

Including Kids on the “High End” of the Spectrum at Church

Stephen Grcevich, MD
President and Founder, Key Ministry

Presented at Children’s Pastors Conference 2024
Disney Coronado Springs Resort, Orlando, FL
January 10, 2024



Key
Ministry

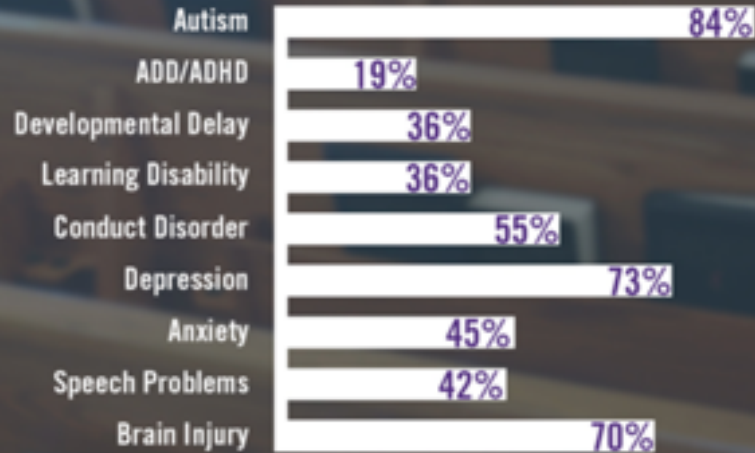
Learning Objectives

- Explore how the cultural model of disability helps us anticipate challenges to children's or student ministry participation for kids with autism and commonly associated mental health conditions.
- Examine why kids on the “high end” of the spectrum are poorly served by existing “special needs” ministry models.
- Equip you and your ministry team with the mindset to proactively address impediments to engagement in your programming for kids on the “high end” of the spectrum.



Autism, mental illness are MAJOR impediments to church attendance for kids, families

**CLEMSON
RESEARCH
EXAMINES HOW
CHRONIC HEALTH
CONDITIONS
AFFECT CHURCH
ATTENDANCE
AMONG YOUNG
PEOPLE**



The percent increase in odds of children with chronic health conditions never attending church compared to children with no health conditions

Whitehead AL. *J Scientific Study Religion* 2018;57(2):377-395.



**Key
Ministry**



Traits seen in kids on the “high end” of the spectrum


- Normal to high intelligence
- Challenges with social interaction
- Heightened emotional sensitivity
- Magnified sensitivity to sensory input
- Intense, narrow interests
- Fixation on routines, repetitive habits
- Difficulty with change
- Focus on self



Ministry with kids with autism IS mental health ministry

- 78% of children with autism have at least one mental health condition - nearly half have two or more
 - 44.8% of preschoolers have at least one
- Most common conditions
 - Behavior/conduct problem (60.8%)
 - ADHD (48.4%)
 - Anxiety disorders (39.5%)
 - Depression (15.7%)
 - Tourette syndrome (1.8%)





Why is church attendance so difficult?

Traits associated with autism and common mental health conditions cause difficulties in meeting expectations of “church culture” – how we act, interact when gathered

Ability to accurately process how one is being received by others, capacity for social interaction, self-control critical for church assimilation

Which barriers to mental health inclusion also apply to families of kids with ASDs

- ~~Stigma~~
- Anxiety
- Capacity for self-control
- Sensory processing
- Social communication
- Social isolation
- Past church experiences



Where does a kid of high intelligence with autism fit at church?

