

How to Minister to Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

In this guide, we will explore some of the typical challenges a student with ASD deals with, triggers that may cause stress or disruptive behavior, and what we can do to help/minister well. It is my hope that this document will help serve as a basic guide/framework for understanding autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and will enable you to minister to your flock of students well!

Let's start off with the typical challenges that a student with ASD deals with:

The Challenge of Integrating Into the Group

There are two key components to consider when thinking about an autistic student's ability to integrate into a group. The first is that students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are often on the outside looking in. That means that these students look at the youth ministry and, in most cases, want to be a part of it. However, they lack the social skills and understanding to integrate into the youth group by themselves.

Oftentimes, autism presents itself in the form of awkward social interactions and unexpected behaviors. These attributes can present unique challenges for a youth ministry environment, where nearly every aspect of programming revolves around personal connection and relationship. But there is hope for kids who have autism, and for their student ministry leaders.

To help prevent an autistic student from isolating, it will be important for you to proactively form a relationship with the student so that you can act as a buffer to help them integrate with their peers.

The other component to consider is the individualistic nature of ASD. That is to say, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is complex and requires a largely **individualized approach**. A broad range of learning styles, behaviors, disabilities, and abilities (that are sometimes unusual) fall

under the ASD umbrella. And the degree of impairment varies widely. One individual with autism may require assistance with basic life skills while another needs little, if any, support. As result, many highfunctioning students with autism have more in common with their typically developing peers than with other kids sharing the same diagnosis. For this reason there is no one-size-fits-all solution for including students with ASD. Autism doesn't always show up in the form of a physical or intellectual disability. In fact, almost half (46%) of individuals identified with ASD have average or above average intelligence levels. So it is imperative that we do not categorize students with ASD as some other separate class of person, but should instead see each student (with ASD and just in general) as an individual that is made in the image of God.

The Challenge of Understanding Pragmatic Language

The real challenge with students with autism spectrum disorders is how do we take God—who is inherently abstract to our limited minds—and make God come alive to a person who thinks in mainly concrete terms? People with autism spectrum disorders struggle with pragmatic language, or language which, “includes recognizing what is relevant to others, information, and implications. It assumes shared meanings: meanings that are understood without being stated.” When we say that God is a rock to a typically developing teenager, he or she can usually infer that we do not mean that God is literally a rock. However, many students with ASD could do that with confidence.

We use language that is contradictory and confusing to describe God because God is so big (i.e. God is a god of supreme grace and mercy, yet is also a God who loves justice). However, a typically developing teenage brain can look through these contradictions and metaphors to a larger, more complete image of God. When asking a student with ASD to describe God, they may feel overwhelmed because there are so many apparent contradictions. What we must realize is that our understanding of God is not what's important, it's the student's understanding of God that is important. We must give the student an opportunity to process and discover the different attributes of God at their own pace. This will require patience but that patience will pay off as the student grows in their understanding and obedience to God.

The Challenge of Empathy

Much of youth ministry is dependent on empathy in our teaching. Think about it: we often start a talk or a lesson with some sort of story about our own experiences that emotionally ties into the lesson that we are teaching. In fact, the Bible relies on our empathy as readers. Sure, Joseph was a suckup, but we feel for him when his brothers sell him into slavery (Genesis 37:18-36).

Many students with ASD have a hard time understanding the implications of the Gospel because they may lack a capacity for empathy. Typically, it's as though they are able to understand the "how" of the gospel but not the "why". For example, a student with ASD may understand the details of Jesus' crucifixion and how it is a terrible death, but they may have a difficult time explaining the importance and implications of the crucifixion in a spiritual sense. So it may take some extra effort and time to help the student personally and empathetically connect with the lesson.

Now that we have a better understanding of what challenges a student with an autism spectrum disorder may have when entering in to a student ministry environment, we need to keep in mind what may trigger anxiety and disruptive behavior and what we can do to minister effectively in light of these triggers.

What Causes the Triggers?

When you have a student on the autism spectrum, you will want to know the signs they will show when they are anxious. Remember, every student is different and may display anxiety at some, all, or none of these triggers.

- Sensory Overload
- Social rejection
- Teasing
- Change in routine
 - Physical touch
- Life, just life

Triggers might be something as simple as telling an autistic student “no”, putting a name-tag sticker on their shirt, or changing up the regular routine without any prior warning. If a student is triggered, whether on purpose or accidentally, it may cause a meltdown. It is important to discover what triggers your student may have and take extra steps to avoid hitting those triggers. A healthy way of doing this is by having a conversation with the student’s parents. Most parents will be very happy to share important behavioral information with you so that you can minister to their teen well.

How Can We Help/Minister Well?

In the event that a student is triggered, they may have a meltdown which may include self-critical comments, inability to stop worrying, increased insistence on routines, repetitive motor mannerisms (shaking head, biting nails, flicking, etc.), outbursts, or general silliness. Should this happen while you are with the student, do not panic or become overly frustrated. Rather, find a solution that will help the student release the stress and anxiety. For some students, this may mean using relaxation techniques such as breathing in deeply through the mouth and slowly out through the nose. For others, it may mean using an object or “fidget” for them to work out their stress.

If your student requires use of a visual aid for routine, give them a copy of the Order of Worship; or if your student has a difficult time containing excitement, give them a fidget item (they can be found in the cabinets in Room 109). If sensory overload is the issue, let the parents know so that they may provide noise canceling headphones, tinted glasses, or a particular “touch object”/fidget. If teasing is the issue, create a list of “small group rules” that will ensure that small group time is a safe place for the student to process the Bible study.

Whatever the trigger may be, it is important that we find out what the trigger(s) is/are and take steps to make sure we are meeting the students need. Christ wants us to help EVERYONE. Yes it might be arduous and uncomfortable, and your hands will get dirty. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus tells all who follow after Him to, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of

the Holy Spirit.” Nowhere in the Bible does it say only to teach those who are mentally healthy with NO disabilities. So we must be proactive in understanding our flock and willing to take extra steps, if necessary, to minister well.

Sources

- [Center for Youth Ministry Training](#)
- [Fuller Youth Institute](#)
- [Life Teen](#)