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**Encouraging Acceptance of
Youth on the Autism Spectrum
in Sunday School Classes and Youth Groups**

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Children and youth who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum conditions (often called Autism Spectrum Disorders, ASD) are often misunderstood and judged as being different by their same-aged peers. The three main characteristics of autism spectrum differences—problems with communication, difficulty with social interaction, and repetitive behaviors and interests—may make acceptance of children with ASD difficult. Their typical peers are often confused by these children’s unusual behaviors and are unsure of how they should respond to them. This confusion can lead to rejection of those with ASD, making it even more difficult for them to learn the skills needed for smooth social interaction. These dynamics are likely to be present in any social groups the young person participates in, including faith communities. Therefore, teachers, youth leaders, and other adults in faith communities have a vital opportunity to find ways to promote understanding and acceptance of young people with ASD, so that these children may be able to form and sustain positive relationships.

In order for adults to encourage the acceptance of young people with ASD by their peers, it is useful to have a basic understanding of the three main characteristics of ASD and the ways

these characteristics make social interaction harder for these children. The first characteristic is difficulty with communication. Some people with ASD are unable to speak. Others with ASD are able to speak but still struggle with communicating their thoughts and feelings and with interpreting the thoughts of others. They may not give enough information in a conversation or they may be overly literal or precise and use words in certain situations that their peers are not accustomed to hearing. They also often have difficulty understanding teasing, metaphors, sarcasm, and abstract concepts. Children with ASD may have difficulty interpreting and using body language and facial expressions. They may not see expressions of hurt or anger on a peer's face and therefore not respond accordingly. This could lead their peers to believe that they are insensitive.

The second characteristic that defines the autism spectrum is difficulty with social interaction. Young people with ASD struggle with analyzing the overall mood of a person or situation, and this may result in behaviors that seem out of place, such as talking too loudly or saying the wrong thing. They find it especially difficult to figure out acceptable ways of acting in a social situation. For example, they may not know when they are expected to take turns or how to join in when other children are playing a game. They may also have difficulty making eye contact, which makes it difficult for their peers to know when or if they are paying attention.

According to Newman, children with ASD typically respond in one of two ways to their social differences. One pattern is to distance themselves from social situations, since it is such hard work for them to figure out the "rules" of interaction. This often results in the misinterpretation by the child's peers that the child does not want to be included. An opposite pattern is that, regardless of their differences, they dive headfirst into social situations. This second response often results in the child with ASD displaying socially awkward behaviors,

resulting in rejection from their peers. Either response that a child with ASD chooses has negative social implications if their peers are unaware of the reasons for their behaviors.

The final defining characteristic of people with ASD includes inflexibility of thought and action. Their strong preference for predictability typically leads to behaviors or interests others consider repetitive. An example of repetitive behaviors is repeating the same action such as hand flapping or rocking over and over. Children with ASD may also repeat the same phrase over and over such as a quote from a movie. Repetitive interests would include a topic that the person focuses on intensely, such as insects or trains. As a result of this extreme fascination, they may spend much of their time talking and thinking about or playing with the object of interest. Children with ASD also tend to strongly resist change. For example, they may find comfort in doing things in a particular order, and it can be very upsetting to them when something causes them to lose that order. Repetitive behaviors and a resistance to change are a way for persons with ASD to comfort themselves since life can be confusing for them and repetition of familiar things makes their lives predictable. However, it may also interfere with social interaction, since their thoughts are often focused on their favorite topic, therefore making it difficult to relate to others who do not share their interests. This could be misconstrued as selfishness by their peers if they have no knowledge of ASD.

Given these characteristics of ASD, it is apparent that children and teens with ASD can easily be misunderstood by their peers. According to Gus, one common misunderstanding about children with ASD is that they want to be left alone. This misunderstanding can make it very difficult for them to form positive relationships with their peers. Quil explains that, “They cannot easily convey their intentions or desire to play with other children through conventional

communicative means. Thus social initiations to join an activity are frequently misinterpreted or overlooked by peers” (p. 202).

