

# Autism and Spirituality: Information for Religious Education Teachers

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Autism is a complex **developmental disability**. It is **developmental** because the disability begins early in life (before the age of 30 months) and lasts a lifetime. It is also **pervasive**, which means several areas of development are affected. Children who have Autism typically experience trouble with verbal and nonverbal communication, social interactions and play activities. This disability also is known as **autism spectrum disorder**, affecting each person differently and with varying degrees.

The cause of autism is unknown, and research has shown that autism definitely is not the result of how parents care for the child. Brain scans of autistic children have been compared to those of non-autistic children, and differences have been found in the brain's structure and shape. Researchers are investigating various theories as to what does cause autism.

## On the Rise

Autism is one of the most common and one of the fastest growing disabilities. A press release by the Centers for Disease Control Prevention ( February 16, 2007) cited two prevalence studies: a study in the year 2000 indicated one child with an autism spectrum disorder in every 166 children; a 2002 study (of 8 year old children in 14 states) suggested one such child in every 150 children. Although not a nationally representative sample, these studies confirm that Autism Spectrum Disorders are more common in the communities studied than previously thought. Altogether there are 1 to 1.5 million Americans with autism. (Autism Society of America), and this number is on the rise.

## Characteristics

The term "autism" was first used in 1943, by Dr. Leo Kanner, in describing 11 children with this disability. He picked this term because "autos" is the Greek word for "self" and self-aloneness is a main feature of autism

Here are some characteristics and behavior patterns you might see in a worship service or religious education class attended by a person with an autism spectrum disorder:

- Difficulty in relating to people, objects and events. (For example, people in the congregation may greet a person with autism and receive no response or an inappropriate response.)
- Apparent avoidance of eye contact  
(Individuals with autism appear to avoid eye contact, but research has shown that they make eye contact but do not understand its importance or potential. One adult with autism once commented, "I know people talk with their eyes, but don't understand how they do it.")
- Repetitive body movements or behavior patterns, such as rocking or spinning, hand flapping, bouncing and jumping
- Unusual play with toys and other objects  
(For example, presented with a toy Noah's ark, the child with autism probably would not play with the sets of animals, but instead find a door or ramp that flips up and down and would play repeatedly with just that part.)
- Difficulty in taking the perspective of another person  
(For example, a religious education teacher receiving some kind of very bad news, could be crying, but the student with autism might walk into the room and instead of asking what was wrong or indicating concern, simply would announce that he or she wanted juice.)
- Failure to seek comfort  
(For example, a child with autism could fall down coming into the building and receive a painful bump on the head. But the child might not cry, run to an adult or communicate what had happened.)
- Difficulty with changes in routine or familiar surroundings. (For example, wanting the same snack each Sunday on the same kind of cup and plate, at the same hour, served by the same person.)
- Heightened sensitivity to sound  
(For example, on hearing certain organ music or congregational singing, children with autism might hit themselves, cover both ears or scream.)

- Over sensitivity to touch  
(For example, when patted on the shoulder by a clergy person or other well meaning member of the congregation, a child with autism could become very upset.)
- Over sensitivity to light  
(For example, on entering the parish hall, a student with autism might turn down the light, or turn it off, especially in the case of florescent lighting.)
- Over sensitivity to certain textures of fabrics  
(For example, when a religious education teacher gives a flannel board presentation to the class, instead of paying attention to the pictures on the board, the student with autism may become absorbed with how the flannel feels.)
- Impaired social skills  
(Persons with autism do not acquire social skills incidentally; these skills must be taught.)
- Distractibility  
(It often is hard to direct the attention of a person with autism. For example, when shown a picture of Jesus and his disciples, a student could focus on an irrelevant aspect of the picture, such as the way light is reflected off the surface of the paper.)
- Sequencing problems  
(For example, not remembering the order of tasks.)
- Inability to generalize or apply what has been learned in one situation to another similar situation
- Organizational difficulties  
(Individuals with autism often do not analyze tasks into their separate parts or know how to start a task or how to proceed.)
- Difficulty processing spoken language  
(See section on teaching students with autism.)
- Difficulty with expressive language
- Unusual speech characteristics  
(Such as reversal of pronouns: Substituting "you" for "I", and "I" for "you." Or, using echolalic speech. For example, a teacher working in a religious education classroom observes a clergy person entering the room. The teacher says "Say hello to the Pastor." And the student with autism responds "Say hello to the Pastor!")

## Teaching Students with Autism

The classroom environment should be structured so that the program is consistent and predictable. Individuals with autism need to have routines. Checklists and visual schedules often work well.

Students with autism benefit from teaching that relies on the concrete. Objects and pictures are better than words only. Demonstrations frequently are useful.

Teachers need to assume what they are saying has been understood, even though it often may appear that students with autism are not understanding what has been presented.

People with autism usually need more time to process what they have been presented - about 20 seconds. It is not a good idea simply to repeat a message, as repetition can interfere with this processing.

Individuals with autism learn more easily and are less confused when information is presented visually as well as verbally. It can be helpful to provide visual instructions that show what has been finished, what needs to be done and how the student is to proceed.

One useful teaching strategy is having a calendar, and adding pictures and words, to give students information and show them what will be happening in their lives, such as saying and writing "Next Saturday you will come to the church picnic; next Sunday you are in a pageant in church."

## Resources

***Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism spectrum Disorders.*** By Barbara J. Newman (2006). Published by Faith Alive Christian Resources. Product #116015. Cost \$27.95 Website: <http://shop5.gospelcom.net/epages/FaithAlive.storefront/EN/product/116015>

***Autism and the God Connection: Redefining the Autistic Experience Through Extraordinary Accounts of Spiritual Giftedness.*** By William Stillman. (2006). Published by Sourcebooks, Inc. Contact publisher at: Sourcebooks, Inc., 1935 Brookdale Rd, Suite 139, Naperville, IL 60563. Cost \$14.95. ISBN#1402206496. Phone: (800) 43-BRIGHT; Phone: (630) 961-3900; Fax: (630) 961-2168 Website: <http://www.williamstillman.com/books.html>

***Inclusion in Faith Communities: Some Tips for Getting Started.*** By Mary Beth Walsh and Bill Gaventa, Autism and Faith Task Force, New Jersey. For a copy, contact the Elizabeth M. Boggs Center, c/o Inclusive Ministries, P.O. Box 2688, New Brunswick, NJ 08903. [gaventwi@umdnj.edu](mailto:gaventwi@umdnj.edu)

## Organizations

**Autism Hotline, Autism Services Center**, P.O. Box 507, Huntington, WV 25710-0507. 1-304-525-8014.

**Autism Society of America**, 7910 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 300, Bethesda, MD 20814-3067. 1-800-3AUTISM. World Wide Web: <http://www.autism-society.org>

**National Christian Resource Center of the Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services**, 700 Hoffman Drive, Watertown WI 53094 800-369-INFO, Website: [www.blhs.org](http://www.blhs.org)

**Indiana Resource Center for Autism (IRCA)**, Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, 2853 E. Tenth Street, Bloomington IN 47408-2696. 1-812-855-6508. Fax: (812) 855-9630; TT: (812) 855-9396, Website: [www.iidc.indiana.edu](http://www.iidc.indiana.edu)

