Creating a Welcoming Environment for Adolescents with Autism

By Tiffany Manning

I can still remember my cousin’s first birthday party. As she was playing with a balloon, it popped in her face. Rushing over to console her, I was taken aback by her response. She wasn’t crying or screaming. She didn’t react at all. It was as if the balloon had never popped in the first place.

A few years later, my cousin was diagnosed with autism. Autism, or autism spectrum disorder, is a condition that manifests itself in difficulties with social skills, repetitive behaviors, and trouble with communication. The word “spectrum” speaks to the diverse challenges and strengths people with autism have. While many believe that childhood vaccines cause autism, there is no scientific research that confirms this belief. Studies do indicate that autism comes from a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

The CDC estimates that 1 in 68 children in the United States has autism. With such a great prevalence, churches need to be intentional about making their worship services and ministries welcoming for individuals with autism. Here are some tips on how to make your youth ministry more hospitable for teenagers with autism:

- **Establish a predictable routine.** Many people with autism obsess over schedules. Their struggles with interacting in social environments result in anxiety when even a minor change is made to their expected plans. Before each youth gathering, provide students with autism with a written copy of your anticipated order of events (pictures to go with each item would also be beneficial). Avoid listing times on the schedule unless you expect things to go exactly as planned. If you anticipate a change in the schedule, let adolescents with autism know as soon as possible so they can have time to process this change in plans. Teens with autism will also find it helpful if you provide verbal reminders of upcoming transitions (for example, “You have two minutes left to finish up snack, then we will play a game.”). These reminders will cause less anxiety over what is coming next for students with and without autism alike!

- **Create sensory-friendly surroundings.** Teenagers with autism can have difficulties with regulating their sensory input (information gathered by their five senses). Smells, sights, and sounds that easily fade into the background for people without autism can produce stress for individuals on the autism spectrum. Fill your space with as much
natural light as possible; some fluorescent lights are too bright or make noise that is distracting. Minimize posters and bright colors on the walls of your youth room to be less disturbing. Loud noise may overwhelm an adolescent with autism, so consider how your worship time or meeting space may need to be adapted. Each student with autism has different sensory needs, so talk with the student or his/her parents to make sure your physical environment is conducive to their participation.

**Use an individual’s interests to structure programming.** Teenagers with autism often have very specialized interests. Have a one-on-one conversation to find out what your student with autism likes to do, then try to find ways to incorporate those interests into your learning and fellowship activities. If a student likes video games, use popular games to illustrate faith topics. If a person jumps a lot or sings, consider an afternoon at a trampoline park or a karaoke night. Activities like these will be enjoyable for everyone and make the students unique interests or behaviors seem less out of place.

**Educate your youth and leaders.** Individuals with autism exhibit some behaviors that may make it difficult for them to make friends with other teenagers, such as avoiding eye contact, repeating words or behaviors, or not talking much. Before students have a chance to label a peer with autism as “weird,” discuss autism with your teens. Talk about how all teenagers are children of God and should be welcome at church and youth group. Brainstorm ways to integrate adolescents with autism and other disabilities into your ministry, including tips for interpersonal interaction to lessen any fears or anxieties students may have. Consider inviting an individual’s parents to speak about their child’s specific strengths and needs at a youth leader meeting to answer any questions. Parents will appreciate knowing you care so much about their child to make sure they feel welcome.

**Ask a student or two to provide support.** While having a conversation with your entire group will provide a good overview of autism and an individual’s needs, you may also want to speak with a couple teens who will be intentional about making sure a new person with autism feels comfortable and engages in activities. Having a few peers that the adolescent with autism can count on for support will provide some predictability and help them navigate new social environments that can be scary and overwhelming. Many schools have “buddy programs” for students with disabilities, so it makes sense that the church should have them as well.
The unique challenges of autism can be intimidating at first because everyone on the spectrum has diverse needs and abilities. Embrace these challenges as opportunities to extend God’s love to a fellow brother or sister in Christ. Your ministry may be one of the few places teens with autism and their families feel truly welcome and accepted for who they are.

Tiffany Manning is an ordained deacon in the United Methodist Church. She has served as the Children and Youth Pastor of St. Paul UMC in Manchester, PA since June 2010. Tiffany has a M.Div. from Lancaster Theological Seminary and is currently pursuing a D.Min. in Youth and Family Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. In her spare time, Tiffany enjoys watching musicals with her husband Nate, doing needlecrafts, and substitute teaching in her local school district.