- They (and their parents) will desperately avoid situations drawing attention to their differences
 - **Special Needs**
- Many want friends – church may be an opportunity to find them
- They may relate better, share more interests with adults



Key principles of a good outreach and inclusion strategy

- We're developing a mindset, not creating a new program
 - Goal is to include them in the ministry activities we already offer
- No parent will need to disclose their child's diagnosis
 - They may not have a diagnosis
- Interventions should help all kids and families we serve – not just those with disabilities



A model to guide development of an outreach and inclusion strategy (TEACHER)

Team	Who needs to be on our inclusion team?
Environments	How do we make spaces where ministry occurs more welcoming?
Activities driving spiritual growth	How do we prioritize inclusion in activities most essential for spiritual growth?
Communication	What expectations will families inside and outside of our church have for their child's experience?
Help	How might we assist families with their most heartfelt needs?
Education	What do leadership/staff/volunteers/attendees need to learn? What education and support do our families need?
Responsibility	How do I get my staff/volunteers/church to own this ministry?

What might your planning process look like??

- Who needs a seat at the table?
 - Leadership
 - Staff
 - Volunteers
- Who in my church, community has special expertise?
 - Special educators
 - Behavioral health professionals
 - Occupational therapists
 - Interior designers





Welcoming ministry environments

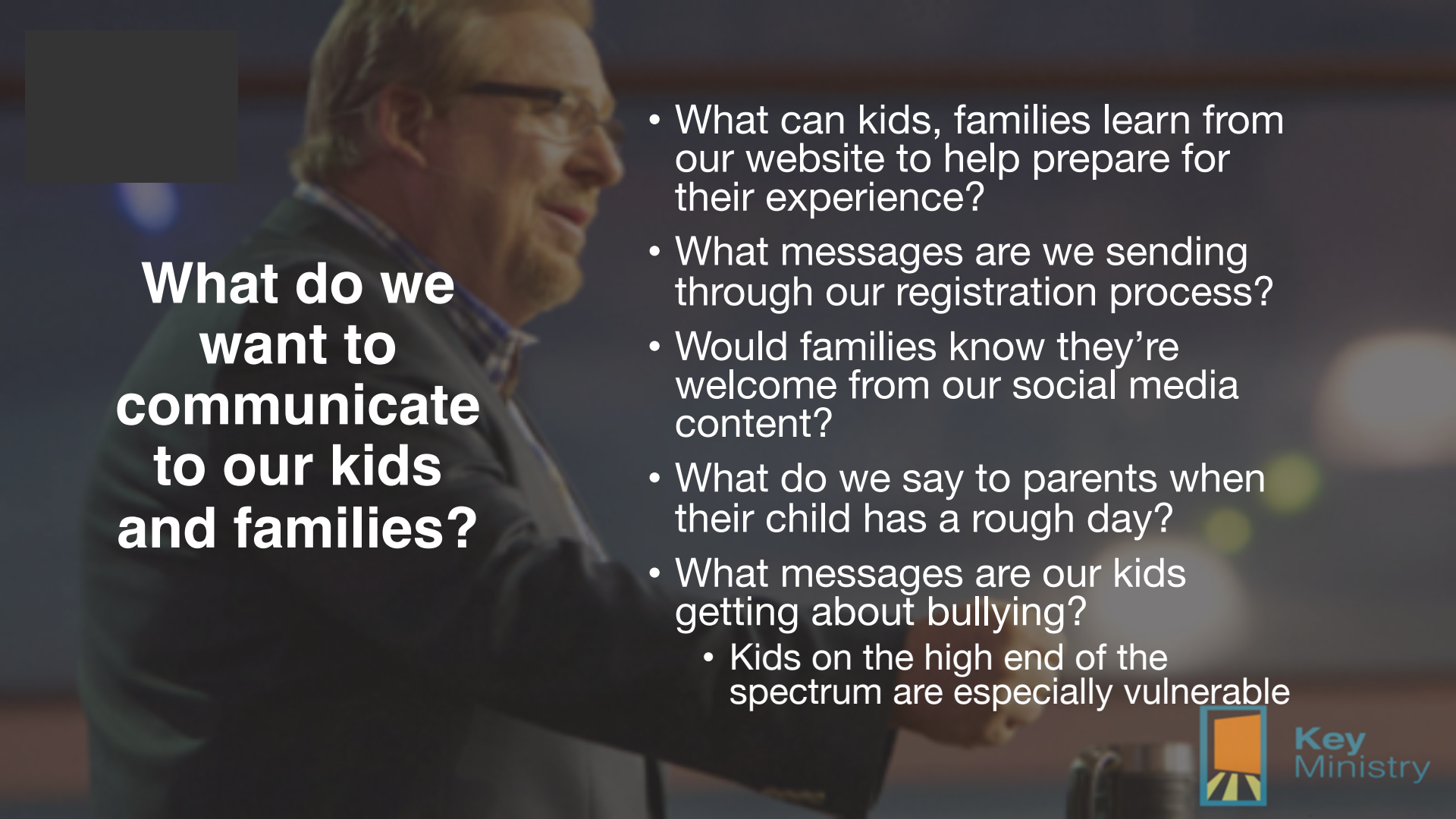
- What are the sensory qualities of the spaces where ministry takes place?
 - Sound
 - Lighting
 - Seating
 - Wall, window coverings
 - Sensory stimulation
- Check-in (arrival, departure)
- How do our spaces promote learning, support self-control?



