

Ministering to families affected by autism

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Autism affects one out of every 150 children. A pastor might have members affected by autism and yet not even know it. Look for the exhausted mother who never seems to keep her child under control; look at the baby who cries unceasingly; perhaps look at the empty place where members with small children no longer come to church because it's just too hard. Autism is here. The pastor, then, needs to know how to minister to the families affected by it.

What is autism?

Most everyone has heard of autism, but they don't know much about it. Though many mysteries shroud this affliction, we know autism as a neurological disorder that affects a child's ability to communicate and develop social relationships. Twenty-five percent of autism has a known cause, such as a genetic or metabolic/mitochondrial disorder.

In 75 percent of cases, the cause is considered unknown. According to the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention, three out of every four children diagnosed with autism are boys. Autism comes in different forms, with symptoms ranging from genius to severely impaired. Some children may look very typical until you get to know them better, or until someone points out specific traits linked with the condition.

Awareness of the disorder

How then can pastors help those with autistic children?

For starters, a pastor needs to understand that children with autism are not easily handled, and they are not very good at being quiet or still. Children with autism can look typical but demonstrate some rather strange, startling, unlovable, and downright bizarre behaviors. If you don't realize what they have, you might think that they are just being unruly, or that their parents need to follow good parenting guidelines.

So the first step is awareness and understanding of this disorder. Most children with autism have sensory issues. This means that a woman's perfume, which we can barely smell, seems overwhelming to the child and can cause a spontaneous outburst, even in the middle of church. This outburst can include a shriek and then panic as they run around in circles, flapping their arms. In the meantime, what kind of looks does the family get as the child disrupts the service?

Other senses are equally affected. A glint of sun reflected on a man's watch may look like a firecracker going off in the child's face. Or you may think you are speaking directly to a child with autism, but they seem deaf because they are overwhelmed with all the other sounds that they hear like a church member folding a bulletin, change dropping in the offering plate, the clock ticking, and shoes shuffling. With these sounds overwhelming them, they can't hear you.

And if you see them spitting out soufflé prepared by a member, it's not because it's bad food, but either the texture or the overwhelming flavor, which by our standards was subtle. Again, it overwhelms the child's senses. You might have noticed they walk on tiptoe too. This may be because they feel like they have rocks in the bottom of their shoes all day.

How to help

As a pastor, you need to ask the family how you can help. Would a nursery help them to be able to listen to the service? Would they need a volunteer to sit with their child during church or Sabbath School so the parents can attend an adult class? Podcasting the sermon and uploading it to the church Web site can help when parents can't make it to church.

What about a children's club in the church? Are their leaders willing to modify and incorporate children with special needs into their programs?

Could the whole church benefit from an autism awareness workshop? If the parents want to train their child to sit in church, could there be a special training room made available or can the church members be notified that there may be some temporary challenges? Do the parents want to have their child anointed?

Church members can minister to these families outside of church too. Asking what would be helpful is an important first step. Some people like me have a hard time accepting help, even when offered, so here are some suggestions:

- Volunteer to run some errands or do some household chores for the parents.
- Learn about the child's therapies and interventions. If the family uses "floor time," see if you can come over and play with the child.
- Volunteer to watch the child for a couple of hours or a day. You can also surprise Mom by giving her time at the salon or the spa.
- When a child with autism misbehaves, ask if there's anything you can do to help. Children with autism do not respond well to spankings or time-outs. Distracting them may help them to calm down.
- Encourage your typical child to befriend and help the autistic child by modeling typical behaviors. Never tolerate anyone teasing or berating them. Many children with autism are very intelligent despite their disabilities, and they have a lot to offer society.
- Most of all, support positive steps the parents take to help the child. Autism is a complex disorder and parents need to try various approaches to deal with the situation.

Autism should not be considered a made-up excuse to allow children to be unruly as some well-meaning members might suspect. Having a child with autism can be overwhelming. Statistics estimate that 80 percent of marriages that have a child with autism fail. The support, encouragement, and understanding given by pastors and church members become essential to these families' spiritual and marital lives.

Ministering

Give special attention to these families. Learn how to interact with their child. Understand their needs. Many of these children can't recognize dangerous situations, so if they wander off they need to be found immediately. Some children with autism don't have receptive language, the ability to interpret and understand what you are saying, but they can respond to sign language or pictures. They have to see you in order to know that you want their attention.

Show the child how to do things and what you expect of them. Some children with autism don't have expressive language or the ability to talk. They can get very frustrated as they try to get

other's attention or to convey their thoughts and feelings. If a child has a meltdown, look for the source—for example, a strange smell, taste, sight, or sound, and remove it or redirect the child's attention. Allow the child to have a quiet place to recoup when their senses are overwhelmed. Children with autism have trouble transitioning; give them a few verbal or pictorial warnings before changing activities with them. Many children with autism are very concrete thinkers so don't use figurative language with them, like "you're putting the cart before the horse," or "you're opening a can of worms." They won't understand what you mean.

Most of all, believe in our children with autism, and praise them. They work so hard to be a part of our world. We know this is good for typical children, so how much more important for these children, who are so often misunderstood?

Try to see the child that God intended them to be and not to see them as the disorder. With early intervention, children with autism can get better, and you can be a part of their healing.

Finally, pray for these precious little ones' healing and for their families. See them through Jesus' eyes, full of hope and potential.