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Explaining Autism to Children and Youth in a Church Setting

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Through working with children who have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in settings such as Bible school and summer camp I have learned to love and appreciate each child's unique personality. These children have brought much joy to my life. That is why it saddens me when I observe children, youth and even some adults who tease, yell at, or ignore individuals with ASD. For some time now I have been looking for a solution to this problem because I know that these negative responses are not in line with Christ's command to love one another.

As a result of observation and research I have come to the conclusion that one of the main reasons that some people respond negatively to children and youth with ASD is because they have little understanding of what ASD is and how it affects the individuals who have been diagnosed with it. On several occasions I have had children ask me questions about a child with ASD such as, "what is wrong with him/her" or "why does he/she get special privileges." Until recently I have been unsure of how to respond to these questions. Thanks to the book, *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities*, by Barbara J. Newman, I now feel better prepared to explain ASD to youth and children who are confused by the actions of their peers with ASD.

In the first chapter of her book Barbara Newman explains that, "accurate information is one of the most powerful tools in creating a successful program for including children with special needs in classrooms at school or in church." This quote sets the stage for the rest of the book as Newman goes on to give the reader accurate information and helpful lesson ideas for introducing children and youth to five specific impairments including: autistic spectrum disorders, emotional impairment, hearing impairment, mental impairment and visual impairment. I chose to use the lesson plan for autistic spectrum disorders to introduce the children in the primary department at my church to autism so that they could have the knowledge that will help them to be more accepting of their peers with ASD.

Newman's lesson plan for explaining ASD to children is very child friendly with lots of visuals and fun activities that will be sure to grab the children's attention. She begins by having the teacher introduce a knitting project. This leads into the discussion of how it takes a pattern to create something so beautiful. Next Newman suggests reading Psalm 139: 13-17 and discussing with the children how God also used a pattern when he knit each one of us together inside of our mothers. To further illustrate how each one of us has our own uniquely different pattern, each child is supposed to draw a self-portrait. This is the part that my Sunday school students enjoyed the most. They used a lot of detail in their drawings including glasses and their appropriate eye or hair color. It was also fun comparing the pictures and observing how each one of us is unique.

Newman also suggests looking at pictures of babies and discussing how they are not finished growing yet. That is because God put a pattern in the child's brain but he is waiting to do the rest of the knitting as the child grows up. To illustrate how God opens up the pattern as the child grows the lesson suggests holding up a pair of keys and discussing what they are used for. Next the class is to imagine that God uses keys to open up different parts of the knitting pattern inside our brain at different times in our life. For example, God uses a key to open up the part of our brain that knows how to walk, talk, eat, read and so on. After that, the children are given the opportunity to demonstrate and discuss the parts of their brain are already opened and the parts that are still locked. I had the class sing Father Abraham to demonstrate an "open" part of their brain and look through a college textbook to demonstrate a part that is still "locked".

All of this discussion about knitting patterns and keys is a great lead in for a discussion on children with autism. Newman suggests pointing out that God used a pattern for them that is a little bit different than ours but just as unique and special. At this point you can discuss the parts of their brain that have been already opened up such as eating or walking and the parts of their brain that are still locked which may be knowing how to act appropriately in church or speaking clearly. If you are discussing a specific student it would be appropriate to point out specific social, language or behavior areas that are still "locked" in that child's brain. Finally, Newman suggests discussing with the students specific areas of the child's brain that they hope God will open up and ways that they can help unlock that area. This gets the children really thinking about how they can help their fellow student with ASD.

This lesson plan can be used to introduce a student with ASD into a Sunday school class or it could be used to spread awareness of ASD so that children will be more understanding in

the future when they encounter people with ASD in their church, school or neighborhood. If you are introducing a specific student, Newman stresses the importance of having that child present so that all of the children get the message that this is something they can openly discuss.

Another factor to keep in mind when presenting information on ASD is to make sure you have the parent's permission and seek their input because they will most likely have an opinion about what you should share with the class. Another important piece of advice that Newman offers is to keep communicating in a positive and honest way. In other words allow the children to discuss with the class areas where they see the child improving or areas that are frustrating that they would like to help that child work to improve. It is also important to give the children feedback on how they are doing such as, "I really like the way that you invited Billy to join the group." Remaining positive, open and honest about ASD will send the message to children and youth at your church that there is no reason for children with ASD to be feared, made fun of or ignored.

I am very grateful to have discovered this resource because it has helped me to be more open with students about children with ASD. Before reading this I would tiptoe around questions about children with ASD because I did not know how to respond and I was afraid of embarrassing or singling out the child with ASD. However, it is now clear to me that keeping information about ASD from children did nothing to aid in the acceptance of children with ASD. My prayer is that more people in the church will also discover that lovingly and respectfully sharing information is the key to accepting people with ASD and making them feel welcome at church.