

PFA Tips

Taking Your Child to Worship Services

“I grew up in a family with a strong religious faith. But it was too hard to attend worship service with my child, so we just stopped going.” It seems we’re getting more and more calls just like this one. So how do you balance the needs of your child with Autism with your desire to maintain your religious connection?

Play Secret Service Agent and do a little recon

Choose a non-service time and take a little tour of the place of worship with your loved one. Show her the rooms where different activities will take place. If at all possible, ask the music director if he can do a small demonstration of the noise level that will occur during a service. Ask how long a typical service lasts. Ask if you may bring snacks or drinks into the area where the service occurs. Make mental notes of the exits and closest bathrooms.

Think of social stories as little practice sermons

Social stories can be a great tool to prepare someone for an experience. If you can, include pictures of the place of worship to help prepare your loved one for the service or other religious activities and observances. View a social story from Carol Gray on Going to Worship at <http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/home/social-story-for-going-to-worship/>. View a sample social story from Autism Inspiration on going to a Catholic mass at <http://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Going-to-Mass-social-story.pdf>.

Technology is our friend

Most of our loved ones with Autism are visual learners and processors. Having that large screen that displays the words to hymns, prayers, and readings and responses, may allow our loved ones new opportunities to participate. And keep in mind that even though they may not verbally respond or sing aloud, they may be reading the words and participating quietly in their minds.

You may also need to rely on handheld technology to help keep your child occupied if that’s really the only way you are going to be able to sit through a service. If you worry that Spongebob isn’t appropriate during religious times, there might be an appropriate app for use during worship services.

Look for a service that dances in the aisles

Sitting still for a long period of time is hard. It’s hard for us. It can be even harder for our loved ones with Autism. Some places may offer more contemporary services where they don’t mind if people get up and move or dance, and are less restrictive of noises that may be deemed disruptive at more traditional faith gatherings. I still laugh when my mom tells me of the time she took my son to her church and each time the minister asked a question (rhetorical), my son yelled out an answer.

Spiritual fulfillment doesn’t equate to one hour

Maybe your loved one can only tolerate 30 minutes in a service. Or 15. Or maybe she can handle 10 minutes at a time, with a 5 minute break in between. Just because you may not be able to sit and attend the entire service, don’t discount what you may get out of the time you are able to participate.

Can you explain an abstract idea to a literal mind?

The concept of a higher spiritual power is abstract, and faith is not based on scientific and physical evidence. So how do you convey the concept of higher spiritual powers to people who are neurologically



wired to be literal thinkers? Unfortunately, a comprehensive answer requires a discussion from people with ASD, philosophers, theologians, and others who know a great deal more than I do. But William Stillman is a respected author with ASD and has addressed this very question and offers his unique perspective in his book *Autism and the God Connection* - <https://www.williamstillman.com/god-connection.php>.

Bribery can surely be forgiven

Offer rewards as positive behavior incentives. Don’t expect an offer of a doughnut at the end of the service, if the child is good, is going to work. The time frame is too long and the demands are too many. Instead, try offering a reward for each 5 minutes that the child does not run down the aisle, or belt out the latest Katy Perry tune. As accomplishments are made, time spans and rewarded behaviors can be modified.

Everyone deserves a party

Ask if curricula can be modified for milestone events. If you want your child to participate in a milestone event such as a First Communion or Bar Mitzvah, but you

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have concerns that your child may not be able to complete the required work or classes, ask if your child can use a modified or altered curriculum. The following two examples may be for Catholic rituals, however, the concepts can be generalized to other faiths.

Dealing With Autism, Lesson by Lesson, in a Quest for First Communion
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/19/us/dealing-with-autism-lesson-by-lesson-in-a-quest-for-first-communion.html>

Adaptive First Eucharist Preparation Kit for Children with Autism and Other Special Needs
<https://www.loyolapress.com/products/special-needs>

Does your child come with a manual?

Share your child's IEP and BIP with the faith-based teacher. You've done the work to establish how to make your child most successful in a classroom setting. And you have it in writing. Share that information with the teacher so she can use the same

methods that are already familiar to your child. Consistency can be a key to success. Another helpful tool may be an intake form to share additional information about your child.

Download a sample intake form at <http://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Sample-Intake-Form-for-church.pdf>

Keep activities age appropriate

Your place of worship may have special programs dedicated specifically to people with different abilities. If so, request that your loved one be with peers close in age, and given age appropriate activities. Sometimes people misinterpret an inability to express themselves with verbal language as being intellectually younger than their chronological age. While we ourselves know that this is not necessarily the case, others who are new to our families' situations may need a reminder to "presume intellect*."

Sometimes adults need to be reminded about good manners

As children we're taught it's not nice to

stare at people. So why is it that we still find adults that stare at our loved ones if they make vocalizations, or flap their hands, or come to service wearing noise cancelling headphones? You may want to ask your worship leader if she would consider addressing the congregation and reminding them that everyone is welcome to worship there. If you discover that all are not actually welcome, then you may want to consider finding a new place to practice your faith. And remember to pray for the misguided.

Find a congregation that makes your entire family feel welcome

Unfortunately, this may mean making a very difficult decision to leave the place of worship where you've been a member for years. Try to see this as an opportunity to make new friends and support avenues. And use the same internal strength you've relied on when "test driving" new therapies and treatments to visit new places of worship until you find that magical fit.

Additional Resources

*"Presuming Intellect: 10 Ways to Enrich Our Relationships Through a Belief in Competence" by William Stillman
<https://www.williamstillman.com/archive/presuming-intellect.php>

Autism and Faith: A Journey in Community
<http://rwjms.rutgers.edu/boggscenter/products/AutismandFaith.html>

Special Needs Ministry for Children and Adults
<https://churchrelevance.com/special-needs-ministry-for-autistic-children/>

Religious Resources – List from Autism Speaks
<https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/resource-library/religious-resources>

Church Resources for ASD
<http://www.autism-pdd.net/testdump/test19276.htm>

The Child with Autism Learns about Faith: 15 Ready-to-Use Scripture Lessons Religion and Autism
<http://fhaautism.com/the-child-with-autism-learns-about-faith-15-ready-to-use-scripture-lessons.html>

St. Mary's Curriculum for Students with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities
<http://www.autismreligiouseducation.net/>

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Director of Safety Programs,
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