Mentoring Teens with High Functioning Autism

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Definition

• Simply stated, high functioning autism (also known as severity Level 1 autism or Asperger’s Syndrome) is a communication and social deficit disorder. Typically adversely impacts interpersonal relationships.

• HFA is not a mental illness, it is a neurological condition. However, due to appearing ‘normal’ but interacting quite differently, individuals with HFA often experience significant depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

• People with HFA die by suicide 9X more often than peers without HFA.
Three True Stories

• “Wendy”
  Youth group = no friends
  No opportunity to share her passions or interests in youth group
  School = few or no friends
  Academic struggles, sibling who did well

• “Whitney”
  Youth group = friends. Opportunities to share passions
  School = friends. Academic success
  Parental mental health issues, other related issues
  Siblings with recurring serious medical needs

• “William”
  Youth group = some friends. Opportunities to share passions
  School = some friends.
  Academic and social struggles at school.
  Sibling who did well.
What were the outcomes?

Wendy
Whitney
William
Adult Mentor Characteristics

- the ability to listen and offer friendship, guidance and encouragement to a young person (National Mentoring Month Campaign)
- a genuine desire to be involved and help youth
- respect for youth and their cultures and backgrounds
- empathy and authenticity
- compatible personalities, interests, and expectations
- prior experience in helping roles or occupations
- flexibility and openness
- the ability to see solutions and opportunities and help youth see them as well
Mentoring Students with HFA - Assumptions

• Assume that all teens are trying to do their best, but some have something preventing them from doing well. That something might be anxiety, depression, or Asperger’s.

• Every person has something to contribute. Gifts, talents, abilities.

• Mentoring is established to support the student in the youth environment, not draw negative attention to the student. Mentoring is a different approach to ministry from typical youth ministry.

• Listen to what the student says about his or her interests and abilities. Also pay attention to what they do not want to talk about.

• Use a family-based ministry model. Focus should be on building relationship with the parents and the student with HFA. You are NOT equipping the parents or students, you are coming alongside in relationship.
Practical Tips and Principles for Mentoring

• Ron Sandison’s 5 practical tips

• Mike Woods’ model: Comfort, Confirm, Challenge. This was Jesus’ model in working with people with disabilities

• Mike Woods’ model: Giving Unconditional Worth to Children on Autism Spectrum.

• Church needs to be a bully-free zone.

• None of us has perfect mental health, perfect social skills or perfect neurological function. We all live with bodies and brains that are somewhat broken, we all have a sin nature. None of us are perfectly mentally or physically healthy because we all suffer from the effects of a sin nature.

• Allowing someone to use their unique gifts in service to the body of Christ meets a need, fills a hole in the body of Christ and draws him/her into the wonder and beauty of serving God. Service is a huge way that God helps all believers grow in their faith.
Heart of Mentoring

• **The Platinum Rule:** Treat people as they want to be treated

• Requires you to know them, to *engage* in relationship with them.

• What’s my **main job in mentoring**? Acceptance, and help them see possibilities. Possibilities that are real can be powerful motivators/powerfully defuse the tendency to depression and suicidal thoughts and actions. Spiritual maturity. Help them develop into who God wants them to be as a person.
Questions Before Getting Started

• Does a person have to have a diagnosis of Asperger’s to get this kind of one-one mentorship?

• How will I recruit mentors?

• Who should or should not be a mentor?

• Where will I find training resources?

• How should I handle objections? (Too time consuming, not the best use of our resources, we already need volunteers)
JESUS LEAVING
99 TO FIND 1
SEEMS CRAZY
...
UNTIL YOU ARE
THAT 1
Ministry Shift Towards Developing Spiritual Maturity

- Develop a *culture of service* within your kids and youth ministry.

- Mentoring can be opportunity for *spiritual and personal growth*, both for the teens who are mentored and the teens and adults doing the mentoring.

- Mentoring/leadership training offered for mature teens may deflect attention away from teens with HFA in mentoring relationship.

- Mentoring focuses on the *whole person*, meeting them where he or she is and helping them develop in a healthy way.
Case Study: Sydney

• Based on what Sydney says about her experiences at church, what are some things your youth group could do differently?

• What could a mentor do?

• What could a youth pastor do?

• What are the things that can be done to the physical space or social environment?
Resources and Discussion

- Handouts
- Autism books
- Comments and questions?
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