - Current behavior plan in use at school and at home
  - Expectations of the inclusion experience
  - Type of assistance needed for success in the inclusion experience (i.e. one-on-one supervision)
  - Detailed plan for the inclusion experience and delineation of responsibilities for implementation of the plan
  - Timetable for the preparation of teachers and students in the inclusion classroom
  - Timeline for trial inclusion period and review
  - Other support needed by the family

A good approach is to get copies of the documents the school system uses and adapt them to your own needs. The parents will have copies of the IEP (Individualized Education Plan), the IFSP (Individual Family Service Plan), and the Transition Plan.

3. ***Prepare the students without disabilities for the inclusion experience.*** Give them simple, straightforward facts about autism that they can understand. Have the parents of the child with autism share with the students about their child specifically – his characteristics, how he communicates, his likes, his dislikes, fears, and how they can be his friend. Tell the other class members about special things that will be used with their friend with autism; picture schedules, token boards, different expectations (like allowing him to stay in story time for short increments of time and then taking a break). Allow students to ask questions they may have.
4. ***Prepare the student with autism for the inclusion experience.*** Talk to him about who will be in the classroom and what will happen there. Allow the child to visit the classroom and explore around it when there is no one else there.
5. ***Be certain that the teacher has everything she needs to make the inclusion experience positive for all concerned.*** Share the information included in this booklet with her. Encourage her to research autism on her own. Encourage her to visit the child and his parents in their home to become acquainted.
6. ***Prepare teaching assistants to work directly with the child with autism.*** It is critical that a teaching assistant be in place to provide one-on-one supervision and to avert any problems that may arise.
7. ***Train students without disabilities to help.*** Having peer tutors, buddies, or advocates in place will enhance the learning experience for everyone.

## Inclusion

1. Plan activities that will open up the community for the child. Include swimming excursions, field trips, picnics, etc. Working with the parents, identify possible problems ahead of time and plan for solutions. Be cautious about the activities you choose. Be sure the environment will not be overly stimulating for the student and that the activity is something he will enjoy. Prepare him in advance for any activity that is a departure from the regular routine.
2. Touch the child only in ways that you know are non-threatening and acceptable to him. Do not attempt to hug or cuddle him unless you are certain of his response.
3. Do not be surprised if the child exhibits repetitive and ritualistic type behaviors. Do not attempt to stop such behaviors unless you have been told how to do so by the child's parents.
4. Remember that no two students with autism are the same. There is great diversity in the behaviors, communication skills, and levels of social interaction demonstrated by students with autism. (For instance, one autistic child may never utter a word while others speak voluminously.) You must get to know the child you are working with as an individual.
5. Take the time to learn his particular traits and idiosyncrasies and how his family copes. Reinforce at all times the methods and strategies used at home and at school to manage behavior and to encourage the development of communication and social skills.
6. Do not allow disruptive behavior to defeat your teaching. Have a plan prepared for the teaching assistant or advocate to remove the child from the classroom and redirect his energies on the playground, by taking a walk, or engaging in other activities that will calm him.
7. Encourage the Bible school teacher not to become frustrated by the autistic child's seemingly abundant knowledge in one area and relative ignorance in others. Also, caution the teacher against becoming frustrated with the student's inattentiveness to her voice while selectively attending and responding to other sounds.
8. Remember that routine is extremely important to these students. Do not make changes in the Bible school class schedule if at all possible. If change becomes necessary, prepare the student and yourself for his response when the change actually takes place.
9. Do not expect to make eye contact with the student with autism. Many students with autism avoid eye contact, even with their parents, while some do. Ask the child's parents specifically how to handle the issue of eye contact.
10. Perseveration (the continuation of an activity to an exceptional degree or beyond a desired point) is common in students with autism. They can be perseverative in

their play and also in their language. Again, ask the parents specifically how to handle perseverance.

### **Post-Inclusion**

Evaluate the inclusion experience on an annual basis or more often if deemed necessary. When evaluating the inclusion experience, ask the following questions:

#### *About the student*

- ◆ Is the student being included in the learning process, and is he receiving encouragement and support?
- ◆ Is the student making friends? Is he happy?
- ◆ Is the student's family pleased?

#### *About the teachers and other students in the classroom*

- ◆ Are the teachers and other students in the classroom comfortable?
- ◆ Are they enjoying and learning from the experience?
- ◆ What positive effects of the inclusion experience are evident in their lives?
- ◆ How do families of students without disabilities in the classroom feel about the experience?

#### *About your church*

- ◆ Are the members of the general church body becoming aware of the needs of students with disabilities?
- ◆ Are they becoming more involved in the lives of this student and his family?
- ◆ Are plans in place to move the student to the next phase of the church program?



## Interview with a Mother of a Child with Autism

**Q. What are the positive aspects of having your child with autism included in a Bible school class with typical students?**

A. He benefits by observing his peers who are modeling acceptable behavior for him. He gets pushed to do more than usual. He also comes to know the Lord.

**Q. How did the church prepare you for your child's transition?**

A. By meeting with us and wanting to know more about how they could help our family. They helped in evaluating our child. Most importantly, they prayed for us.

**Q. What advice do you have for churches that are starting an inclusion Bible school class?**

A. Try not to jump to conclusions about people. Be understanding. Provide one-on-one help in the classroom. Take the time to learn about autism. Teach the congregation to be aware and compassionate. Most importantly . . . pray!

**Q. What advice about inclusion do you have for parents of a child with autism?**

A. Inclusion is wonderful, but the road will not always be smooth. Your child will greatly benefit from your making him behave and respond as closely to the behavior of a child without autism as possible. This draws him closer to the Lord. Also, it is important to have patience with the people involved in working with your child.