In his book, *Look Me in the Eye*, Robison gives an example of social initiation gone awry. He recounts his childhood as a young boy with Asperger’s Syndrome and his attempts and subsequent failures at making friends. On one occasion, he decided to befriend a girl named Chuckie. Using what he knew about his mother’s form of showing affection for him and the way that he was taught to befriend a dog, he patted Chuckie on the head. He was instantly rejected with a smack from the girl and a chastisement from the teacher that we don’t treat people like animals. After more equally rejected attempts, he decided to give up. Robison goes on to explain his disappointment:

The worst of it was, my teacher and most other people saw my behavior as bad when I was actually trying to be kind. My good intentions made the rejection by Chuckie all the more painful...I never interacted with Chuckie again. I stopped trying with any of the kids. The more I was rejected, the more I hurt inside and the more I retreated (p.11).

Now that it is clear that young people with ASD are not all loners by first choice, it is necessary for teachers and other adults who relate to these children to learn strategies that will promote their social inclusion. One way that caring adults can begin is to examine their personal interaction with the child. Do they respond negatively when the child inadvertently makes an inappropriate comment? According to Boutot, one of the factors that affect the acceptance of a child with disabilities is the attitude of a teacher towards that child. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of their response to a child with ASD.

Newman suggests that teachers should teach behaviors that will lead to greater acceptance instead of reacting negatively to the child’s behavior. She suggests that a lecture or punishment is not appropriate for children with ASD in situations where they may not know

what they did wrong. Instead, the teacher should respectfully explain why what the child did or said was unexpected and likely to have negative social repercussions. The adult can then follow with teaching a more acceptable behavior. This strategy could have been used by Robison's teacher when he was trying to befriend Chuckie. He might have been less confused if his teacher had explained why Chuckie did not like being patted on the head and then taught him a better way to get Chuckie's attention. When other children see adults responding to a child with ASD in this manner, they will see the respect that the adult has for the child and may pick up an appropriate strategy for interacting with that child. On the other hand, when offering such instruction is likely to cause embarrassment, it may be most respectful to draw the young person aside later for a private conversation.

Another factor that affects the acceptance of children with disabilities by their peers is knowledge of the disability. According to Boutot, children are more accepting if they have an understanding of the disability and are aware of the similarities and differences between them and their peers with disabilities. Newman compares giving people knowledge about ASD to equipping them with glasses and suggests:

I have found 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. I believe that educators, children, and parents of peers need to be given the right glasses in order to practice greater acceptance and understanding (p.9).

Gus explains a method similar to Circle of Friends by which she worked with the tenth grade classmates of a boy named Adam who had been diagnosed with autism. Her plan was to help them gain a better understanding of Adam and how autism affects his behaviors, with the hope that they would become more accepting of Adam. She began by having the class list positive characteristics of Adam. Boutot suggests that it is especially important to focus on the

positive traits or interests of the child so that their peers can find aspects of the person that they identify with, such as a love of sports or dinosaurs.

After listing the positive traits, in Adam's absence the class discussed behaviors that Adam displayed that made interaction difficult. Gus used these frustrating characteristics as a way to open up the conversation about autism. She explained the three main characteristics of ASD and ways they effect the social interaction of a child with ASD. Next, she gave the class strategies for positive interaction with Adam. Finally, she helped the class to make a connection between Adam's difficult behaviors and the characteristics of ASD.

Gus believes that helping the students to make this connection was instrumental because it helped the students to understand their own feelings as well as showed them that the adults took their feelings seriously. After Gus did a follow-up with Adam and his classmates, she discovered that Adam was happier at school and that his classmates showed improved attitudes and behaviors towards him. Newman suggests a similar method that includes ongoing meetings throughout the year so that the class can discuss things that are going well and areas that still need to be worked on.

