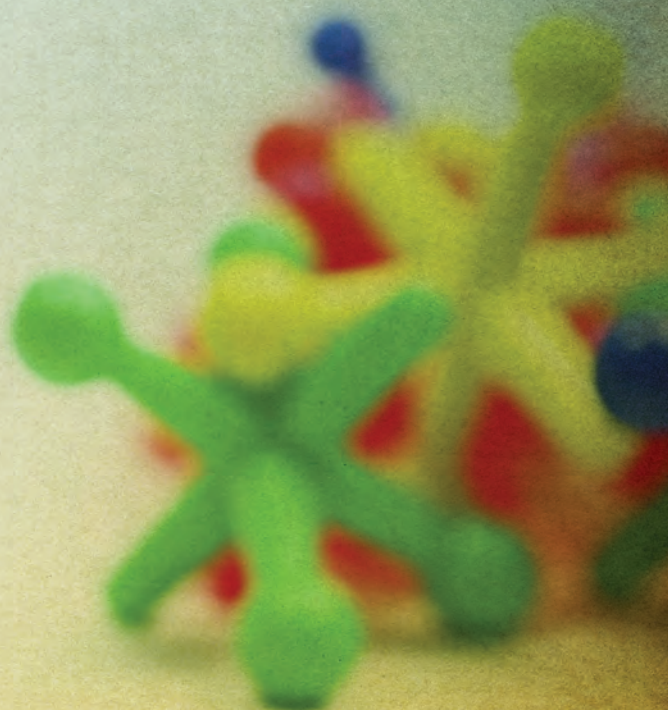


BARBARA J. NEWMAN

helping kids include kids with disabilities

revised edition



“Barbara Newman’s *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities* is thoughtful, accessible, and eminently helpful in offering practical tools for Sunday school teachers and youth ministers to create an inclusive environment within their churches. Although this book is short, which makes it all the more readable, Newman somehow manages to pack it full of information about mental and physical disabilities in the context of Christian theology. Every church library should have a copy, and every director of youth and children’s ministries should refer to it often.”

—Amy Julia Becker, author of *A Good and Perfect Gift: Faith, Expectations, and a Little Girl Named Penny* (Bethany Books, 2011; named one of Publisher’s Weekly’s Top Books of 2011) and *Why I Am Both Spiritual and Religious*.

“Barbara’s book reminds us that relationships lie at the heart of an inclusive community. Her straightforward guide offers practical ideas for connecting kids with and without disabilities in ways that are likely to foster friendships and faith.”

—Erik Carter, Ph.D., associate professor of special education, Vanderbilt University

“Another Barbara Newman ‘home run!’ As always, Barb’s biblically solid material is practical, positive, and powerful. This is a ‘must-have’ resource for anyone involved in children’s ministry.”

—Stephanie O. Hubach, Mission to North America special needs ministries director, Presbyterian Church in America; author of *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability*.

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**FAITH
ALIVE**
Christian Resources

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Dedicated with love to my dear family:

- my husband Barry Newman,
- and our sons John and James Newman.



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Foreword

How is your son enjoying Sunday school?" I asked the parents at the end of our parent-teacher conference. A heavy sigh prefaced their answer. When their son with autism was three, the parents explained, he attended children's worship for the first time. After class, a weary worker returned their son and said, "Please don't bring him back to this class. We can't handle him." For the next four years, one parent attended church and one parent stayed home with their son. Too old to qualify for the nursery but unable to sit through a service, their young son, they felt, had no place in their congregation.

A young adolescent with a mild intellectual disability could hardly wait to start his first year of boys' club at church. Although he was unable to read, he saw each of his older brothers making Pinewood Derby cars, and he longed for the day when he would be able to participate. The great day finally arrived. But after the first night of boys' club, the leader called the boy's parents and asked them not to send him again. He was unable to read the materials, and the leaders didn't know how to handle that.

