

Tip Sheet 6

Library Accessibility –What You Need to Know **Accessibility for Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)**

Overview

Autism Spectrum Disorders are a very complex and varied impairment. People who have ASD may have impairments in language, social skills, and sensory integration and processing. In the library setting, these persons may not demonstrate ASD-related behaviors until interacting with staff.

A patron with ASD may not be verbal, or may talk *at* you rather than converse. This patron may repeat what you say, be too loud, interrupt others, not understand figures of speech or jokes, and unable to follow multipart instructions. A person with ASD may be unusually sensitive to smells, ambient noise, flickering lights, and certain textures. Many persons with ASD lack the ability to read body language or other social cues. Some persons are not aware of socially appropriate behaviors --- not understanding the rules of social distance, appropriate touch, and eye contact. These impairments create a need for control and predictability in environment. Accommodating a person with ASD often involves facilitating and directing interactions, to reduce risk and disruption.

Tips

- Communicate directly with the patron when possible, not the caregiver.
- Determine the preferred communication style (verbal, sign language, written notes, a communication board) and defer to that preference.
- Keep your language simple and concrete. Avoid idioms and multipart directions.
- Rather than telling a patron with ASD what *not* to do, instead be positive, advising the patron about acceptable behavior.
- Be predictable. Describe your present and upcoming actions.
- Give five or ten-minute warnings before transitions (like the end of computer time).
- Do not insist on adherence to social norms, such as eye contact.
- Be flexible. Allow some noise, gum-chewing, and sitting where comfortable to encourage participation, if these things help the person with ASD organize himself and participate.
- Bend circulation policies. (For example, allow multiple renewals of favorite titles.)
- If waiting in line is a problem, assist the person with ASD before other patrons. Do this in a discreet manner; do not draw attention to the patron.
- Minimize sensory stimulation. For example, turn off some fluorescent lights and remove distracting objects from program rooms.

- Provide quiet, private work areas.
- Explain environmental changes, including furniture or staff changes, to patrons.
- Ask patrons what disturbs the library environment, and avoid or alter these environmental stresses.
- Advise patrons with ASD of days and times when noise/crowding is lower and staff can provide greater personal assistance.

Class Visits or Programs

- Unless told otherwise, assume that a child with ASD is functioning on the same age/grade level as peers.
- Begin with an explanation of the visit or program with a visual schedule. Refer to that schedule when transitioning to a new activity.
- Don't insist that the child with ASD join in everything, but be prepared to adapt activities or crafts so children with ASD can participate.

Following these guidelines will make the library visit comfortable and minimize frustration for persons with ASD. However, if a patron with ASD begins to tantrum, or becomes verbally or physically threatening, it is okay to ask this person to leave (or be removed) until calm. In extreme cases, if the person with ASD represents a threat to himself or others, it is appropriate to involve security personnel or the police. Ensure that law enforcement personnel understand that this person has a developmental disability, and is not a criminal.

Patrons with ASD are members of the community and contribute through participation in library programs. The time that you spend creating a comfortable environment will encourage all families to visit their local library.

Resources

Autism Society of America (ASA)

www.autism-society.org

Since 1965, the ASA has been a major source for information, research and referrals, with state chapters that serve local communities.

Autism Speaks

www.autismspeaks.org

Autism Speaks has merged with Cure Autism Now (CAN) and the National Alliance for Autism research (NAAR) to create a powerful, nationwide autism advocacy organization.

Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (OASIS)

www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger

Through O.A.S.I.S., parents offer quality information, support groups, and more.

This Tipsheet is one in a series developed by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association. See: www.ascla.ala.org.