

# CENTERING CHILDREN IN OUR CONGREGATION

Workshops designed to nurture children's faith formation



# WELCOME

OCTOBER 9, 2025

## EMBRACING CHILDREN ON THE SPECTRUM





Supporting children with autism  
and disabilities in the church



**CONNECT. EMPOWER. TRANSFORM.**  
Empowering community impact for sustainable transformation.

## ABOUT CCT


At CCT, we operate at the intersection of faith, purpose, and action. Rooted in the belief that cities should reflect God's peace, prosperity, and wholeness. We dedicate ourselves to fostering community resurgence. We champion the idea that real change sprouts from within, not from the outskirts. Hence, we partner with local leaders in the sectors of Education, Business, Church, and Non-Profit to ensure community-driven results. Today's workshop is part of our initiative Centering Children in Our Congregations, created in response to the needs expressed by ministry leaders who serve children in our congregations.

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## ABOUT JONI & FRIENDS

Joni & Friends is a Christian nonprofit dedicated to bringing hope, dignity, and belonging to people living with disabilities around the world. Founded in 1979 by Joni Eareckson Tada, the organization exists to glorify God by communicating the Gospel and mobilizing the global Church to evangelize, disciple, and serve people affected by disability. Through programs such as Wheels for the World, Joni's House, and Retreats & Getaways, Joni & Friends meets physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in more than 90 countries. The ministry envisions a world where every person with a disability finds hope, experiences dignity, and discovers their place in the body of Christ.

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# TODAY'S PROGRAM

- 11:30 AM**   **Welcome**  
Carolina Mueller
- 11:35AM**   **Opening Prayer**  
Cathleen Lawler
- 11:40 AM**   **Embracing Families with Disabilities**  
Fred Hammer, Erin Webb, and Roenz Balangue
- 12:00 PM**   **Conversation Lunch**  
Your choice between one of the following:  
Cranberry Walnut Chicken Salad Sandwich,  
Tomato Basil BLT, or Chicken Caesar Salad
- 12:20 PM**   **Panel Discussion**
- 1:30 PM**   **Closing**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Page

- 2   **About**
- 3   **Today's Panel**
- 4   **The Autism Spectrum**
- 5   **Understanding Autism**
- 7   **Non-Verbal Communications**
- 9   **Resources**

Please take a moment to scan the QR code and fill out our survey evaluation. Your input will help us improve our workshops. Thank you for your participation!



# TODAY'S PANELISTS



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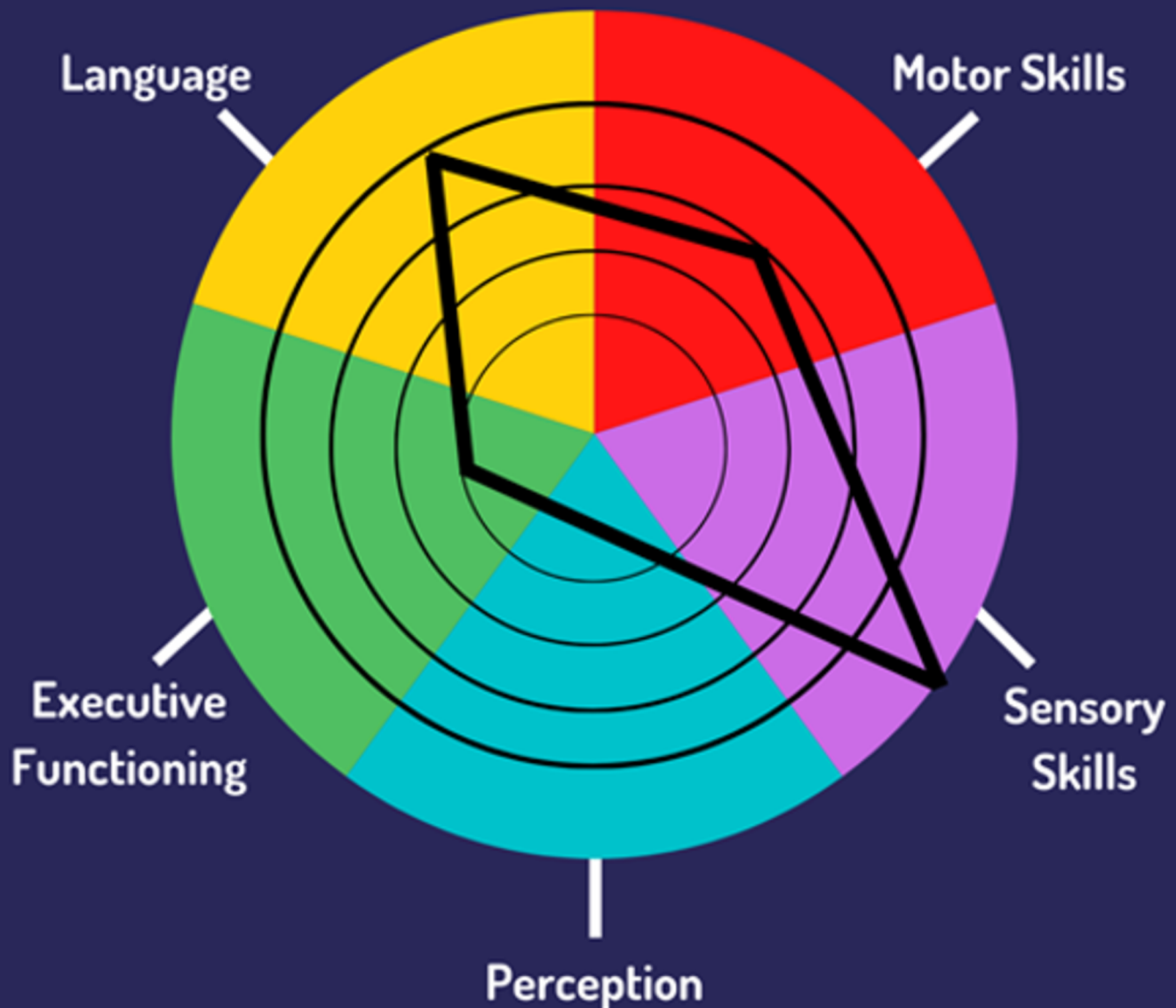
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# THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

