



# AUTISM &

## *The Faith Community*

*A guide for faith-based communities  
to understand the needs of individuals  
with Autism Spectrum Disorders*

# *Understanding Autism*

Autism is a lifelong neurological disability that affects a person's ability to communicate, understand language, play, and socially interact with others. The first signs of autism usually appear as developmental delays before age three.

Every person with autism is different. However, there are some common characteristics of individuals with autism that may occur.

- Difficulty in using and understanding **language**
- Difficulty in using **social skills** and navigating social situations
- **Over or under sensitivity** to sound, sight, taste, touch, or smell
- **Repetitive behaviors** such as spinning or lining up objects
- **Difficulty with changes** to surroundings or routines
- **Challenging behaviors** such as aggression or self-injury





# *What Communities of Faith and their Congregations Need to Know About Individuals with Autism*

Faith communities of all kinds, striving to be inclusive of individuals with developmental disabilities, are not alone. Places of worship tell us that they need preparation to welcome all. When the disability is autism, the need for awareness and sensitivity is paramount. Helping all families feel welcome in a place of worship is important. Our role is to provide information to religious leaders, religious educators, and congregations to reach out to individuals with autism.

## *Reaching Out*

- **Understand the spectrum of difference;** autism is not a brain illness, it is a brain difference
- **Attend to the strengths,** preferences and special talents of the individual with autism, not just their challenges
- Remember that individuals with autism may **seek relationships in a different way** than we do, but are often interested in developing friendships with adults and peers
- If the individual is supported by a social services agency, **develop a relationship with the agency** and invite an agency representative to learn more about the place of worship



- Expect that **all individuals can learn** the skills to become full and contributing members of their community, including their place of worship
- **Sensitivity training** may help congregation members transform a misunderstanding of autism into acceptance
- **Encourage family involvement** in other activities at your place of worship

## *Use Family's Approach as a Guide*



- Always ask about the individual's primary form of communication
- Ask families what they hope for by joining a community of faith
- Ask about sensitivities to light, sound, touch, and smell
- Inquire about previous worship and religious education experiences and what strategies worked to minimize anxiety and calm the individual
- Learn what are and have been effective learning strategies
- Gently inquire about any behavioral challenges
- Ask about any triggers of inappropriate behaviors
- Remember, raising a child with autism is often a challenge; respect individual styles of coping

## *Planning Ahead for Parents*

- Introduce yourself and your family member to your religious leader before attending a service
- Make an appointment to visit a place of worship when few people are around
- Write a story and/or create a picture book to help the individual know what to expect in a place of worship or in a religious education classroom
- Use a digital camera to take photographs of individuals wearing ceremonial vestments, if any, to help to introduce the child or adult to the ways individuals may dress in a place of worship

- Review the steps of the service so it is familiar, including the door to enter and exit; arrange take photographs or record the service in video format, if approved in advance
- Inquire ahead about the theme or message of the worship service; some scriptures may use metaphors or images (e.g., burning bush) that need an explanation before attending the service

## *Helpful Strategies*

- Learn ways to make and use visual supports including picture schedules to provide predictability
- Many faiths publish comic-book style booklets for children that tell the story of the faith or major figures in the faith in a way that is accessible for children and adolescents with autism
- Help individuals prepare for transitions by using concrete language, verbal countdowns, and/or a picture or word symbol
- Contact CARD for resources; our professionals are available to provide guidance to religious leaders, educators and congregations

## *Adjust the Physical Environment*

- Use natural lighting, whenever possible; dim fluorescent lights if the individual is light sensitive
- Be aware that there may be a fight-or-flight response to the new and unfamiliar situations; arrange the seating and/or education area to motivate the individual to remain seated



## *Model a Caring Attitude*

- Move slowly to the individual's level to communicate
- Use a quiet, calm voice and minimize words and touch
- Speak in simple, short phrases and pause between giving requests
- Expect minimal eye contact

## *Focus on Cooperative Behavior*

- Praise all cooperative behavior
- Remember behavior is a form of communication; tell the individual what is expected and reinforce all positive behaviors
- Ignore behaviors that appear different (unusual body movements, unexpected vocalizations, inappropriate words or comments)



## *Be Prepared; Be Proactive*

- Be a listener and be available
- Observe when anxiety escalates; an individual with autism may respond with aggressive behaviors toward others or themselves in order to communicate anxiety or frustration
- Encourage parents to help redirect, reassure, and restore calm to an escalating situation
- Notify an usher, greeter, or family host to be prepared and to gently and quietly assist as needed
- Remember, given time and space, the person may de-escalate their behavior
- Use this brochure as a resource and provide it to your congregation and other parents



## *Encourage Faith in the Home*

- Listen to religious music and sing with children and adults in the home, if appropriate
- Study scriptures; recite prayers or mantras with children and adults in the home
- Incorporate rituals of faith, offerings, meditation, and/or individual expressions of faith in daily life
- Observe religious holidays with family members

## *Faith-based Websites*

- **[www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org)** — National Organization on Disability provides a section on Religion and Disability
- **[www.ncpd.org](http://www.ncpd.org)** — National Catholic Partnership on Disability
- **[www.jfcsmpls.org/inclusionresources.html](http://www.jfcsmpls.org/inclusionresources.html)** — Jewish Inclusion Resources
- **[autism.about.com/od/copingwithautims/p/spirituality.htm](http://autism.about.com/od/copingwithautims/p/spirituality.htm)** — Attending Religious Services with an Autistic Person
- **[www.njcosac.org/cosac2/publications](http://www.njcosac.org/cosac2/publications)** — Order a copy of *Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community* which includes articles written by family members, theologians, pastors, rabbis, related professionals, and individuals with autism. Follow link or call (609)883-8100.





*Florida's First Choice for Autism Support*

The Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) provides support and assistance with the goal of optimizing the potential of people with autism and related disabilities.

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