



RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND CHILDREN WITH ADHD

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AS SOMEONE WITH A DISABILITY who also knows what it means to parent a child with ADHD, I've become an advocate for my child on so many fronts. Religious education and involvement are no different. Indeed, because religious organizations are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act, it can be a process. After all, when it comes to ADHD and inclusion issues, despite good intentions, many religious institutions don't even know what they don't know. So it is up to people with ADHD, and the people who love them, to educate and advocate for people with ADHD in religious life. This is especially true in the context of enabling children with ADHD to have full access to religious education.

In all likelihood, your child with ADHD either goes to public school or a private school specifically designed to serve children with disabilities. Your child's teaching teams may be steeped in knowledge around accommodations, IEPs, 504s, and differentiated learning. That is generally not the case in most religious schools, so there is a learning curve. Thus, here are some tips to help you help your child to succeed.

1 Know you are not alone.

Fully one in five Americans has a disability. So, while parenting a child with ADHD feels lonely at first, seek out other families with similar experiences and you will find them. They can offer good advice and may become your new best friends.

2 Find out if there is a congregation in your area with real experience and success in working with children like yours.

Call your local religious or disability groups to see what resources and leads they can offer. Ask other parents of children with ADHD about their experiences with different congregations. Go online and look at each congregation's website. Does it say they welcome and serve people with disabilities or not? Interview the clergy and heads of the religious schools in your area. Attend a congregation that really wants to serve ALL children and is prepared to do so.

If you already belong to a congregation you like, and they don't currently serve children with ADHD, ask them if they are ready to learn to do it right. If so, search online for resources from national faith networks that represent your tradition. Refer them also to the free tools on the websites listed in the sidebar.

3 Write a "how to succeed with my kid" letter.

You can also prepare a file with your child's IEP or 504 plan and suggestions for success from any behavioral, speech, physical, occupational, mental health, or other therapists that work with your child. But don't expect a religious school teacher to be knowledgeable enough to understand that material. Your letter should be an easy-to-read-and-follow toolkit for working with your child. Put things into simple language with bullets of information that the school needs to know to make your child's experience safe and successful.

Remember, you have unique insights that can help the teacher understand your child's strengths and needs. Your candor, experience, and advice will be much appreciated. Depending on his or her age, you may want to invite your child to suggest what you should express in your letter to the teaching team. Check with your child's secular school team to see whether the teacher or others might be willing to provide some guidance to the religious school team. This could include preferential seating, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), behavioral contracts and management plans, tangible rewards, token economy systems, and more.

4 Request a meeting with your child's teacher and team.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that just because religious school is part-time you can skip this process. Yes, you and the teachers are busy. However, if you miss out on having a real substantive conversation, you may create a situation that will turn off your child to religion. Additionally, it is not enough to meet with

the school principal or clergy. You need to sit face-to-face with the actual person who will be in the classroom with your child, as well as the school leaders who support that teacher. Invite the clergy to the meeting as well. If needed, bring your child's therapists. You may want to bring your child to this meeting, depending on his or her age. Part of the meeting should address why being able to come as a family to your congregation is important to all of you.

Before the meeting, send your letter about your child to all the participants. Bring copies to the meeting and have your "elevator pitch" about your child ready to go. You may want to practice it in front of someone in advance. It is important to get your points across quickly so they can ask questions. Teachers will really appreciate your efforts, resources, and transparency.

Once the teachers learn about your child, the school may want to put an aide in the classroom to support your child's needs. Or they may want to match your child with a teacher who is more experienced. If so, do your elevator pitch and Q&A with that teacher as well. The school may benefit from having your child's therapists or secular schoolteacher meet with them, or join the class for a day, to give the teacher some tips.

Painful though it may be, you will need to leave room for the religious school to say that they cannot meet your child's needs and to suggest you look elsewhere. It is much better to switch congregations or religious schools, or move to a different sort of engagement, than to put your child in a place that isn't safe and supportive.

5 Ask about the preferred method of communication.

Mutual respect and trust are important to all relationships. This includes the relationship you want to cultivate with your child's religious educators and the clergy. That's why it's important to find out which method of communication suits them the best. Many will prefer emails.

