

Covenant Lutheran began Godly Play with 3-5 year olds this Sunday school year (2012/2013). Our specific challenge was not only teaching God's story in a different way but teaching to children on the autism spectrum. I'm Lisa Donahue, deaconess, living out my calling as an occupational therapist in the Cy-Fair school district. Together with my daughter, Christine, a speech therapist in the same district, we have 25 years experience working with children with special needs. We were excited to pair our therapeutic expertise with the wonderful program, Godly Play.

School districts are required to use research based programs to teach children; same for therapists working with students with special needs. By incorporating research based strategies into Godly Play a wonderful program has emerged; not only for our students with special needs but also for those who are typically developing.

Structure (a natural component in Godly Play) and visuals are two key components to facilitating participation and language to children on the autism spectrum. To begin our day, our door person greets each child with a visual schedule. The visual schedule is reviewed and each child prepared for the morning. Each section of Godly Play has a designated icon. When a section is completed the child places its corresponding icon in the finished envelope on the back of the schedule.



During story time visuals are important to teach the children the expectations: sit, listen, quiet, hands to self. Additional visuals are used, as needed, throughout class time.



Before our work time, children are given choices of work tasks (e.g. playdoh, crayons, paint). They remove the icon that correlates with the task they choose and place the Velcroed icon onto e.g. work table, painting easel. Task buckets have a corresponding icon with a piece of Velcro for the children to place their matching icon.



It has been exciting to watch our children with special needs blossom: their communication has increased, inappropriate behaviors have been nonexistent approximately 6 weeks into the year, and appropriate behaviors and participation have increased. It has been fascinating to watch the children who are typically developing seek out the visuals in an innate desire for structure and boundaries. These strategies provide students not only structure and boundaries but a way to communicate, opportunity for self-esteem building through choice making, and an opportunity to develop appropriate behaviors through clear and consistent expectations.

Christine and I have also made research based strategies available to parents to assist children on the autism spectrum participate in the worship service. To learn more contact Christine or me. We're happy to visit you and share strategies as well as how to teach children on the spectrum or you're welcome to view our set-up at Covenant.

Lisa Donahue, Deaconess/OTR lisdote@hotmail.com

Christine Donahue, SLP, CCC cedonahue@gmail.com