A congregation had been praying for several months. A little girl was having uncontrollable seizures, and the doctors had run out of medications to prescribe. The girl's church family cried out to God, asking that these frequent attacks in her brain would stop. And God answered those prayers. The seizures stopped, but the girl faced years of therapy and special education to help her grow and learn. Unaware of the extent of her brain injury, and not sharing in the painstaking routines of daily therapy, the church family happily celebrated God's answer to prayer.

At the same time, the girl's parents grew resentful and angry that God would allow their daughter to face such challenges. Now, more than ever, they needed support and care from their church family.

Fortunately, each of these three stories had a happy ending. In each case, the child's parents and their school contacted the church. Each pastor they contacted was truly sorry the incidents in question had happened, and each was eager to better understand the child's gifts and needs. The boy with autism was assigned a special helper so that his parents could worship together. The child in boys' club had a rotating buddy each week who read and wrote with him before they both enjoyed the craft. With the parents' permission, the pastor of the little girl with seizures updated the congregation so they would better understand her needs and her family could continue to receive appropriate support.

I believe that church—a place where children with disabilities and their families desperately need to experience belonging and inclusion—can sometimes be a place of misunderstanding and perceived rejection. But that can change. After twenty-seven years of working with CLC Network (Christian Learning Center) and serving as the church services division director, as well as a special education coordinator for an inclusive education program at Zeeland Christian School in Michigan, I'm convinced that God can use what we have learned in the classroom setting and in church settings to help congregations better enfold children and adults with disabilities.

This book explains some of the methods we use to help carve out a place of belonging for students with disabilities at Zeeland Christian School, as well as

in a variety of church settings. As part of CLC Network, we welcome children of parents who want a Christian education for their family. Whatever their children's unique gifts and needs are, we attempt to provide programs and people to meet them in our school. It's my hope and prayer that the ideas in this book will also better equip churches to welcome children with disabilities and give them a place of respect and honor in their congregation.

A Word about Labels

Children with disabilities usually have been given some type of label that describes a medical condition or an educational need. This label can help teachers and other caregivers better understand that child's gifts and meet that child's needs. As you read about various kinds of descriptors and designations in this book, please remember these five things about labels:

- **See the person, not the label.** A child may have a great sense of humor and be a good runner and have an intellectual disability. It's easy to look at an individual with a disability and see "Down syndrome Ryan" or "spina bifida Blake," but that is certainly not in line with what God teaches in his Word. That person is "Ryan, who is made in God's image to fill a specific purpose in God's kingdom, who has been given gifts to offer others in the body of Christ, who also happens to have Down syndrome." We should always see a disability in the context of God's amazing design for that person and in the context of Christ's body, the church. Kathie Snow has done some excellent work in this area. You can find her brief but very helpful article on people-first language at disabilityisnatural.com/images/PDF/pfl-sh09.pdf.
- **Never attempt to attach a label yourself.** You may read about autism spectrum disorder, for example, and notice that a child in your group has many of those characteristics. For you to apply the material in this book in your Sunday school class without a proper diagnosis and permission from the child's parents could potentially be very hurtful to that child and to his or her family.
- **Labels change.** This book uses labels and terms that are considered preferred usage at the time of printing. But those labels and terms change often. Please also be aware that states differ in the labels and terms they use for educational purposes to describe children who have disabilities, and these terms can change over time too. For example, a child who is called "cognitively impaired" by a school system in one state or province might be called "developmentally delayed" in another. Keep this in mind as you adapt this material for use in your own state or province.
- **Start with the child.** When planning for a child with a disability in a church setting, never begin by understanding the child's medical or educational label. Always begin by getting to know that child. The plans and ideas you develop need to wrap around that child's unique gift areas and need areas. While it's helpful to know some general information about areas of disability, the most important way to begin is by getting to know Maria or Blake or Tamika.
- **There's more to learn.** Keep in mind that this book offers only an overview of various kinds of disabilities. There is much more material available about each highlighted area. If you want to learn more, start by checking into some of the resources listed at the back of this book.

Dedication and Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to my family. I want to give special thanks to my husband, Barry, who sharpens me in my walk with God and who has spent many years being my partner in ministry. I thank God for you and the ways you continue to influence my life. Thanks also to my children, John and James, who continue to teach me about each person being a unique creation of God and who also delight in accepting, welcoming, understanding, and befriending persons with disabilities. I see God's heart in both of you.

