

## **Making Accommodations - Part 2: A discussion with Family Outreach of Helena's Jackie Mohler, M.Ed.**



Family Outreach's Family Support Specialist, Jackie Mohler recently shared her experience in working with parents that have kids on the Autism spectrum, and how she coaches them to be advocates for their children in community settings. Here are a few more insights in a question and answer format.

**Q: What might be a good way for pastors and church leaders to initiate a conversation with a family that has a child with autism, or they suspect the child is on the spectrum but might be afraid to ask?**

A: Autism Spectrum is just that—a spectrum of severity and abilities that the child might have. The most important thing would be to approach the family from a role of wishing to serve and support as best you can. Simply approach them and ask, “We are so glad to have come to be a part of our church family! What can we do to make you feel at home and help [child’s name] be successful?” In this way, you have opened up the conversation from the position that you are willing to learn from them about their son or daughter.

**Q: Great point, Jackie! That should be our approach with all children. Can you think of things the church might suggest if the parent doesn't come up with any ideas?**

A: In general, it is never a bad idea to think about what will set the child up for success. Consistency and knowing the routine of their world is important to children on the autism spectrum. Suggest that it might be helpful for their family to come into a classroom or worship setting at a time other than when worship or a program is going on. Have them meet with the pastor or teachers that will work with them and “walk through” the rhythm of a regular worship service or class time. Find the bathrooms and let the child know how and when they will be allowed to use these. Do be aware, however, of making overgeneralized statements that might be confusing.

**Q: I am sorry to jump in, Jackie, but could you explain what you mean by that warning?**

A: Certainly... What I mean is this: children on the autism spectrum tend to be very black and white thinkers. If you tell them that the bathrooms can only be used after class, they might squirm and fuss because they don't understand that you would make an exception for a child about to have an “emergency.” Think through your rules and how you convey them. If you tell them they need to raise their hand before they speak, and then you ask them a question and they raise their hand before they answer... well, they are just following your rules! These may seem a little silly for examples, and not every child is the same... but, hopefully you get the idea.

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