



**Autism
Council
of Utah**

Autism and Faith

These are some suggestions that have been gathered by the Autism Council of Utah from a summit and subsequent meetings that were held to talk about autism in the faith community. These meetings were non-denominational.

Autism is a spectrum disorder. In a nutshell, that means once you've met a kid with autism, you have met ONE kid with autism. The spectrum is huge – there are doctors with autism, and there are mentally disabled people with autism, and everything in between. Autism affects each person and family differently. But one thing most families want is open hearts, open minds, and open doors – acceptance and support in their faith community.

The following is a collection of suggestions about things you can do for the:

Individual with autism:

- Acknowledge the person, say hi.
- Do not assume that an inability to verbalize is also an inability to understand.
- Don't talk about them like they aren't there.
- Explore sensory issues, lights, speakers, and temperatures – sometimes what is considered to be a “normal environment” to us will seem like steel wool under the shirt to a child with autism (e.g. fluorescent lights and music full blast).
- Give assignments as appropriate – be specific and direct with speech.
- Include them – say prayers, help where needed – one boy was totally non-verbal a few years go and now he can say most of the words of a prayer with help.
- Include love, really see him as one who can learn and has a lot to offer – value the person.
- Learn their names and use “People First” language.
- Modify programs to fit individual needs – pre-teach the lesson so that the child already knows.
- Give the same recognition that other kids get – modify as necessary.
- Use adaptations to provide the child with materials he can understand.
- Remember to focus on “the positives” – find out what reinforces the person.
- Use schedule boards.
- Teach those that are surrounding them, peers – they are not “weird”, their brain works different, well sometimes they are a little weird, but they are so fun!
- Understand and accept the importance of consistency and “rituals” – they are not doing it to be difficult, changes may be tough.
- Assign a friend – could be a rotating assignment and provide an opportunity to be a friend.

Family:

- Accepting help early on is easier than being driven to your knees and then accepting help.
- Ask what you can do for the family – don't be afraid to initiate a service.
- Be open – non-judgmental.
- Master your fear, with fear nothing is possible, but with faith nothing is impossible!
- Provide respite outside of church.
- Talk to your religious leader.
- Understanding is key, if there could be a way to allow the family to introduce themselves and help the congregation understand their situation. Education is power to help.
- Families are doing their very best – they just want to be “normal”.
- It is a unique challenge and opportunity – you can be changed forever... for the better!

Siblings:

- Allow siblings to talk about being a sibling, but don't expect them to be the expert.
- Don't assign the sibling to take care of the child with autism.
- Give them support – understand they are under a different level of stress.
- Include them as individuals – respect what they might be going through.
- Make sure they get where they need to go, the family may be unable to take that on.
- Pay special attention to the siblings and make sure that they are accepted even though they have a sibling with a disability.

Congregation:

- Build a team of people to help – you don't have to help alone.
- Respect what a family is going through and their privacy – let it be their story to tell.
- Congregation education – help the congregation understand what autism looks like.
- Don't be afraid to try – ask questions, try new things.
- Get concrete plans, ideas and resources from the families about how to help - learn the rules and consequences that are appropriate.
- Look for expertise within the congregation – may be resource.
- Create partnerships with organizations that provide support (e.g. ACU, USOE)
- Have enough adults available to meet the child's needs.
- Help for adults in group homes in your area.
- Let the family talk about their needs and situation. It's a great way to learn about them.
- It's OK if you don't want to help, families will not judge you – know your limits.
- It's OK if you don't know what to do, sometimes we don't either!
- Send information well in advance of activities and events so they can plan to participate.
- Share ideas about how and why to serve this population.
- Train peers, other children or adults on how to understand person with autism.
- Keep the family in mind when planning activities.
- Seek inspiration – creative ideas often come from pondering, prayer and reflection.
- Be an emergency drop off to absorb stress or trauma.

Congregation Leader:

- Create a disability-friendly “Welcome Packet” to share with new families and to help gather information on the family, as well as the family member with a disability and how best to support them.