I would also like to thank the following people for their encouragement and for helping me to better understand this information and put it into a book:

All of the students at Zeeland Christian School, who have allowed me to learn with and from them.

Doug Bouman, psychologist for CLC Network in Grand Rapids, Michigan, who taught me to think in greens and pinks.

Leslie Drahos, Carol Gray, and the consultants from Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, who have taught me so much about children with autism spectrum disorder.

Dr. Thomas B. Hoeksema, William VanDyk, Richard “Bear” Berends, and Jan DeJonge, who have been so influential in my life as a special educator.

Dr. Andrew Bandstra, professor emeritus of New Testament and Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, who also happens to be my father and who has helped and supported me in these endeavors.

My dear mother, Mae Ruth Bandstra, who passed away five years ago. Her actions and words about kindness, acceptance, and love continue to influence my actions and words on a daily basis.

My colleagues at Zeeland Christian School, from whom I learn daily.

May God use this material to build up and strengthen the church. To God be the glory.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Note: This unit on autism spectrum disorder includes the following:

- Basic Fact Sheet
- Lesson Plan
- Letter to Families

Please note that each child is an individual. The categories we use to describe children are helpful only in explaining general characteristics. Children with autism spectrum disorder vary greatly in their gifts, as well as in the significance of the impact of their areas of difference. Please be sure to contact the child's parent or guardian to obtain more specific information about the child in your group.

BASIC FACT SHEET

Autism Spectrum Disorder

In the 1980s, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was diagnosed in about 1 in 10,000 children. That figure is closer to 1 in 100 today. Most of us know an individual with ASD or have watched a TV show or interview featuring a story about autism. Even though many of us have a clear mental picture of an individual with ASD, it's important to remember that when you've met one child with autism, you've met exactly that—one child with autism. As is true of any area of disability, the range of ability and severity in ASD is very great. Within that diversity, however, we can identify some common threads.

Generally, children with ASD have differences in six areas:

Social interaction and social understanding. So many of us can walk into a group of people and nearly instantly know how to act and what to say. Children with ASD, however, find that difficult. Either avoiding social situations or making many social errors or blunders, children with ASD may benefit from being taught very specifically how to act in a given situation, including in church settings.

Language skills, including spoken words and the unspoken ways we communicate. Some children with ASD do not speak at all; they may use communication devices, pictures, or gestures. Others can speak, but they have difficulty understanding figures of speech or words with multiple meanings. For example, hearing the leader mention that we need to “ask Jesus into our heart” or that we are “covered by the blood of Jesus” could be very confusing

or frightening for a child with ASD. Or if the volunteer happens to describe a downpour by saying, “It’s raining cats and dogs,” he should be prepared for a huge reaction!

Repetitive behaviors or themes. Many children with ASD enjoy repeating the same activity or thinking about the same idea over and over. Sometimes this is a physical act like rocking or lining up toy vehicles; other times it is talking about the same subject or object over and over.

Sensory understanding. Children with ASD may perceive things very differently with one or more of their senses. For example, a child with a hearing sensitivity may not like loud sounds—she may cover her ears if the worship leader plays a loud song or if someone drops a book. It’s also possible that a child could be undersensitive to noises, often speaking in a very loud voice or unaware that people are calling her name. A child with a vision sensitivity may look at the lights or squint. A child with differences in his tactile system may crave touch and enjoy touching certain objects, or he may dislike being touched at all.

Desire for routine. Change can be very difficult for children with ASD. A child may always choose the same chair or toy and appreciate a schedule that does not change.

Perspective-taking ability. While many of us can virtually hop into the heads of others and have a good idea of what that person might be thinking or feeling, this is very challenging

for an individual with ASD. It might be difficult for a child to understand and read body language or accurately understand whether another person is happy, excited, upset, or sad.

“If I didn’t see it, you didn’t say it.” Generally, children with ASD much prefer learning by eye than by ear. For that reason, it’s important for leaders to use pictures and other visual aids in the church environment. While children will vary greatly in what they are able to learn and understand, it’s important to discover the ways children best receive information and give information to others. This will set the framework for positive and helpful interactions with one another.