What people think the autism spectrum looks like:



What it can actually look like:



# Understanding Autism...

## Answering Four Questions about Autism



### 1. What Is Autism?

According to the Mayo Clinic, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a condition related to brain development that impacts how a person **socializes** with and **perceives** others, causing problems in social interaction and communication. The disorder also includes limited and repetitive patterns of behavior. The term spectrum in autism spectrum disorder refers to the wide range of symptoms and severity.

- Developmental conditions like autism often come bundled with other disorders. For example, nearly 75% of people with autism also have sensory processing disorder (SPD). This condition can make lights, noises, textures, and smells overwhelming.

### 2. How Common Is Autism?

According to a 2018 study from the CDC, approximately 1 in 59 children are diagnosed with ASD. Autism is diagnosed through observed behavior, not through a medical test, such as a blood sample. Autism is not a disease to be “cured” or something a person outgrows. However, through various therapies people with autism can work toward mitigating difficult symptoms to more easily manage the activities of daily life.

### 3. How Does Autism Impact Participation at Church?

Because autism is an invisible disorder, typical autistic behaviors are often misinterpreted. For example, someone with autism may find it difficult to make eye contact during a conversation. This might be interpreted as unfriendliness, which makes forming relationships difficult. Add to this symptom difficulty processing the many sights and sounds of a church service, and it's not hard to see how church can quickly become a hostile environment for someone with autism.

### 4. What Can You Do?

Provide awareness about autism for those in your church. Most churches unknowingly and unintentionally create physical spaces and social expectations that exclude people with autism.

Some ideas for raising awareness about autism in your church:

- Have someone share about their experiences with autism during a church service, preferably someone who has autism.
- Provide an autism fact sheet (like the one you are reading right now) for your congregation.
- Include information about autism on your church's website, letting individuals and families affected by autism know they are welcome.

## Myths About Autism

**Myth:**

People with autism don't want to form relationships.

**Fact:**

Like everyone, people with autism are created in the image of God and were made for relationship with God and others! A church that models God's love and acceptance of people with autism becomes a powerful example of the love of Christ.

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**Myth:**

People with autism have lower intellectual capacity or people with autism are all secret geniuses.

**Fact:**

Autism does not necessarily impact intelligence. Roughly half of people with autism have average or above average intelligence. Because people with autism often communicate and learn differently than their peers, it may seem like they are not engaging, when in truth they're absorbing everything.

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**Myth:**

People with autism do not experience emotion.

**Fact:**

People with autism experience all the same emotions you feel. This myth may come as a result of emotions being processed or communicated differently by people with autism.

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**Myth:**

Autism is just another word for "bad parenting" or "lack of discipline."

**Fact:**

Autism is a real, medical condition. Through early intervention and certain behavioral therapies, people with autism can learn to better navigate their world.

# Nonverbal Communication

*Sharing God's Word With Everyone*



## **How Beautiful Are the Feet of Those Who Bring Good News**

Sharing the gospel is a common mission for every believer. But how do we share the Word with someone who has limited use of language? This is a question anyone sharing the gospel needs to answer. To begin, we need to understand that most communication is nonverbal! Things like talking with your hands, facial expression, emojis, or italicizing or bolding words all convey more than simple words can provide. But communication is a two-way street. So, what are some ways our nonverbal friends communicate?

