

RE with autistic students

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We will:

- Briefly review what autism is
- Explore strategies to support autistic students in lessons
- Consider the difficulties autistic students particularly experience in RE
- Look at strategies that are particularly useful in RE

True or False?

What is autism?

A spectrum of needs including:

- Restricted or limited interests
- Sensory needs
- Need for routines and resistance to change
- Social communication difficulties including language

An autistic person maybe anywhere on the full range of academic ability

Steve Silberman

‘Autism is like being a Mac user in a Microsoft world.’

Greta Thunberg

‘No, autism is not a gift. For most, it is an endless fight against schools, workplaces and bullies. But, under the right circumstances, given the right adjustments, it CAN be a superpower.’

Sensory needs

- Sight
 - Hearing
 - Taste
 - Touch
 - Smell
- +
- Proprioception
 - Vestibular
 - Interoception

Sensory needs

- Stimming (Stimulating) – often in response to discomfort, anxiety or distress. This may present in many different ways as a person seeks to mask needs eg tapping, rocking.

Masking

Acting as though the person does not have different needs which takes a great deal of energy and concentration. Seems to be particularly evident in females.

Anxiety

Worrying about what will happen next. Will I be teased or bullied about this? I do not understand that. Will I cope with the noise, smells etc? Whose group will I be in?

This can become a chronic condition.

Common strengths

- Detail
- Spotting patterns
- Open minded questions (not the 'correct' or obvious question)
- Following guidance carefully

The autistic spectrum explained with ping pong balls



What language do we use?

- Autistic spectrum condition
- Autistic spectrum disorder
- Autistic person
- Person with autism

Strategies to support autistic students in lessons

Strategies to support autistic students in lessons

- Have a brief plan of the lesson available – a visual timetable.
- For younger children illustrating this is helpful (check if your school has Widget Online)
- If you need to adapt the lesson then simply change the visual plan

Strategies to support autistic students in lessons

- Have a routine to your lesson especially for opening and closing activities

Strategies to support autistic students in lesson

- Prepare for changes in routine

Strategies to support autistic students in lessons

- Consider sensory needs (lighting, sound etc)
- How can you reduce distractions?

Strategies to support autistic students in lessons

Extra time to process information and answers

- Processing metaphorical language or implied information
- Processing information that does not match what is expected from facial expressions or context
- Processing information regarding a different emotional response to their experience
- Strong possibility of comorbidity (two conditions together) eg dyslexia or developmental language difficulty

Strategies to support autistic students in lessons

- Avoid irony and sarcasm

Strategies to support autistic students in lessons

Provide visual support

- Diagrammatic versions of information are very helpful

Strategies to support autistic students

Format for notes or doodling

Text to be studied printed out, well spaced and with a good margin round the side so student could:

- Highlight
- Add notes and explanations
- Doodle

Strategies to support autistic students

Provide scaffolding

- Guiding plans for essays and exam answers
- Sentence starters

Scaffolding plus

- Offer three sentence starters to choose from
- Ask students to create 3 sentence starters (on mini whiteboards) for themselves

Strategies to support autistic students

Plan group work carefully

- Who with?
- Roles in group?
- Expectations
- What to do if the student finds the situation difficult
- Consider an option to do a similar task on own

Strategies to support autistic students

- Provide a 'time out' system

What difficulties do autistic students experience when studying RE?

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- Metaphor, imagery, analogy, stylised language
- Visual metaphors eg Sacred heart
- Unregulated empathy
- Rigidity in thinking eg ethical issues
- Understanding context in Biblical teaching, church teaching and church history
- Incorporate special interests if possible

