



People with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD): What You Need to Know
Library Accessibility Tip Sheet 6

Overview

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is the name given to a variety of related developmental disabilities. People who have an ASD have impairments in language and social skills, and they have some kind of unusual or obsessive interest. Although these elements may differ in kind and intensity, all of them must be present for a developmental disability to be called an ASD. In addition, difficulties with sensory integration and processing often accompany an ASD. The most commonly known ASDs are autism and Asperger's syndrome. In the library setting, these person's ASD-related behaviors may not be readily apparent.

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/or be 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, turn taking, and eye contact. These impairments create a need for control and predictability in the environment. Accommodating a person with ASD often involves facilitating and directing interactions in order to reduce the risk of meltdown and disruption.

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 (have a meltdown) or becomes verbally or physically threatening, it is OK to ask this person to leave (or have this person 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 are able to participate in many library programs when given the appropriate supports. The time that you spend creating a comfortable environment will encourage all families to visit their local library.

Tips—General

- 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 (for example, the end of computer time).
- Do not insist on adherence to social norms, such as eye contact.
- Be flexible. Allow some noisemaking, gum chewing, and sitting where comfortable to encourage participation if these things help the person with ASD organize him- or herself and participate.
- Bend circulation policies when possible. (For example, allow multiple renewals of favorite titles.)
- If waiting in line is a problem for a person with ASD, assist the person with ASD as soon as feasible. 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.
- Have a quiet place where someone can go to compose him- or herself if necessary.

Tips—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.

Assistive Technology

- Picture schedules of library events or due dates of materials.
- Visual timers where needed.
- Touch screens
- Alpha smart (a lightweight, portable tool which helps persons who have difficulty with spelling and grammar get it right)
- Fidgets (small manipulatives like a soft ball or anything that fits safely and comfortably in the hand)
- Natural light or full-spectrum florescent lighting

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.

National Autism Center (NAC)

www.nationalautismcenter.org

Source of the autism national standards report.

Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (OASIS)

www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger

Through OASIS, parents offer quality information, support groups, and more.

This tip sheet, revised in 2010, is one in a series developed by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association. See www.ala.org/ascla.