

Autism Spectrum - Level 1

When it comes to creating an inclusive classroom environment at church, it's important to understand a few key things about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Including the fact that needs vary. Some students will benefit from a one-on-one buddy. However, others may just need some understanding and extra support as needed, such as many students who have autism level 1, previously known as Asperger's.

Setting Students with Autism Level 1 Up For Success At Church

1. Understand What Is Challenging

Every person who is on the spectrum is unique, but there are a few common challenges that leaders should be aware of such as:

- **Trying Something New** - New activities or tasks can be challenging because many students thrive on routine and knowing what to expect. But another aspect that is tough is that completing new tasks requires making assumptions. Making assumptions can be more challenging for people with ASD.

For example, when someone says, "Make us some sandwiches." That is one very general command that is actually made up of multiple assumed steps.

1. Find the ingredients.
2. Find the plates.
3. Spread the mayo.
4. Slice the tomato.
5. Stack the bologna.
6. Add the top bread.
7. Put the leftovers in the fridge.
8. Put the dirty dishes in the sink.
9. Bring the sandwiches to the group.

In reality, that is a lot of assumed steps. So, if making assumptions is hard to do, that would make completing new tasks very difficult.

How Leaders Can Help- Give very clear and specific instructions for each step of a new task and allow students to ask as many clarifying questions as needed. Or ask another student to go with the student to help as needed.

- **Sensory Overload** - Be aware that too much noise, action, smells, textures, and other environmental stimuli can sometimes feel overwhelming to students who have ASD. Feeling overstimulated can lead to a student shutting down or acting out.

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How Leaders Can Help- Have a calm area available, and keep noise canceling headphones and sensory fidgets on hand.

- **Managing Emotions** - Emotional self-regulation can be more challenging for students who are on the spectrum. This means they can become easily frustrated and may not be able to cope in an appropriate way.

How Leaders Can Help - Be aware that how you handle this will vary depending on the student and the situation. Always use your best judgement and put safety first. If appropriate, you can try introducing coping skills such as taking deep breaths, taking a short walk, or talking through feelings.

- **Social Situations** - Socializing can be more difficult because many students have a hard time understanding nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, as well as reading in between the lines when one thing is said, but something else is meant (like sarcasm or fishing for compliments). Since most of communication is nonverbal this can lead to students misreading signals and responding inappropriately.

How Leaders Can Help - Model inclusion by consistently inviting the student into the group and valuing him. However, if a student prefers his space, respect his wishes. If a student does respond inappropriately and is confused by how others are responding to him, then help him understand better by being kind and clear about the social expectation. Finally, inviting his peers to be intentional about compassion and inclusion can make a big difference with acceptance.

ONE MORE TIP - When a student does have challenging behavior assume positive intent. Understand that he is likely NOT trying to be difficult, he is just trying to cope with a challenge. So approach with empathy and help him figure it out.

2. Listen to Learn

The best way to have the right supports in place is to invite the student and his family into the discussion. Make communication a priority and learn more about your student. And be sure to ask "How much do you want to share with the group." Some students may want total privacy, while others may want to share.

3. Celebrate Strengths

Discover your student's talents and invite them to serve in your ministry.