

# Coming Alongside Individuals with Diverse Abilities: Using Occupational Therapy Practices to Promote Inclusion in the Church



**Resources and information on how to meet the needs of individuals with special needs in the church community. Includes calming strategies, tools for effectively communicating emotions, self-regulation strategies, ideas for promoting social interaction, and more.**

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## Calming Strategies

Ideas to try when you recognize an individual may be stressed or agitated, or may be entering a stress-inducing situation (the sooner you notice, the better):

- Take deep breaths
- Go for a walk
- Sing the ABCs or count forwards and backwards
- Listen to music
- Go to a quiet space
- Do a maze, word search, dot to dot
- Draw a picture
- Read a book
- Play with a fidget or stress ball
- Get a drink of water
- Close your eyes
- Blow bubbles
- Push against a wall
- Look at a sensory bottle
- Chew gum or suck on hard candy
- Do some stretches

It is important to note that not all strategies work at all times or for all people. Get to know what works best for individual's you are working with and be willing to try new ideas. It is important to try these activities, like deep breathing, when they are calm so that it comes more naturally when emotions are elevated. Trying to propose or teach some of these strategies works best when the individual is calm and receptive. Distraction, diversion, removing triggers and staying calm yourself are helpful ways to keep emotions from escalating.

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### Ways You Can Help Calm a Member that is Stressed or Agitated

- Address the individual as privately as possible. If you can move to a separate space, that is the best option for addressing concerns.
- Give the individual space. Generally, two arm's lengths is appropriate when someone is agitated. If you notice they say "go away" or "get back" they are indicating that you are too close. It is okay to give them more space.
- Limit the number of people involved. To help with communication and to help avoid the individual feeling attacked or cornered, one-on-one communication is preferred. It is helpful if that person knows the individual well and has calming strategies on hand.
- Blocking exits or routes sometimes makes individuals feel trapped and can escalate the situation. Try to position yourself out of the "escape" path.
- Stay calm and respectful. You are modeling behaviors you would like them to follow. This means keep your words respectful and your tone calm. When someone is agitated or distressed, it is not time to reprimand, tease, or provide negative feedback. People are more receptive to what you have to say when they are calm so save any feedback or lessons for later.
- Notice your body language. Stand at an angle for the person you are addressing. Keep your hands open and visible. Stand comfortably and openly, trying to avoid crossing your arms or clenching your fist. These behaviors appear confrontational rather than calm and accepting.
- Keep your language simple and direct. Using shorter sentences and simple vocabulary helps eliminate misunderstandings.
- Give them time to process what you are saying and repeat it as necessary. All of us, when stressed, have a harder time processing and responding to what others have to say. Be patient and assume the best in them.
- Reassure them they are not in trouble. This will help eliminate some defensiveness and help them understand you are there to help them.
- Help them express their feelings and what they need.

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### Helping Others Communicate How They Are Feeling

Effectively communicating how we are feeling helps to eliminate further stress and conflict. Others are better able to help us when we are able to express how we feel and what we need. Some individuals, especially when stressed or excited, have even more difficulty communicating how they are feeling. This can cause problems to escalate or individuals to retreat, feeling misunderstood.

#### Here are some ways to encourage others to communicate their feelings:

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Be patient. Making someone feel rushed can exacerbate their overwhelming feelings. Give them time to process what they are trying to communicate. Silence is okay!
- Use active listening. Example: “What I hear you saying is...(what they said)”
- Consider the environment you are in. If it is loud, busy, or has a lot of distractions, it may be helpful to step into a different space so that they can think, and you can listen.
- Help them label their emotions.
  - Feelings Charts may be a useful tool to help identify emotions.
  - Teach emotions or feelings words.
  - Associate feelings with pictures. Allow them to point to a feeling if verbalizing is difficult.
- Don’t compete for talking time. Let them speak, listen well, and think of what you are going to say before you respond. This sends the message that you care about what they have to say, and you are there to help.
- If possible, allow them to talk or communicate with familiar people that have an understanding of their communication style.
- If verbalizing their feelings is difficult, allow them to write how they are feeling. This may help them to sort out their feelings more efficiently.

