

I AM AUTISTIC & I LOVE JESUS!

BY LYNN COLE

Caring for a child with autism is a journey. In our case, our journey began when our son, Caleb, stopped talking when he was about two years old. Our pediatrician encouraged us to have him tested for autism. This started our quest for knowledge about autism and the autism spectrum. We are currently waiting for test results to determine where Caleb is on the spectrum of autism.

I'm not a neurologist or psychologist. I'm writing from the viewpoint of a stay-at-home mother. I'm learning as I go.

What I have learned is that autism is a disorder of neural (brain) development characterized by impaired social interaction and communication and by restricted and repetitive behavior. There still have been no findings of the cause or cure of autism. One child with autism can read and memorize things. Another may have a reading disability but excel in math. Many autistic children are socially impaired and have difficulty communicating.

My reason for writing this article is to share that children with autism, no matter what spectrum they are on, can worship, pray, and learn about our God and Savior, Jesus! I know this first hand. The enemy continually told me Caleb would never understand salvation, and that he would never receive the Holy Ghost. But we all know—when the enemy opens his mouth, it is all lies!

Caleb received the Holy Ghost on April 7, 2012. He was baptized in Jesus' name on April 14, 2012! He was only eight years old! To God be the Glory!

If you are passionate about children and children's ministry, please keep reading. I have put together helpful tips on ministering to children with autism.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTISM:

- Rocking back and forth
- Child sits in a fetal position
- Fixation on a certain object
- Lack of interest with other children
- Covers ears when loud music is played



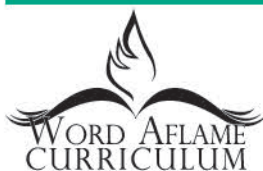
- Difficulty when transitioning from worship to lesson
- Lack of eye contact
- Seems to not understand when given direction
- Child repeats a word or phrase

TEACHING TIPS

1. Pray and ask God to give you wisdom, strength, and patience.
2. Introduce yourself to the child's parent. Ask questions about how you can help the child get the most out of Sunday school.
3. Take the time to get to know the child. Ask the child simple questions. Autistic children may not respond quickly because they process information slowly. Some may not respond at all.
4. You may consider assigning a helper to the child. Introduce the helper to the child's parent. This will give the helper an opportunity to ask how to assist the child.
5. Sights, sounds, tastes, or touches may be intensified for a child with autism. You may want to consider modifying the volume of the music and adjusting the lighting.
6. Autistic children want to be involved. If you would like them to help, talk to the child in advance. Explain in detail what they will be doing.
7. You may consider giving the child a routine task to help the child feel part of the class. Autistic children love routines such as straightening chairs, picking up trash, or turning off the lights.
8. Transition time may be the hardest for the child. An autistic child is not able to stop and sit down immediately. One idea is to have the helper take the child out for a water break.
9. Communication is frustrating for the autistic child. Should you need to correct or give additional instruction, you may need to ask for eye contact. It may not last very long, but the child will know you need his attention. Talk to him in simple sentences.
10. If the child disrupts, don't call him out by name. This may cause him to have a breakdown or a tantrum. This is why a helper is so important! The helper can be the one to help redirect and calm the child. Always protect the child's self-esteem.

11. Remember you are the "Jesus" this child sees every Sunday!
12. I hope that this has helped you and your Sunday school staff. The Lord created us all with differences, and we are all fearfully and wonderfully made. One Bible translation says, "Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!" Autism is a complexity, but children with autism are gifts of God and deserve our best.

For more information, see *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* by Ellen Notbohm.



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