What activities do we most want our kids, families to engage in?

- Large group environments at weekend worship
- Traditional “Sunday School”
- Small groups
- Conversations at home
- Midweek activities (AWANA)
- VBS
- Retreats
- Service activities



A man with glasses and a dark suit is shown in profile, speaking at a podium. The background is blurred, suggesting a stage or conference setting. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

What do we want to communicate to our kids and families?

- What can kids, families learn from our website to help prepare for their experience?
- What messages are we sending through our registration process?
- Would families know they're welcome from our social media content?
- What do we say to parents when their child has a rough day?
- What messages are our kids getting about bullying?
 - Kids on the high end of the spectrum are especially vulnerable



Helping families with heartfelt needs

- Casseroles
 - "Equal treatment" from care, support ministries
- Respite care
 - Welcoming "typical siblings" reduces stigma
- Connections with treatment resources
 - ABA
 - Mental health
 - OT/speech
 - Special education advocacy





Sensory-Friendly Worship Services

Education and Support

- Not many resources specific to persons on the high end of the spectrum
- Key Ministry will custom-design free training for pastors, church staff, volunteers
- Christian-based mental health education, support
 - Fresh Hope
 - Fresh Hope for Families with Disabilities created in partnership with Key Ministry
 - Grace Alliance



Relational Ministry Owned by the People of the Church

- “Relational respite”
 - Small groups are encouraged to offer care, support for individual families
 - Advantage – integration into social networks within the church
- Grabbing a mop
 - Organically meeting immediate needs
- Resourcing families for outreach
 - Social media tools to invite other families within their sphere of influence



**The best outreach and
inclusion strategy?**

**A trusted friend to
come alongside
newcomers at church!**



Key takeaways

- Kids on the high end of the spectrum are too often absent because they struggle to fulfill our expectations for how they should act – and interact at church.
- The combination of autism AND co-occurring mental health conditions makes church challenging for them – and their families.
- A good inclusion strategy proactively identifies, minimizes obstacles to engagement in children's/student ministry activities
- Families of kids with autism are more likely to be unchurched than those impacted by any other disability – a good support strategy can also be an effective evangelism and outreach strategy.





Questions?

Help from Key Ministry

- Training
 - Disability and the Church 2024
 - Video training
 - Disability Ministry Video Roundtable
- Free training, consultation to churches
- Resources
 - Networking with other ministries
 - Special Needs and Disability Ministry Leaders Group on Facebook
- Someone to come alongside your ministry!



Connect with Key Ministry

- keyministry.org
- Facebook: Key Ministry
- Twitter: @KeyMinistry
- Catherine Boyle – Director of Mental Health Ministry
 - catherine@keyministry.org
 - steve@keyministry.org