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### Noticing Signs of Stress or Agitation

#### Potential signs:

- Pacing
- Fidgeting
- Flapping arms/hands
- Rocking
- Shutting down (staring off, being very still)
- Covering ears or eyes
- Seeking reassurance through asking questions repeatedly
- Self-injurious behaviors (biting, hitting, pinching, scratching, etc.)
- Clinched jaw or fists
- Bolting or running away
- Changes in facial expression or body language
- Grumbling, making sounds, speaking louder, or having verbal outbursts

#### Noticing Triggers:

- Are they overloaded with sensory input?
  - Is there too much noise?
  - Is there someone or something touching them?
  - Is the space busy or cluttered?
  - Are the lights bright?
  - Each of these things could be overloading their sensory system causing more stimulation than their brain can process at a time. This can cause panic.
- Are they overloaded on information?
  - If they are trying to process too much information at once, they may become overwhelmed. Confusion and misunderstanding can be very frustrating.
- Are they overwhelmed with emotion?
  - Having emotions and not being able to accurately express them can be overwhelming.
- Do they have competing demands?
  - Complex demands are harder to process which can lead to frustration.
- Has there been any unpredictability?
  - Were there changes in schedule?
  - Were there changes to the environment (example: sitting arrangements)?
  - Did something not go as planned for that individual or the group?

All triggers cannot be eliminated or prevented but knowing what triggers cause an individual to become stressed or agitated may help to prevent or reduce the impact of these occurrences. As soon as you notice any of the signs or triggers, you want to consider using calming strategies and removing any triggers. Using the calming strategies sooner helps to prevent the stress and agitation from escalating to problematic behaviors.

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### **Encouraging Socially Appropriate Behaviors: Assisting Members that are Hyperactive or Inattentive**

You may notice that some members might have difficulties paying attention, sitting still, or remaining on task. They may also act or speak before thinking, be excessively active, be easily distracted, and have difficulty following directions. You may find them fidgeting or squirming, getting up when it is not appropriate, running or climbing, talking excessively or loudly, blurting out or interrupting, or not waiting their turn. It is important to know strategies that can help them calm their bodies and minds so every member, including them, has an environment conducive to learning and worshiping at church.

If the individual is inattentive or hyperactive, you could try the following ideas:

- Provide visual cues and rule reminders.
- Structure the most important part of the lesson at the beginning of the service.
- Give short, specific directions.
- Provide stretch breaks.
- Give them responsibilities: sharpening pencils, passing out papers, getting water for other members, etc.
- Have them take notes of important points for everyone on the white board or on their own paper.
- Allow them to stand (in a spot that is not distracting to others—give them a visual cue for where to stand like on a piece of paper).
- Allow them to go for a walk or participate in physical activity prior to sitting for long periods of time.
- Eliminate distractions, especially ones in their visual field.
- Keep their hands busy. Fidgets, stress balls, or drawing tasks are some options to provide.
- Be patient. 😊

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### Heavy Work Activities:

For individuals that are hyperactive or are seeking sensory input, it may be helpful to provide them with some hard work activities. Hard work activities can help the body to feel calm and organized, balancing the sensory input information that our brain has to process. This is particularly helpful when an individual is feeling overstimulated or overwhelmed. Heavy work activities can help to prepare them for activities. How often they need this sensory input may vary but if you notice that the individual may be needing sensory input to calm body and mind and organize their behavior, you may want to have them participate heavy work activities. For adults or older children, having them help you with activities is motivating. Be sure to praise them for their assistance.

The following are some heavy work activity ideas to try:

- March or jog in place (stomping)
- Do wall push ups
- Jump and crash on the crash pad (repeatedly)
- Do wheelbarrow walking or animal walks like bear crawling or crab walking.
- Carry materials like books.
- Squish play dough.
- Rip paper or cardboard.
- Do yoga or deep stretching.
- Blow bubbles or a pinwheel.
- Move tables or chairs to set up for the lesson.
- Chew gum during the lesson.