For continued learning and support, consider the following resources:

- *Autism and Your Church* by Barbara J. Newman (available from friendship.org)
- *Church Welcome Story* by Barbara J. Newman (clcnetwork.org)
- *Autism: A Christian Response* (Training DVD available through CLC Network; clcnetwork.org)

LESSON PLAN

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Materials

- knitting or crochet project in progress
- assortment of knitted or crocheted items (sweaters, mittens, potholder, scarf)
- knitting pattern
- Bible
- picture of a baby
- paper and crayons or markers for each child
- set of keys
- a colleg-level book
- photocopies of key picture, one per child (p. 79)

Step 1

- Show the children the knitting project. Show them how knitters can take the yarn and work with it to make a variety of beautiful things. Let the children look at the knitted or crocheted items you brought and talk about what we use them for. Let them share their amazement that a ball of yarn can turn into these items, and explain that, in order for that to happen, we need to learn how to knit. Ask if any of the children could turn that yarn into mittens. Then show the pattern that gives directions for making the project.

Step 2

- Ask the children if they know that God is a knitter too. Read Psalm 139:13-17 and let them listen for that word. What was God knitting? Mittens? No. He was knitting people.
- Hold up the picture of the baby. Talk about the kinds of things God used in his pattern (eye color, size and so on). Is this baby all finished growing? God puts some of the knitting pattern

into a child's brain and then waits until later to do the knitting.

- Pass out paper and have children draw their own "pattern" or self-portrait. Talk about their similarities and differences with other classmates.
- Show the children a set of keys. What do we do with these keys? They open and start a variety of things. Say something along these lines: "Let's pretend that when we are born, God makes a set of keys for the knitting pattern. One key opens up the part of our brain that knows how to walk. Another pretend key opens the talking part. There are keys for eating and moving and reading making friends and sharing."
- Tell the children they're going to practice using the parts of their brain that are already "open." This will give everyone a chance to stand up and move around. Ask them to move to a familiar song, perform an exercise routine, or recite a memory verse. Point out that a baby could not do those things. God has already opened up that part of their brain.
- Then show them that some parts of our brains are still "locked up." Hold up the college-level book. Ask, "Can anyone read this book?" No. God will open up that part of their brain later when they get older. God keeps using those pretend keys. Can they think of other things that God will still open up?
- Say, "I could talk about any one of you because God knit you together so beautifully! But today I want to tell you about our friend [name] (indicate the child). The doctors found out that

[name] has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Can you say those words? ASD means that God's knitting pattern was a little bit different for [name]. [name] has a different set of keys than you do. Some of the keys are the same, but some are different." At this point, talk about what parts of that child's brain are "unlocked" — movement, eating, and whatever this child is able to do. Some children with autism are able to read at a very early age. It may be exciting to demonstrate this to the other children. Then say, "But our friend also has some areas that are still locked up." At this point, talk about what parts of that child's brain are still locked or only partly open. Some examples may be speaking as clearly as the others, sharing, knowing how to act in church school, hearing a loud noise without jumping, and so on. Once again, make your examples specific to the child. Allow children to comment or ask questions.

- Continue the dialogue by saying, "I am so excited. It may be that while we are together, we will see God open up one part of [name]'s brain. I wonder what key that will be? God knows because God has the pattern. I believe that God has put us together in this class so that we can help [name] use one of the keys. What do you think [name] will learn to do this year? What are some ways we can help?"

Step 3

- Pass out a copy of the key to each child. Have each child draw a picture or write on the key what part of the brain they hope God unlocks for their friend [name]. They may cut these out.
- Gather the children in a circle and take turns asking God to give [name] the key they just drew.
- (Option) Give each child a second copy of the key pattern and let them draw a picture or write about which part of their brain they hope God opens for them soon.

Adaptations for Younger Children

To make this presentation a bit more active, increase the number of examples of things they can already do and include some gross motor movements like hopping, clapping, singing a familiar song with motions, and the like.

