

Inclusion in Faith Communities: Some tips for Parents to Get Started

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1. Introduce yourself and your child to your religious leaders before you attend, if possible. Ask if there are other children or adults with autism in the congregation. Explain what autism is, and your child's limitations and potential. But first, let them know how important participation in a religious community is to your family, and that this is an area of concern for many families.
2. Offer to help provide information, educational opportunities, or people who can assist religious educators to include your child. Professionals may be quite willing to give guidance to religious educators and to help figure out how to adapt a curriculum. There may be other ways that you as a parent can volunteer in the religious education program to help overall teaching and staffing resources. There are also online resources and materials.
3. Find a family-oriented worship service where a little noise is not uncommon.
4. If your child is too young to pay attention to the service, bring books or other engaging toys to occupy him or her.
5. If the expectations are for children to sit in a religious service for 45-60 minutes or more, make sure the child is able to do this at home first, or has an opportunity to practice.
6. Figure out a way to come to the sanctuary with your child and go through the steps of the service so it is familiar space. Practice can happen outside the service and at home. Video modeling, a video of what happens in the service and what people do, can be a way of helping a child learn visually.
7. Use concrete language and visual aides when instructing your child.
8. Use a digital camera to make a picture book of your worship service and space, important parts of the service, key people, etc. You can use the pictures to help a child learn the names of the places, actions, and people. Practice at home, and reward the child when he/she labels them in public.
9. Find something in the worship service that your child enjoys and can participate in and succeed at to make attending services fun for your child.
10. Learn how to use a motivational system and then make it as discrete as possible.
11. Use this booklet as a resource and provide it to your congregation and other parents and families.
12. Use the resources in the next sections. There are some excellent ones for congregations.

Source: *Autism and Faith: A Journey into Community* manual by Elizabeth M. Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities at UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Department of Pediatrics and the New Jersey Center for Outreach and Services for the Autism Community and The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation.