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### Encouraging Socialization

The church is a community of believers that support, encourage, and walk through life together. This makes church the perfect place for individuals with social deficits to find acceptance and develop relationships. It is important to remember that although a person may have difficulty with social interactions it does not mean that they do not desire social interactions or relationships with other people. The following are some ways that you can provide social support for members with social deficits or who are struggling to connect with their peers:

#### General Social Skill Development Tips:

- Create an open and welcoming environment → Model acceptance.
- Be direct with your expectations. Example: “I would like for you to ask Jim how he is doing.”
- Provide structure to unstructured activities. Free time is often hard to navigate for individuals with social deficits because they are unaware of what is expected of them.
- Praise or provide positive reinforcement for behaviors the member exhibits that are prosocial. Be specific about what behavior you want them to keep doing. Example: “I like how you asked Cindy how she was doing and gave her time to respond.”
- Model appropriate social behavior. In other words, show them the behaviors you want them to imitate. This includes: body language, facial expressions, proximity, volume, tone, and verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Use the member’s strengths to help them be viewed as competent and interesting. Example: If Larry knows a lot of music, have Larry help create the worship songs list or lead the group in worship. If Sandra is a strong reader, have her read the weekly Bible verse to the group.
- Consider arranging groups, partners, or choosing them at random to avoid members with social deficits getting left out.
- Teach social boundaries—what things are appropriate and inappropriate to talk about in this setting.

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### Specific Social Skill Areas to Promote:

#### ***Pretend Play:***

Play is often how we learn to interact with others. Pretend play is a skill for younger children that helps them to develop social skills like thinking and language skills. For some children this comes easily, but others it is harder to develop, making it harder for them to join in playing with peers.

#### *Ways to Encourage Pretend Play:*

- Imitate their play behaviors. (If they are giving the teddy bear a sip of tea, join in and do the same). This encourages them to continue pretending and makes the interaction social. You are now a part of the play interaction.
- Show them new pretend play actions.
  - Make it look fun! Make fun sounds, smile or make faces...be playful!
  - Model the play action as many times as needed.
  - Verbally tell them what to do with prompting. Example: “Place the car on the track” and point to the track.
  - Use hand-over-hand to guide them through the action. Example: “The spaceship is ready for liftoff. Let’s make him fly” and help her move the spaceship through the air.

#### ***Imitation of Social Skills and Reciprocity:***

Social skills are often developed through imitation and reciprocity. When individual’s grow in their ability to imitate, they are often better able to reciprocate. These skills are helpful in learning appropriate social behaviors and developing mutual or “give and take” relationships with others.

#### *Ways to encourage imitation and reciprocity:*

- Engage with their interests to show them how to engage in yours.

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- Imitate their movements, actions, words or sounds, gestures and facial expressions. When they see you imitating them, they may be inclined to imitate you.
- Prompt them to do what you are doing by saying “do this.”
- Clapping, drumming, or making sounds are often activities that may be fun for the individual to imitate. Get their attention. Show them the action (make it look fun). Have them follow. You can use hand-over-hand support to take them through the movement, if needed. You can follow this same sequence for other activities.
- In conversation, be clear about whose turn it is to talk. This may mean providing a visual at first. Learning reciprocity in conversation is helpful for developing relationships. Model how this works. Example: say “I went to the farmer’s market yesterday. What did you do?” or “We talked about your week, I’d like to tell you about mine.”

### ***Shared Enjoyment and Joint Attention:***

Shared enjoyment is when you and another person find joy in the same experience, object, or action. Joint attention is when you are both paying attention to the same thing. These skills help in engaging with and enjoying the company of others.

#### *Ways to encourage shared enjoyment and joint attention:*

- Get on their level and be face to face. If you are in their line of vision, they are more likely to pay attention to what you are doing.
- Use animated voices and expressions.
- Imitate expressions, sounds, words or actions that they are doing.
- To practice joint attention, use things that are motivating to them or that they find interesting.
- Give labels to objects and actions. Keep these simple and direct. This helps create a shared understanding of the experience and provides them with an opportunity to connect through language. For example: When turning a page in a book, say “turn.”