From looking at Gus's study, it is obvious that having and sharing knowledge of ASD is very important. However, it is also important for young people to know how to use this knowledge. To this end, Gus gave Adam's classmates several strategies which let the child's gifts and abilities shine through. The first of these strategies is for the classmates of the child with ASD to encourage the child to join their activities, since he/she might be unsure of how to join in on their own. Next, Gus suggests that peers should use words to make it very clear when they are trying to be friendly. This is necessary since the child may not be able to interpret facial expressions or body language. As a result, a smile or a hand gesture might not be enough.

Instead, Gus would suggest that peers of children with ASD should use explicit language when trying to be friendly to that child. The next strategy that Gus gives is patience. Since children with ASD may have difficulty understanding the “rules” of a particular situation, it is necessary to teach their peers to be patient with them as they are trying to learn more acceptable methods of interaction. Next, Gus suggests that peers should be encouraged to explain what is going on when there are misunderstandings. Another strategy is for peers to engage the child in conversation by asking questions. This is a great way for children to get to know their peers with ASD, discover similarities, and make that child feel that he/she belongs. Finally, Carter suggests that it would also be helpful to brainstorm as a group any other ideas that the young people may have for including their peer with ASD.

Boutot recommends peer tutors as another way to increase the acceptance of a child or youth with ASD. Peer tutors, also known as peer buddies, involve pairing the young person with ASD with a typical peer who volunteers for the position. It is important to choose a peer tutor who will be a good role model for the child with ASD. The typical peer receives training in what ASD is and strategies that they can use to interact with their partner. Peer tutors should be taught the importance of reinforcing the child with ASD when they do a good job. Next, the peer buddy offers support to the child with ASD in any areas that are needed. This support could take a variety of forms. For example, the peer buddy could help the child understand an assignment, join an activity, understand the rules of a game, contribute to a group project, or socialize during unstructured times. Through working with a peer buddy, the child with ASD learns necessary social skills and is made to feel welcome as part of the group. Boutot states that:

Having a friend already in the class will help the student with ASD look and feel more secure and fit in more quickly. When other students see a child interacting naturally with the student with ASD, they will be more likely to accept him or her as a member of the class with whom they, too, might be friends (p. 159).

One final method that increases the acceptance of young people with ASD is becoming familiar with their distinct personalities and abilities. Newman stresses that every person with ASD is unique. Therefore, the label of ASD cannot tell us everything we need to know about a particular child. That is why it is necessary to gather information about the particular child that you will be working with. Newman offers several ways of doing this. One of them is to have the parents fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire could include information such as the child's strengths, interests, diagnosis, things that their child may find difficult, goals that they have for their child, suggestions that they have for including their child, and any other helpful information. When making a questionnaire Newman stresses the importance of beginning by asking about the child's gifts. Newman states that, "It's tempting to begin by asking for a child's diagnosis. Starting with an individual's gifts communicates clearly that you see this person as much more complex and diverse than one label describes" (p. 43).

Another way to gather information about young people with ASD is from the young people themselves. Newman suggests helping them make a list of their likes and dislikes. Adults can also gather information through observing the person in diverse settings. All of the information gathered about the student can then be used positively in the classroom or youth group. For example, adults could use the information to foster friendships between children who have similar interests and the child with ASD. The teacher could also use their knowledge of the person's strengths and interests by giving them opportunities to contribute their unique abilities in the group setting.

If adults in the faith community can help young people to be accepting of their peers with ASD, they are doing much more than creating a pleasant church environment. They are helping all of their students to understand God's design for creation. God's design is one of

diversity. If God wanted everyone to be exactly the same, then he would have made us that way. Hubach points out: “Over and over again, the Scriptures stress that in our unity in Christ, we need to value and embrace the uniqueness of each individual (p. 172). One of the scriptures that Hubach is referring to is Romans 12:4-5, which states, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” Christ desires for us to love and accept one another’s differences because they are all a vital part of his plan.

With a basic knowledge of ASD, strategies for including children and youth affected by it, and an understanding of each person’s unique gifts, teachers and youth leaders in the church will be able to welcome these young people into the unified body of Christ.

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