**Q. What can a church do for a family with a child with autism?**

A. PRAY! Try to be understanding, compassionate, and supportive.

**Q. When first preparing for the inclusion class, who, in your opinion, needs to meet together and discuss the process?**

A. The parents, the director of the department and/or children's minister, and all the teachers and helpers who will be working with the child.

**Q. Why do you think inclusion is important?**

A. It is preferable over separation. The students can learn from each other. Students without disabilities learn acceptance and patience. The child with autism can learn appropriate behavior.

## **Interview with a Bible School Teacher Teaching a Child with Autism**

- Q. In working with a child with autism, what do you think is the best advice you can give to another church starting an inclusive Bible school class?**
- A. Have an extra aide with the child, one-on-one. Also expect from the child with autism the same behaviors you would expect from the other children in the class. (Anticipate the positive.)
- Q. What is your typical class routine?**
- A. First the students put their attendance stickers on the board, then put their offering in the plate, and then sit down for story time.
- Q. What do you think makes your inclusion successful?**
- A. We started out slowly. We did not just jump in and expect the student to join our class without problems. It was also wonderful to start with an assistant who could provide one-on-one attention to the student.
- Q. Does the student with autism participate just like all the other students or do you prepare special things for him to do?**
- A. We encourage him to do what the others are doing. He must participate just like all the other children. The only "special" things he has are an aide and a special type of scissors.
- Q. How do you deal with disciplinary problems of the student with autism?**
- A. Be firm! Tell him what he is supposed to be doing. It is important for him to learn appropriate behavior. Posted behavior expectations help him to remember what he is supposed to be doing. If behaviors continue to escalate, we work to redirect him or remove him from the classroom before they get out of hand. Having a place for him to regroup or calm down is helpful.
- Q. How do you prepare the other people who work with the student with autism?**
- A. By making them a part of the meeting to discuss the student's Christian education program and by having the parents tell them what to expect.
- Q. What advice do you have to give the parents of children who are not autistic that will ease their minds about having a child with autism in their child's Bible school class?**
- A. I tell them that we are all the same in God's eyes. We all need a chance to learn about the love of God.
- Q. What, in your opinion, can make the inclusion program a success?**
- A. The people involved must have a willingness to learn about the student, and a positive attitude about the whole situation.

### ***Three Important Things to Remember When Working with a Student with Autism***

1. **Resist the urge to touch them.** Many students with autism do not like to be touched. They are not cuddly and will not respond well to hugs, pats on the back or someone touching their face. Also, avoid using touch as a means of calming them if they are upset.
2. **Students with autism think in pictures.** They are very literal with their interpretations of what people say. When someone says the word "dog," they think of a specific dog, not the species of dogs. They have a hard time understanding when a person is joking. Understanding verbal communications can be difficult. Using pictures along with verbal instructions helps them to understand what is expected of them and what is being said to them.
3. **Students with autism require a lot of structure.** They work best in an orderly, routine based environment. Having a posted classroom schedule and providing them with their own personal schedule will help them to be able to participate in church activities. They do not like surprises. If there is a change in the normal routine, plan ahead and prepare them for it.

# SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF AUTISM

## COMMUNICATION

- Non verbal or has delayed verbal skills
- Echolalia – repeats questions or statements said to him or repeats lines from movies, TV shows, books and songs.
- Indicates needs by gestures rather than using words
- Has trouble understanding verbal directions
- Has difficulty initiating and sustaining conversations

## SOCIALIZATION

- Is not cuddly
- Avoids eye contact
- Has difficulty interacting socially with others
- Plays by himself
- Does not understand non-verbal social cues
- Does not acknowledge someone calling his name
- Giggles and laughs inappropriately

## INTERESTS AND ACTIVITIES

- Resistant to change in routines
- Thinks in pictures
- Interested in a certain function or attribute of an object - spinning wheels on toy car, pushing buttons on an object
- Engages in self-stimulatory behaviors – hand flapping, rocking, grinding teeth, humming, etc.
- Unusual response to sensory stimuli – overly sensitive to sound, touch, light, and taste
- Markedly overactive or under active
- Spins objects or lines them up in rows
- Plays intently for abnormally long periods of time
- Manifests inappropriate attachment to objects
- Has focused interest on a particular subject – dinosaurs, math, spiders, etc.

## Resources

National Autism Hotline/Autism Services Center  
605 Ninth Street, Prichard Building  
PO Box 507  
Huntington, WV 25710-0507  
304-525-8014  
FAX: 304-525-8026

[www.autism-resources.com](http://www.autism-resources.com) offers information and links regarding the developmental disabilities **autism** and **Asperger's Syndrome**.

<http://www.autism-society.org/>

The **Autism Society of America** was founded in 1965 by a small group of parents working on a volunteer basis out of their homes. Over the last 35 years, the Society has developed into the leading source of information and referral on autism. Today, over 20,000 members are connected through a working network of over 200 chapters in nearly every state. Membership in ASA continues to grow as more and more parents and professionals unite to form a collective voice representing the autism community.

Asperger Syndrome: Living Outside the Bell Curve is a wonderful DVD from IEP Resources that interviews the family of a child with Asperger Syndrome along with a doctor from the University of Wisconsin Children's Hospital. It discusses causes and symptoms of Asperger Syndrome as well as coping strategies. This DVD and other good resources can be found at [www.AttainmentCompany.com](http://www.AttainmentCompany.com)

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Effective Instructional Practices by L. Juane Heflin and Donna Fiorino Alaimo published by Pearson Merrill/Prentice Hall copyright 2007.

[www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org)

[www.abaresources.com](http://www.abaresources.com)

[www.pecs.com](http://www.pecs.com)

[www.teacch.com](http://www.teacch.com)

[www.thegraycenter.org](http://www.thegraycenter.org)