### **Body Language**

While we don't want to over-interpret body language in a global sense (crossed arms don't always mean someone is standoffish), we can learn what an individual's body language means. You may need time to learn to speak your friend's body language, but be assured, their posture is saying something!

### **Tone**

Even wordless vocalizations convey meaning through their tone. Many parents can tell the difference between their baby's cry for a diaper change and being hungry. When you pay attention, these subtle nuances become apparent! Understanding requires focus and effort, but it is possible.

### **Facial Expression and Eye-Contact**

To the Western world, steady eye-contact and a smile seem to be the most natural way to show someone you're friendly and engaged. But this is not always the case! In places like Korea, extended eye-contact between people is sometimes viewed as rude. The way eye-contact is used is largely a cultural matter. And for some people, such as those with autism, eye-contact can feel uncomfortable and unnatural.

### **Language Support**

Sometimes, we can help supply words to promote communication. This may be as simple as asking "yes" or "no" questions. One church invites non-verbal children to participate in Bible memorization by arranging laminated words in the right order to indicate understanding. Assistive technology such as a story board, a yes/no board, or an iPad using software like Proloquo that verbalizes their thoughts can assist with communication.

Nonverbal people still have a lot to say, and a lot of ways they can say it. But how can we effectively communicate back? Communication is, after all, a two-way street.

## **Communicating With People Who Are Nonverbal**

After listening, we need to learn to communicate clearly. How can we help make our message as clear and easy to understand as possible?

### **Establish Trust and Friendship**

There's an old adage that says, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." When you establish a relationship by spending time together, playing a game, and engaging their interests, you open the door to fruitful communication. Enter their world. A strong relational foundation not only invites people to listen to what you say but gives you a chance to observe the ways they communicate and respond to communication. Listen before you talk!

### **Use Simple, Concrete Language**

Sometimes, less is more. Many (but not all) nonverbal people have an intellectual or developmental disability. In these cases, identify what is essential to understand the lesson or story you are sharing. Describe things literally using real life examples. Avoid metaphors and hyperbole. Instead of saying, "Invite Jesus to live in your heart," say, "Ask Jesus to be a part of your life so you can think and act like him."

### **Use Symbols, Icons, and Pictures**

A picture is worth a thousand words, especially when describing abstract concepts. A visual timer moves "time" from the abstract to the concrete. A picture of Christ on the cross brings understanding to something we don't see in everyday life. Symbols are another form of communication. We see this intuitively in things like uniforms and name badges. Symbols allow you to communicate information like, "Anyone wearing a red lanyard can help," or, "Anyone holding the talking stick is allowed to speak."

### **Engage Multiple Senses**

Engaging more than one of the listener's senses when telling a story or teaching a lesson will help them remember. Some people respond to tactile experiences more than oral communication. You can show them a mustard seed when teaching about faith or let them hold a ball of wool when talking about a shepherd. Putting a Bible verse to a melody helps almost everyone learn and memorize scripture more easily.

### **Leave Space for a Response**

Most of us struggle with awkward silences. But allowing a moment of silence to stretch can be what's necessary to give your friend a chance to respond and communicate. The most important thing to remember that general expertise about "nonverbal communication" is secondary to specific expertise on an individual. Learning how individuals communicate and receive communication is the most important thing you can learn. So be patient, be willing to ask questions, and pray!

# RESOURCES



## **Sensory Overload Video**

This animation gives the viewer a glimpse into sensory overload, and how often our sensory experiences intertwine in everyday life.

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## **Certificate Program - Moody Bible Institute**

Moody's one-year Certificate in Disability Ministry will equip you with the biblical perspective and practical skills you need to effectively minister to those who have special needs and the people who care for them.

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## **Bible Curriculum - Awe & Wonder**

Awe & Wonder provides Adapted Bible Curriculum designed specifically for special needs/disability ministry and home discipleship.

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## **Disability Ministry Books**

An Amazon list of books to equip you and your team for your disability ministry.

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## **Sensory Supplies**

An Amazon list of items that are great to have to accommodate all abilities in your classroom.

# HELPFUL TOOLS



First-Then Statements



Limit Options, as Needed



Social Stories



Prompt peer interactions



Timers & Transitions



Use Less Words



Individual Spiritual Plan



Use Concrete Language

## Calming Corners



## Support Kits



## Calming Rooms



## Visual Agenda









# THANK YOU FOR JOINING US

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Your feedback encourages us to keep offering workshops like this! Tell us what you thought: scan the QR code and complete our short evaluation survey.





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