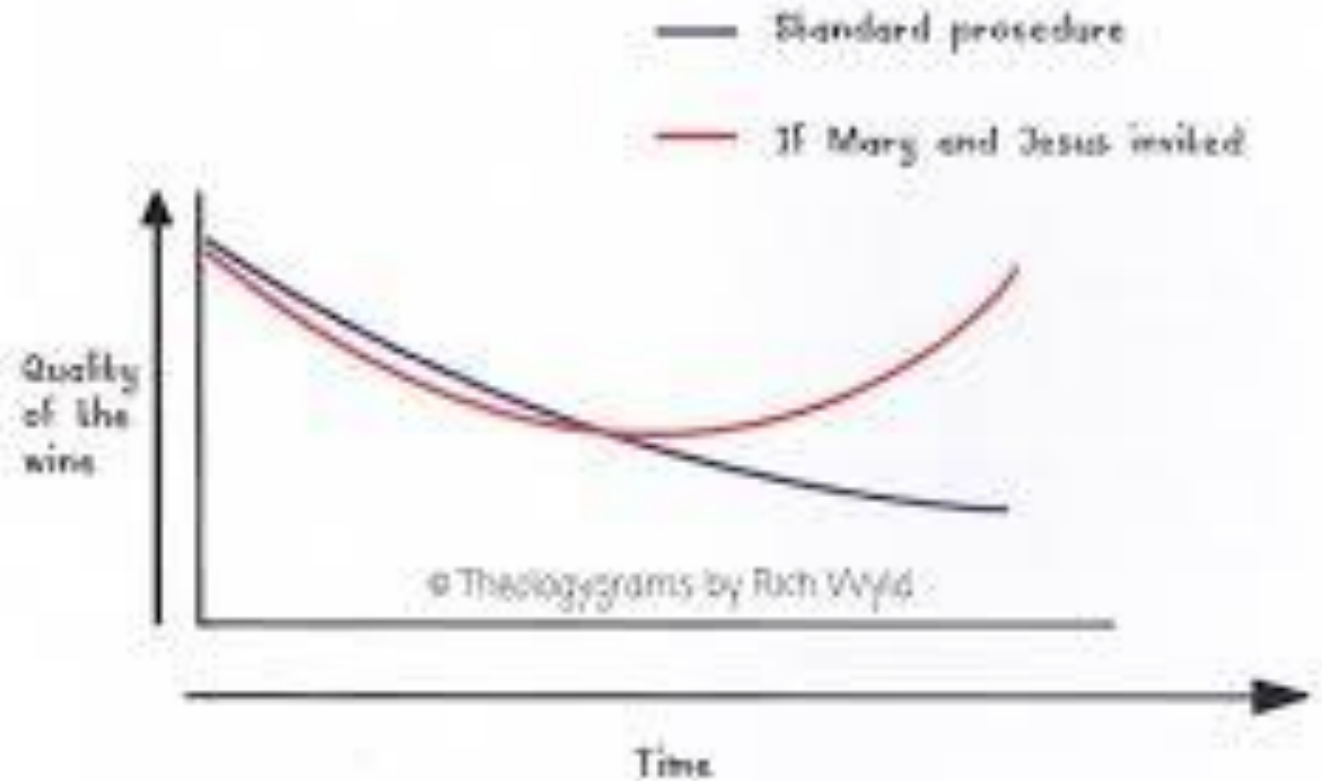
Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

