

Including Children With Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities in Religious Education Classrooms

TIPS AND RESOURCES



Inclusion in religious education: Why is it important?

Being included means more than being in a community. It means being **with** a community. It means that the community is accessible and welcoming, and that all members have opportunities to share their gifts and contribute to the whole.

Religious education classrooms often are places where participants can learn more about their own religious tradition, where they can grow and mature in their beliefs and practices, and where they can create meaningful relationships with peers. People with autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disabilities will benefit from inclusion and opportunities to explore their own faith journeys.

What are Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)?

ASD are a group of developmental disabilities that make interacting with people difficult. Because ASD affect people differently, they are referred to as “spectrum disorders.” But, all people with ASD are likely to experience challenges in three main areas:

- **Communication:** Children with ASD may have delayed or little speech. If they have speech, they may have limited ability to use words to convey their wants or needs. They may also have a hard time using words in conversation and social interaction.
- **Social Interactions:** Children with ASD usually have trouble with social interactions. They may have difficulty understanding unspoken social cues, such as tone of voice or facial expressions.
- **Restricted/Repetitive Interests:** Children with ASD may have an intense interest in a particular subject/object. Routines are also very important.

Communicating with families

When reaching out to a family:

- Present an overall attitude of openness and a desire to be supportive.
- Ask the family about their faith journey. Listen.
- Ask families what their goals are for inclusion in the classroom.
- Ask about the child’s special interests.
- Ask about the child’s gifts and strengths.
- Ask the family to share helpful information such as communication and behavior strategies.

Communication tips from: *Autism and Faith: A Journey Into Community*. See resource section.

Implications for teaching

Autism is a spectrum; each individual is unique. Though supports will need to be individualized, the following tips may be helpful as your community works toward inclusion in the classroom.

- **Modify the Activity:** Ideas include engaging the child in part of the activity rather than the entire lesson, engaging the child in something relevant to the activity, providing breaks during the activity, and changing the order of the activity.
- **Prepare the Child:** Ask a current and interested student to serve as a peer model. They can provide basic information and guidance to the child. Identify ways to give the child an idea of the activity beforehand, such as by practicing or videotaping what they will be doing.
- **Use Supports and Strategies:** Provide information in a clear and visual way. Use pictures to clarify your spoken words. Reward the child frequently to motivate him/or to keep up the good work!

Due to transitioning staff, it may be helpful to create an information card about the child. Typical information includes: The child’s interests, what types of supports are helpful, and who to contact if difficulties arise.

Getting the community involved

Develop procedures to promote the effective inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

- Form an inclusion committee.
- Develop a brochure packet.
- Form a support group.
- Host a respite night.
- Advertise what is available and who to contact.

Please see reverse for resources.



Including Children With Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities in Religious Education Classrooms

RESOURCES

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center** (VKC) works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center, and a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Training Program. The following are some of the ways the Center's programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers.

Disabilities, Religion and Spirituality

This program provides training to current and future religious and spiritual leaders and educators and supports individuals with disabilities and families as they give expression to their religion and/or spirituality. Activities include developing ecumenical educational materials, conducting research, and sharing best practices. Contact courtney.taylor@vumc.org (615) 322-5658.

Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD)

TRIAD is a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center program dedicated to improving assessment and treatment services for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families while advancing knowledge and training. See TRIAD.vumc.org or call (615) 936-0267.

TRIAD Families First Program

This free training series provides parents of children with autism (ages 2-5) with techniques to enhance social and communication skills and to manage challenging behaviors. Contact familiesfirst@vumc.org or (615) 322-7565.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder is a free statewide phone, web, and print referral service in English and Spanish. It connects the Tennessee disability community with service providers and resources. Its website database has over 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county and service. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities, TN Department of Health, and the TN Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Contact www.familypathfinder.org, (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636.

Vanderbilt Autism Resource Line

Free information and referral service for parents, teachers, and community professionals. Information is available about autism-specialized diagnostic evaluation services, school consultation, parent workshops, and professional training at Vanderbilt for children, adolescents, and adults with ASD. Contact autismclinic@vumc.org or (615) 322-7565, or toll-free (877) 273-8862.

Two Easy Ways to Take Part in Research

The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center serves families through research studies. StudyFinder is a searchable database that lists current VKC studies, including ASD research. Studies seek people of all ages with and without developmental disabilities. See kc.vanderbilt.edu/studyfinder, (615) 936-0448. Research Match is a secure place for volunteers and researchers to connect. Once you sign up and get added to the registry, a researcher will contact you if you're a possible match for the research study. See www.researchmatch.org.

Free and Downloadable Autism Resources

See "Resources" on Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Website. vkc.vumc.org

Local and National Resources

- **Faith for ALL** is an organization that accelerates congregational accessibility so people with disabilities and their families can have deeper access into the community life of a congregation. www.faithforall.org
- **Interfaith Disability Network** is a member organization that educates and engages individuals with disabilities and their families and faith communities in cultivating mutually beneficial relationships. www.interfaithdisability.org

Print Resources

- Carter, Erik. (2007). *Including People With Disabilities in Faith Communities: A Guide for Service Providers, Families, and Congregations*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.
- Walsh, M., Walsh, A., Gaventa, W. (Eds.). (2008). *Autism and Faith: A Journey Into Community*. NJ: Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities.

Contact the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center
Nashville (615) 322-8240
Toll-Free (866) 936-VUKC [8852]
vkc.vumc.org
kc@vumc.org