6 Be fully honest with the team.

If your child has tantrums, be sure the team understands the triggers that cause them and what will generally prevent them. If your child needs a head's up before a transition, sometimes needs to pace in the back of the classroom, or has a tic or expression they use to indicate anxiety, the team needs to know so they can best serve your child. This is not the time to worry about privacy—you need to focus on safety and success.

7 Be upbeat.

Teachers want proactive parents. A positive relationship with your child's teacher will help your child feel good about the experience. Work with them from your belief in their gifts and capacity, because they are the religious education teachers. You can help them find answers to the ADHD questions, but they are the religion teachers.

Resources on Faith Inclusion & Disabilities

- RespectAbilityUSA.com; see especially
 - › RespectAbilityUSA.com/about-us/stakeholders/faith-based-groups
 - › RespectAbilityUSA.com/resources/Jewish-inclusion
- aaidreligion.org (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Religion and Spirituality Division)
- faithanddisability.org/partner (Collaborative on Faith and Disability; use the link to “Tennessee” under “Partners” to access a number of excellent resources for initiating inclusive faith supports).

For resources specifically on ADHD:

- CHADD.org
- understood.org
- ed.gov (US Department of Education)

Before you hit “send,” look over your messages and make sure they’re respectful of the teacher’s time and efforts to help your child. It’s great to ask questions and make suggestions as long as your messages convey your trust that the teacher is performing the job ethically and responsibly. You want to be their partner. Stress your willingness to help them find answers to questions they may have.

Remember that the teacher is a person first. Send thank-you notes, volunteer, let them know when your child really enjoyed a particular lesson, and try to be considerate of their schedule (teachers have families, too).

8 Share your enthusiasm for religion with your child.

Talk with your child about what he or she will be learning during the year and why it is important to you. Celebrate religious holidays and practices at home and show that it matters to YOU as well. Walk the walk. Let your child know that you have confidence in his or her ability to master the content, and that you believe it will be a positive part of their life.

Reinforce the natural progression of the learning process that occurs over the school year. Learning skills take time and repetition. Encourage your child to be patient, attentive, and positive. Enjoy your own relationship with God and your spiritual community!

9 Slow down and take the time to do it right.

Transitions are often difficult for children with ADHD. Moses didn’t get to the Promised Land overnight. There will be a few bumps in the road. Your child will have a successful year at school in spite of them. Stay calm and positive. Remember to take care of yourself. Know your limitations, and don’t be afraid to ask for help. Make sure your child has enough sleep, plenty of time to get up, eat breakfast, and get to school.

10 Familiarize yourself with the other professionals in your congregation.

Make an effort to find out who in the congregation can be a resource for you and your child. Learn their roles and how best to access their help if you need them. This can include the principal, cleaning and kitchen crew, front office personnel, clergy, and lay leaders who may work with kids with disabilities in their professional jobs.

11 Reinforce your child’s ability to cope.

Give your child a few strategies to manage a difficult situation on his or her own. But encourage your child to tell you or the teacher if the problem persists. Many religious schools will be happy to provide you with a place to sit while your child is in class, and you can bring work or reading. That way, if they need back-up, you are available to help. Maintain open lines of communication with the school.

12 Help your child make at least one real friend there. Talk with the teachers about other children who may have the same interests as your child.

Try to arrange playdates or get-togethers with classmates during the first weeks of school to help your child establish positive social relationships with peers. Go to holiday and religious events and help facilitate actual friendships for your child. If social events are led by people other than the religious school leaders, make sure they also know how to succeed with your child. Parents of other children with and without ADHD or other differences who are friends with your child can become your new best friends as well.

13 Listen to your child’s feelings.

When your child shows any anxiety about going back to the school or attending religious events, the worst thing you can do is brush it off. Listen and be responsive. Empower your child to advocate for himself or herself as well. Show your love. Sometimes you need to take a little step back in order to move forward.

14 Enjoy their childhood. It goes way too fast! ☺

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