

Handling autism in the faith classroom

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DURHAM -- Every child with autism is different, but congregations can still prepare themselves to welcome all children into their classrooms, Anna Berkeley said this week to a group of church volunteers, teachers and ministers at a lunch and learn session at Duke Memorial United Methodist Church.

Berkeley, who works for Community Partnership Inc. and Durham Inclusion Support Services, shared information about autism and how congregations can handle children with autism and their parents.

"Welcoming Children with Autism to Faith Classrooms" was the final lunch and learn series this season of Durham's Early Childhood Faith Initiative. There may be another series this fall.

Berkeley quoted from a recent PBS series about autism, "Autism Speaks," with the advice that "if you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Yet there are overall guidelines to help churches know what to do when a child with autism comes to class. The basics are to treat every child as an individual, rather than labeling them, she said.

She gave an overview of autism facts: It's generally evident before age 3; it is diagnosed four to five times more in boys than girls; there is currently no known cause. She talked about recent neurological research on the brain-body-environment connection, and a researcher's description of autism as brain misregulation -- connections that are not happening and cause the stress response of fight, flight or freeze.

Berkeley said that when the brain's connections are misfiring, firing too much or areas are not ready for the firings, "we see the behavioral output of those brain functions."

Some children have regressive autism, she said, in which at age 12 to 18 months, they start losing skills. Some children's autism is impacted positively by changes in diet, she said, but again, "It's so individualized."

So how do faith classrooms handle children that have different needs?

- Put yourself in the parents' shoes and think of it as a partnership.
- Clarify expectations with parents and volunteers.
- Ask parents what kind of information is important to know, like how a child reacts to a certain

scenario. Also think about how you word questions. Questions to ask include what makes them smile; what makes the child angry or sad and how do they react to those emotions; and how should the teachers handle it?

- Be prepared with activities ready at drop-off, and include an alternative activity like a small notebook or puzzle.

- Maintain a consistent schedule and try to do activities in the same order.

- Consider the child's sensory needs, like defining spatial boundaries with chairs at circle time; having quiet space; and having heavy work activities like deep breaths, squeezing a ball or blowing bubbles.

If something happens, Berkeley recommends taking a step back and wondering what's going on.

"Always think that behavior is communication," she said. "If we understand what they're trying to tell us, then we can help."

Community Partnership Inc. offers consultations and technical assistance. To contact Berkeley, call (919) 402-9400 ext. 301 or email aberkeley@compart.org.