

10 Things Children's Ministry Leaders Should Know about Kids with Autism

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1. They're KIDS!

Just like every child, children with autism have interests, fears and strengths. While their development may be delayed or different in some areas, kids with autism enjoy many of the same experiences as their peers: playing with a special toy, spending time with a parent or friend, watching a movie, hearing a favorite story. Very often, children with autism have more in common with their typically developing peers than people realize!

2. Every child with autism is unique.

No pastor would assume that all third graders have the same personality and temperament! Similarly, ministry leaders should remember that autism may present very differently in one child than another. Autism is called a "spectrum disorder," which means that kids diagnosed with autism may have very mild symptoms and behaviors, or they may require very intense assistance. Some children may have strong verbal skills. Others might have limited language or may be non-verbal. While some children with autism have superior thinking and academic abilities, some may have cognitive disabilities. The adage spoken by many educators definitely applies to ministry as well: "If you've met one child with autism, you've met ONE child with autism."

3. They might be "sense-itive."

Kids with autism might have heightened sensitivity to their surroundings, making some experiences difficult. For example, entering a room that has flashing lights and loud music might be overwhelming. Other kids might have difficulty with textures, so wearing a shirt with scratchy tags or finger painting could be anxiety-producing. Kids might have very limited palates because of sensitivity to food tastes and textures. It's important to know that that these sensory issues are real, and can cause discomfort.

4. A picture is worth 1,000 words!

Author and speaker Temple Grandin, who has autism, said, "I THINK IN PICTURES. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures." When kids with autism see picture schedules or color-coded processes, they can very often complete tasks and manage routines more effectively.

5. They may have intense interests and repetitive behaviors.

Some children with autism may have a fascination with topics such as weather, sports or insects. Often, they want to share their interest with others, and they may launch into a "monologue" about the topic. Another characteristic seen in kids with autism is

repetitive movements. This may look like hand-flapping, rocking or spinning of objects. In addition, children might have repeated vocalizations or they might repeat what they hear (known as “echolalia”).

6. Making friends might take practice.

Social skills can be bewildering to children with autism. Learning to read a friend’s facial expressions, for example, might be like learning a foreign language. Similarly, understanding tone of voice, taking turns and maintaining eye contact can be challenging.

7. Routines can create comfort.

For children with autism, changes in routine can create high levels of anxiety and uncertainty. This can lead to difficulty completing tasks, maintaining attention, or even “meltdowns.” Routines provide comfort and predictability for children on the autism spectrum, allowing them to know what to expect and what is expected of them.

8. Figures of speech might be hard to “figure out!”

Kids with autism often process language very literally. Our “church phrases” can cause some confusion for students with autism. Psychologist Cara Marker-Daily shared, “One of my young patients wondered, ‘do I have to have surgery to get Jesus into my heart?’” Common Christian language, such as “blood of the Lamb” and “we’re on fire for Jesus” can cause confusion and anxiety.

9. Children with autism love others.

While children with autism may not always react in a typical way to others’ feelings, they do not lack empathy. Psychologist Sherri McClurg emphasizes, “Children on the spectrum can feel very deeply for others.” One mother described, “My son knows when I am upset, and he will come and put his hands on my face to comfort me.”

10. Jesus loves them.

He created them. He understands them...and He knows their infinite value to the Kingdom. In Matthew 19, Jesus commands “Let the little children come to me!” Jesus has plenty of room in His arms for ALL the children...including the wonderful kids who just happen to have autism.

By learning about autism, church leaders provide the opportunity for these children—and their families—to grow in relationship with Jesus. And remember, the Church is incomplete without the gifts of all! One mother reflected on her church’s welcoming culture, saying, “It took time and effort [to include my daughter with autism at church]. But now, she’s an altar server. I never thought that would happen! But, she felt the call to serve... miracles really can happen.”