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### ***Peer Interaction:***

#### *Ways to encourage peer interaction:*

- Partner an individual with strong social skills with an individual with social deficits to help model peer interactions.
- When there are group activities, groups of 3-4 are typically a good size to promote peer interaction.
- Give positive feedback when children interact in positive ways.
- Create opportunities to practice peer interaction. This is a great opportunity to role-play, provide feedback, and model positive peer interactions.
- Practice skills like listening to others, waiting your turn to talk, and using manners like “please” and “I’m sorry.” This can be done during small groups. It is important that the scenario be as natural as possible.

### **Creating a Welcoming Space**

- Limit distractions, clutter, and excess noise. This can help individuals that are overstimulated by sensory inputs, have hearing difficulties, or learning disabilities.
- Make sure the environment is accessible for everyone. Consider whether an individual with limited mobility can safely navigate the space and be involved in social interactions.
- Have a quiet space for individuals to calm down or release energy. Make this space comfortable. You may include pillows, rugs, or other calming materials. This space needs to be framed in a positive light, not as a punishment. These spaces are helpful for children that are hyperactive, impulsive, or overwhelmed.

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### Inclusion: Promoting Acceptance of People with Diverse Abilities

#### How to Foster a Sense of Belonging:

- Use person-first language. For example: Instead of “Autistic child” say “child with autism.” This sends that message that the person comes before the disability.
- Only mention the disability when relevant. There’s a number of characteristics to describe someone with. If the disability is not relevant to the conversation, use a different descriptor. No one wants to be characterized for any one characteristic.
- Use accepted terms like “disability,” “special needs,” or “different abilities.” These are preferred over outdated terms like “handicap.”
- Even if you are apprehensive about working with an individual with diverse abilities that you are unfamiliar with, try to appear comfortable so that others will follow and mirror your attitude. Showing fear or apprehension tends to send the message that others should act the same which can become isolating for the individual with special needs.
- It’s okay to ask questions of how to best care for and serve the individual. That is much preferred over making assumptions.
- Model warm, respectful, caring attitudes to all members. This encourages others to do the same.
- Focus on strengths and abilities. Talk about those strengths and things the individual does well. This sends the message that all people, with or without disabilities, have capabilities.
- Respond to questions about differences and disability as they arise. You can offer brief, simple answers.
- Create opportunity for social interactions. This does not need to be forced but created through setting up an open, respectful environment.
- The best way to encourage acceptance and inclusion is to have adults and leaders model it.

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### Instructions on Making a Weighted Lap Pad



#### **Purpose:**

Weighted lap pads are used to provide proprioceptive input to the individual. The pressure calms the nervous system. A calmed nervous system can potentially improve an individual's behavior in the following ways: decrease wiggling or fidgeting, improve body awareness and decrease sensory meltdowns. Weighted lap pads also provide tactile sensory input to an individual.

#### **How to use:**

Simply place the lap pad (with the cover) on the individual's lap while they are sitting in a chair or on the floor. Weighted lap pads are best used when they are approximately 5-10% of the individual's body weight.

Lap pad usage varies depending on the needs of the individual. Some individuals are able to use a lap pad during much of the day. Other individuals become used to the pad and are better served by using it at various times throughout the day. Typical times for using a weighted lap pad include: start of the day, after physical activity, during special activities like crafts or music, during written work, during reading activities, during stressful activities and during quiet work times. It may be beneficial to have a lap pad schedule for the individual, so they know when it is appropriate to use the lap pad. Some individuals will be able to independently put on and take off their lap pad, as needed.

#### **Care instructions:**

- The protective covers can be hand washed or placed in the washing machine.
- The lap pads are filled with rice so don't wash them in the washing machine.

