

Making Accommodations: a discussion with Family Outreach of Helena's Jackie Mohler, M.Ed.



Family Outreach's Family Support Specialist, Jackie Mohler, shared her experience in working with families that have kids on the Autism spectrum, and how she coaches them to be advocates for their children in community settings. Family Outreach is on the web at www.familyoutreach.org.

Faith based communities can tap into these strategies in their effort to better accommodate the special needs of a family that has a child on the autism spectrum. Below are a couple of "gems" of insight that Chaplain Chris has posed in a question and answer format. The entire conversation can be found at www.intermountainministry.org.

Q: What are some of the more practical tools you could see used in a church setting to help a child with autism, and their families, feel more embraced and included in the fabric of the congregation?

A: Autism Spectrum represents a wide range of children with varying abilities. One thing that can help ANY child in the classroom or youth group setting would be visual schedules. These can be anything from pictures of the areas or activities that the child will experience throughout their time under your care to symbols or pictures that represent different activities. These tools are helpful because children on the spectrum do not pick up on the visual cues that many of us do unconsciously in knowing how and when to anticipate a transition. The whole class could be cleaning up supplies from a craft or activity, knowing that this time is naturally wrapping up. But, for the spectrum child, the transition from crafts to Bible time, for instance, will seem sudden—abrupt—and, potentially disturbing. They have "missed the cues" that this transition was about to happen, and may not be appropriately prepared to make that transition with the class, youth group, or congregation.

Q: Besides the visual schedules, how would you suggest churches help these children make these transitions smoothly?

A: Well, each child is different, but sometimes placing an object in the child's hand that signifies the next activity that they will be doing is helpful. For instance, if the classroom is outside for some recreational time, the teacher can bring a box of crayons with her. Then, as the time for play outside is just about to conclude, she can use that box of crayons to help the child transition to coming back inside for coloring time or the craft. By placing it in the child's hand, it becomes a tactile bridge to the next activity on the schedule. It fulfills through the sense of touch what the visual schedule does through the sense of sight.

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