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Virtual OTD Capstone Symposium, Spring 2020

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Spring 4-23-2020

## Inclusion in Religion and Spirituality for Children with Special Needs

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### Recommended Citation

Weiss, MacKinzie C.; Collins, Kayla; and Shotwell, Mary P., "Inclusion in Religion and Spirituality for Children with Special Needs" (2020). *Virtual OTD Capstone Symposium, Spring 2020*. 6.

<https://soar.usa.edu/otdcapstonespring2020/6>

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## Inclusion in Religion and Spirituality for Children with Special Needs

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### Background

Children with disabilities, especially those with an autism diagnosis, often have trouble with inclusion and have been shown to “participate less frequently and with less variety in activities than do typically developing children” (Little, Ausderau, Sideris, & Baranek, 2014). Participation in religious activities of children with special needs is even lower than participation in school activities, even though these children have expressed an explicit desire to be involved (Todd & Rufa, 2013). Without proper staff education and training with curriculum adaptations, these children and their families are less likely to attend and be included in their preferred religious activities. Occupational therapists are skilled at providing tools, resources, and interventions to adapt and modify programs for better inclusion (AOTA, 2014).

### Problem Statement

Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities are often disregarded by religious institutions because these institutions do not have the resources to include these children and families. Often in churches, there is limited knowledge in how to best reach out and successfully include these children and families. The average children’s ministry does not have specialized knowledge on children with disabilities and their specific needs and challenges.

### Purpose

The purpose of this project is to help a church in Jacksonville, FL become more inclusive to children with special needs by incorporating evidence-based occupational therapy strategies and interventions.

- Focus on educating and training volunteers with evidence-based occupational therapy techniques and strategies to facilitate inclusion and participation

### Methods

This project aimed to implement different programs within the current special needs ministry at the Church of Eleven22. These programs were aimed at increasing the participation and inclusion of children with special needs via volunteer education and training.

#### Buddy Break

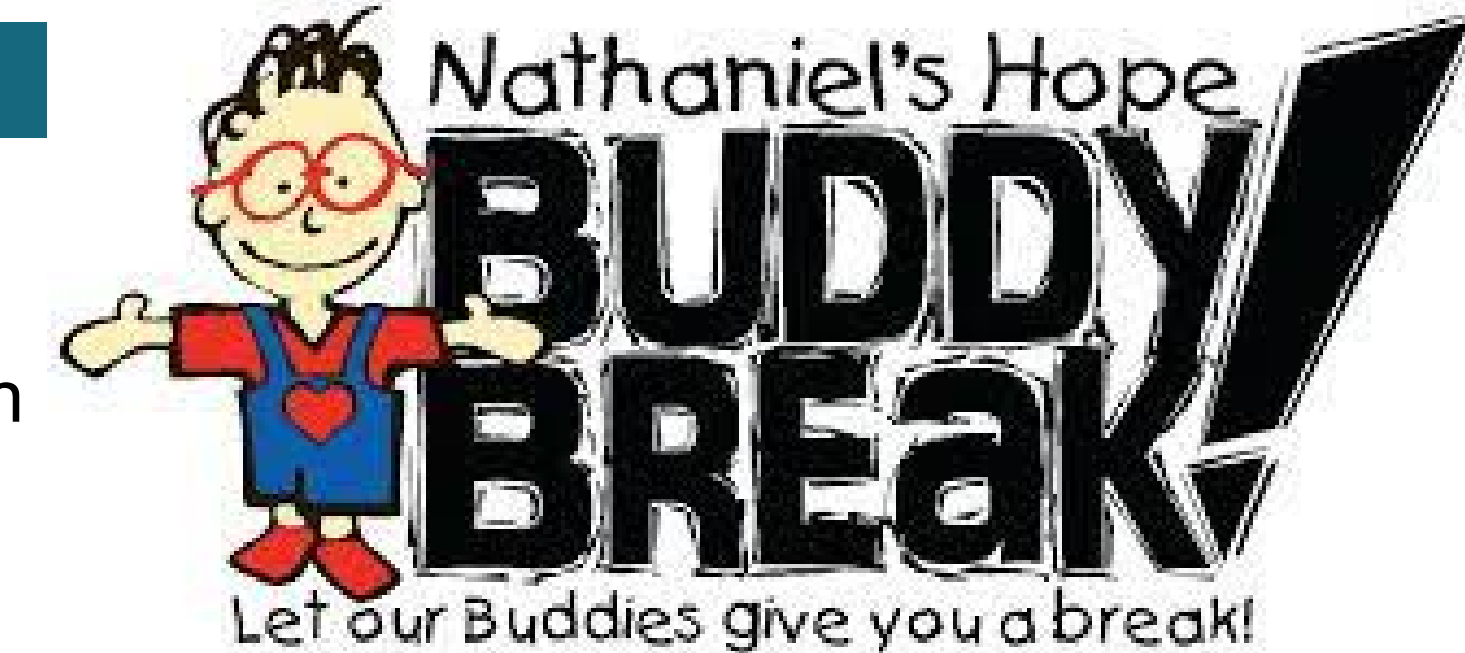
- Once monthly parent respite program for families of children with special needs
- Small consistent group of volunteers who were paired with same child every event
- Opportunity for “hands-on” training with different disciplines (OT, PT, speech, music)
- Proved to be most effective type of volunteer training
- Increase in participation by both the volunteers and the children with special needs

#### Volunteer Education

- Creation of volunteer education video with strong emphasis on occupational therapy intervention techniques in collaboration with OTD classmate
- Creation of special needs educational content in Church’s ServeStaff training manual
- Creation of special needs PowerPoint for children’s ministers

#### S’cool Moves

- Completion of S’cool Moves modules and training
- Creation of brain breaks educational video that was shown across all campuses during volunteer morning huddle



### Dissemination

Volunteers who participated in all of the Buddy Breaks were asked to give feedback on their level of volunteer education received, feelings of empowerment and comfort during parent respite event

- Volunteers reported feeling more empowered and educated as a result of the hands-on learning
- Importance of interdisciplinary team was stressed by the volunteers

The children’s ministers and the special needs director were interviewed concerning the creation of the volunteer educational materials

- Volunteer education in a video format was important
- Content provided was a relevant and was a needed addition to the incoming volunteer manual

This project sought to contribute evidence to the existing literature on the inclusion and participation of children with special needs within the religious community. It is the hope of this project that aspects of programs developed will positively influence future programs.

#### References

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