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### Using Visual Cues or Other Materials in the Kit

- Explain the purpose of the tool to the individual you are using it with. Keep it simple and direct and adjust your language to the person you are speaking with. They will better understand the value in the tool and be more open to using it. Example: We are using this noise level chart to help us know how loud or quiet we need to be throughout the service.
- Explain how you are going to use the tool to the individual you are using it with. Doing so, helps them to use the tool appropriately and understand what you mean when you are using it. When the individual understands how to use the tool, they will be more comfortable using it when they need it most. Example: “This feelings chart helps me to understand how you are feeling so I can help you best. If you are frustrated, you can let me know by pointing at the frustrated picture. I can then help you problem solve how to best handle being frustrated.”
- Have them practice in a calm, quiet space prior to using the tool. It is important that they have experience using the tool before you try and use it in a large group. Example: With the noise chart, review each of the levels. Ask them which level is appropriate during activity times, which level is appropriate during conversation with friends, which level is appropriate during the lesson, which level is appropriate during prayer, etc. Practice what to do when a leader points to one of the levels. Ask them “when I point to whisper, how should that sound?”
- Try one tool at a time. It is hard to know what might be helpful to individuals and we do not want to overwhelm them with too many strategies at once. Example: if you are planning to have the individual use a breathing chart as a

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calming strategy, focus on teaching and mastering that strategy before introducing more.

- Give individuals time to learn and apply the tools. It may take time to learn to use a tool and apply it in church when it is needed. Do not immediately assume it will not work and give up.
- Celebrate progress and using the tools appropriately. Everyone likes to be acknowledged for something they have been working hard at. Example: You notice that when Janet walks in, she knows she is feeling on edge, so she grabs the weighted lap pad before taking her seat because it helps her to feel calm. Acknowledge that Janet made a good choice for herself.
- Be on the same page with other leaders and volunteers. This strategy helps to ensure we are not overwhelming individuals or providing conflicting information. You will also have more support in implementing strategies. Example: if you noticed that Sid really seemed to benefit from doing some yoga stretches prior to the lesson, let other volunteers know that so they can use that strategy in the future if you are not there. If other volunteers do not know, they may tell Sid that he needs to sit, when he really needs that time to calm his body through stretches.
- Remember, not every tool will work every time or for every person. You may have to brainstorm together what might be helpful. It's okay for something to not work. Keep trying so that each person can have a great church experience with positive connections to others and spiritual growth.
- If you have questions about how to use a tool or when it would be appropriate to use, ask! Use your leaders as resources.

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### Materials Included in the Tool Kit:

- Calming Cards
  - <https://www.lizs-early-learning-spot.com/anger-management-23-calming-strategy-cards/>
  - <https://www.littleslifeandlaughter.com/coping-skills-cards/#more-240>
- Breathing Strategy Cards
  - <https://store.copingskillsforkids.com/collections/free-printables/products/playful-deep-breathing-printables>
  - <https://store.copingskillsforkids.com/collections/free-printables/products/deep-breathing-printables>
- Emotion/Self-Regulation Charts (purchased from TeachersPayTeachers)
  - <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Emoji-Zones-of-Regulation-VisualsPosters-3355281>
  - <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Zones-of-Regulation-coloring-sheet-updated-1-7-17-2742995>
- Emotion Visual Cards (free)
  - <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Feelings-and-Emotions-Cards-1651017>
- Stretch Cards
  - <http://www.theottoolbox.com/2016/10/bedtime-relaxation-stretches-for-kids.html>
- Volume Level Visual
  - <http://blog.maketaketeach.com/voice-level-chart-freebie/>
- Weighted Lap Pad and Cover
- White board
- Clipboard
- Quiet Fidgets
- Stress balls
- Word Searches
- Coloring Pages
- Dot-to-dots
- Bubbles
- And More!

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**Recommended books:**

*Disability and the Sovereignty of God* by John Piper (e-book)  
<https://www.desiringgod.org/books/disability-and-the-sovereign-goodness-of-god>

*Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* by Stephanie O. Hubach

*The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder* by Carol Kranowitz