Take time to delight in the keys these children already have and look forward to the many areas that God will open for them.

Note: Consider drafting a letter to families to inform them about what the class is learning about ASD. See a sample on p. 32.

Adaptations for Differing Abilities

You'll want to tailor this lesson plan to the abilities of the children in your group so every child can participate in a meaningful way. Need help? See the Activity Substitution Guide on page 73.

—Barbara J. Newman, *Autism and Your Church: Nurturing the Spiritual Growth of People with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, pp. 119-120. © 2011, *Friendship Ministries*. Used by permission.

LETTER TO FAMILIES

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Dear Family,

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12). I want to take a moment to explain a little bit about the parts of the body that make up our class this year. We will learn from each person in the class, but God has made arrangements to include a child in our classroom who will be teaching us some special things. This child has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and the family has given us permission to share the implications of that with the class and with you.

Based on our class activities, your child will be able to talk with you about ASD, but I also wanted you to have some specific information so that you’ll be able to support the friendships that develop in our classroom. We want to encourage our students to play and work together, both at church and at home.

Each person in our class has different gifts and abilities, and this is true of the child with ASD as well. Most children with ASD have differences in a few areas but share many things in common with your child. The first area of difference is *language and communication*. Some children with ASD do not speak at all, while others don’t understand all words the way you and I interpret them. The second area of difference is *social understanding*. Knowing how to act or interact with others can be a real challenge. Many things we think everyone should know are not always obvious to a child with ASD. A third area has to do with the *senses*—what a child hears, sees, smells, feels, or even tastes. Usually the child has one or more senses that perceive things differently than others do. Finally, a child with ASD often *focuses on one activity, topic, or movement*. Sometimes children with autism rock, flap their hands, play with one object, or talk about one topic to bring about a sense of happiness and order.

Although experts are still unsure of why children have ASD, we do know that the reason stems from the brain and areas of the brain that develop differently. I have talked with our class about ways we can help our friend learn and open up this year. I am delighted that God has given us a chance to grow in this way.

If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, please call me. I am encouraging the children to ask questions as well. Thanks for your support.

Sincerely,

Children with disabilities are part of God's family, but people don't always treat them that way. In this book you'll discover how to help kids and their leaders welcome and include kids with disabilities at church or school. This revised edition of *Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities* contains a wealth of helpful information for understanding disabilities such as

- autism spectrum disorder
- attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- behavioral challenges
- hearing, visual, and speech/language impairments
- intellectual disabilities
- physical disabilities
- learning disabilities
- severe or multiple disabilities

This book also includes guidelines and forms to help churches identify and meet needs, lesson plans for presenting information on each area of disability, fact sheets about specific disabilities to share with adult leaders, and much more. It's an indispensable resource for teachers, Sunday school leaders, church staff, and anyone who works with children.

*"Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities is an important companion piece to *Autism and Your Church*. Together they outline a comprehensive method for developing a disability ministry to children and youth. This book includes valuable information and lesson plans that promote awareness and acceptance of children and youth with disabilities.*

Developing an understanding of how we are all uniquely made and part of God's kingdom is an important ingredient in successfully welcoming and including kids with disabilities."



Nella Uitvlugt, former
Executive Director, Friendship Ministries
www.Friendship.org

"Barb takes complex information and translates it into a practical guide for the church leader unfamiliar with the world of special education and disability. Children's ministry teachers will appreciate the lesson plans and analogies to help children understand their peers with differences. Church leaders will benefit from countless best practices offered, such as the Parent Interview Guide and suggested word choices throughout the book. This handbook belongs on the shelf of every children's ministry leader."

Amy Fenton Lee
Special Needs Columnist,
Children's Ministry Magazine
Special Needs Consultant, Orange

Barbara J. Newman is a church and school consultant for CLC Network. She is the author of many books, including *Autism and Your Church*, *G.L.U.E. Training Manual*, and *Body Building: Devotions to Celebrate Inclusive Community*. She also is a frequent national speaker at educational conferences and churches. In addition to writing and speaking, Barb enjoys working in her classroom at Zeeland Christian School in Michigan.



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