- Use visuals – especially diagrams

Rich Wyld: Theologygrams

- Use visuals

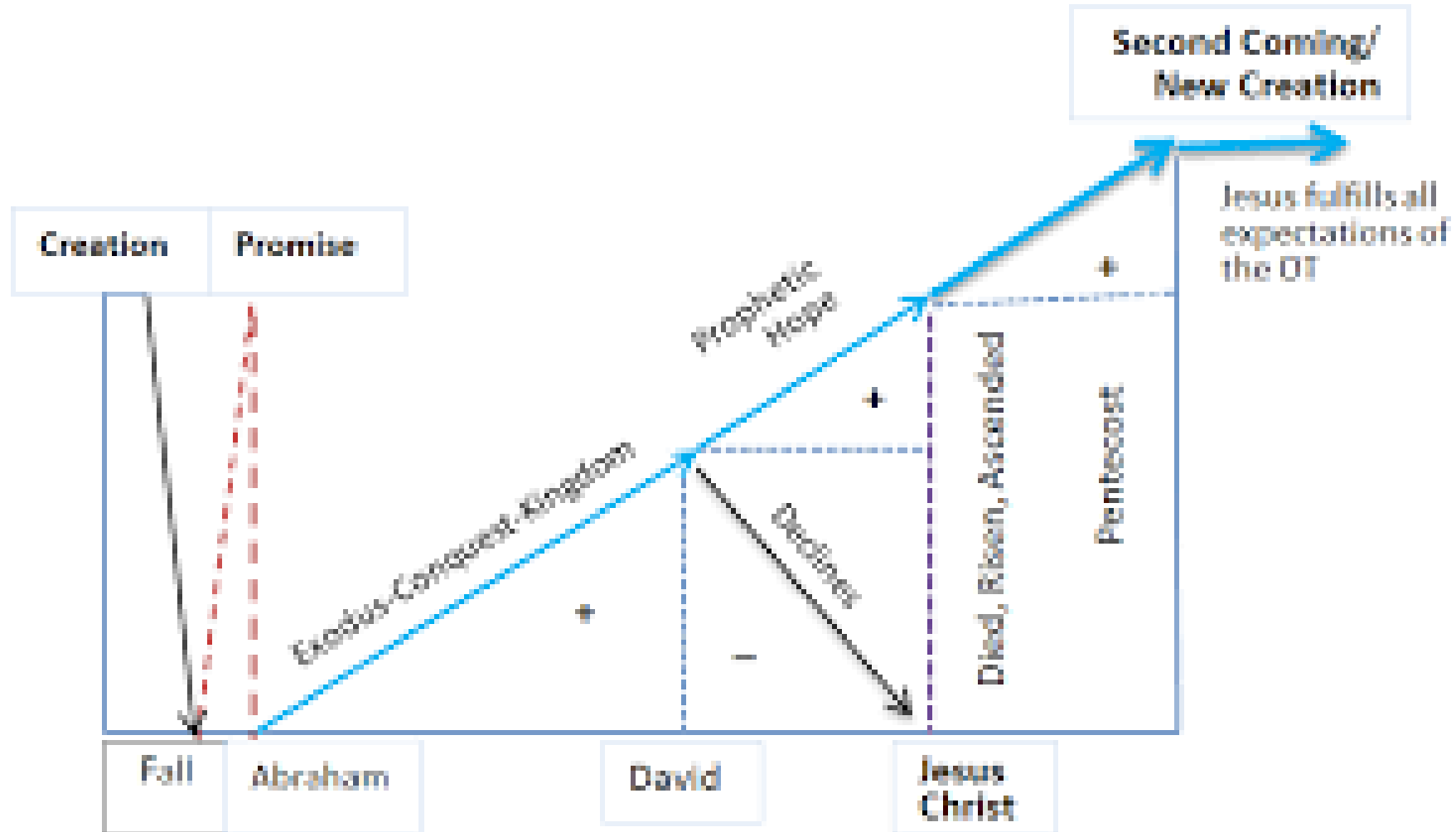
QUALITY OF WINE DURING A WEDDING



Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

- Visuals to explain large scale context
- Autistic people often focus on detail and can be 'context blind' or at least 'context short sighted'

Vaughan Roberts: God's big picture



Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

- Keep referring back to the different types of religious writing eg history, poetry etc. This can give medium scale context.
- For those students who like to spot patterns, use this skill when looking at styles of writing eg we know it is historical writing because the writer says who was ruling at that time.



BIBLE LIBRARY

The Catholic Bible has 73 books inside it.

These range from history books, to poetry, prediction books, songs, biographies, rule books to letters.

Reading the Bible is just like going to a modern library - there is literally loads of TYPES/GENRES of books in it. It has been described best as an 'inspired library' because of the vast amount of books it contains.

Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

Teach phrases that signal 'parable ahead', 'poetry ahead'. This gives small scale context.

- 'He told them this parable...' 'psalm'

When reading the Bible and other religious texts encourage the students to routinely ask, what sort of writing is this? Law? Prophecy? A letter? History?

Students generally enjoy hearing about context of the time ('Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes' by Kenneth E. Bailey helps).

Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

Explain symbolism in imagery

Good example on pages 14,15 and 35 AQA revision guide

Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

Collect a list of metaphors and their meanings

eg 'The Lord is my shepherd' – Jewish shepherds would lead their sheep and know them individually. They stayed with them day and night and protected them from wild beasts.

Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

Be aware of unregulated empathy – students may dismiss concerns without a second thought or be overwhelmed by a person's (or animal's) plight

Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

- Avoid dismissal of differing ethical stances by teaching some think...because... and others think... because...
- Use logic to support stance rather than how someone might feel eg if one believes life begins at conception, abortion means killing a life and is therefore wrong

Strategies to help teach RE well to autistic students

If you can, incorporate special interests eg

Train timetables – timetable and place of events of Jesus' trial, crucifixion and resurrection

Boy band – names and characters of disciples or saints

Farming – any farming allusions in the parables

Online game – ?

Any questions?