

## Serving Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder

### Objectives:

- Define Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Recognize common behaviors associated with ASD
- List ways to create a welcoming environment for patrons with ASD
- Identify NYPL Resources for patrons with ASD

### Introduction

#### Serving Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The following recordings are from the *Visible Lives: Oral Histories of the Disability Experience Project*.

Karen Malone discusses her experience with her son David, who was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder as a toddler.

[Karen Malone] And the best analogy would be, being in an old fashioned telephone booth with somebody banging on the outside, trumpets blaring, drums pounding, and this is what he has to overcome every single day, because that's what they walk through everyday; they overcome so much to be in a social situation that maybe you should look at them differently, because my son is just like everybody else - he's a wisenheimer, you know he's a typical teenager, but he needs a little understanding, also, you know take you time ...

Emmalia Harrington discusses her experience living with autism, and the perceptions others have about people with autism.

[Emmalia] oh how do I say, if you know one person with autism you know one person with autism, and I would very much like to be heard, because it's very annoying having specific people and just popular culture tell me how I'm supposed to be. I'm neither Rainman nor am I Sheldon from Big Bang Theory. I do not behave in any of these ways, hence, I can't possibly have the condition. One thing that really, really bothers me is according to popular culture by virtue of being autistic I have no empathy. Also the bit about how I'm supposed to no social skills. I may not be the biggest social butterfly, but I do have my social circles. I have a fiance. I have, I have a pet, who enjoys bothering me for playtime and other forms of attention. So between all of these things I think it's safe to say that I am capable of feeling emotions and understand a little bit of other people and animals' emotions.

## **Overview**

Libraries are for Everyone - including patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is our responsibility as Library employees to create equitable experiences for patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD.

You do not need to be an expert to serve patrons with ASD. You can engage successfully with individuals with ASD and their families by using best practices in interpersonal interactions; making appropriate accommodations, and creating welcoming spaces. It is natural to feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar situations. This tutorial will provide you with information and skills to build your confidence, and to enable you to provide a positive experience for patrons with ASD.

## **What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

When you hear the word Spectrum what comes to mind? Words like Variety, Range, Gamut, Scale, Array, or Continuum perhaps?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental disorder defined by a range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication, as well as by unique strengths and differences.

ASD affects each individual differently, and no two people with an ASD diagnosis will exhibit the same behaviors and respond the same way. "If you know one person with Autism, you know one person with Autism. It is not our job to diagnose patrons, but we can recognize common behaviors and use best practices to respond to the behaviors.

The same concepts introduced in the Accessibility and Inclusion module apply to patrons with Autism for example person first language - Patron with Autism, instead of Autistic patron. Asking "How can I help you?" is an easy way for the patron to let you know, if he or she needs any accommodations.

## **Common behaviors associated with ASD**

Because people with ASD fall within a spectrum, the following are just examples of certain behaviors or challenges people with ASD may face. Not every person with ASD will exhibit all of these behaviors. These behaviors can generally be grouped into four different categories:

1. Social Skills
2. Communication
3. Restrictive or Repetitive Behaviors
4. Sensory Integration Challenges

## **Social Skills**

Examples of Social Skills behaviors you may observe in people with ASD

- Avoiding Eye Contact
- Not understanding typical personal space boundaries
- Avoiding or resisting physical contact
- Preoccupation with a single subject or specific item

## **Responding to Social Skills Behaviors**

Don't force eye contact with a patron, who is avoiding it or assume the person is being rude to you. It is likely that the patron is just uncomfortable for that patron. Refrain from raising your voice to get attention. There is no need to request that a patron look at you directly. A calm even tone of voice will achieve the best results. An individual with Autism may have a different sense of personal space boundaries, and may move it too close for your personal comfort. Communicate clearly and directly in these situations, for example "I'm going to step back so we have more space" if a patron moves in too close to you. It is important to remember that individuals with ASD may also avoid or resist physical contact. For this reason it is best practice avoiding touching the patron or gesturing in close proximity.

### **Communication**

Examples of Communication behaviors you may observe in people with ASD

- Delayed speech and language skills
- Repeating words or phrases over and over, known as Echolalia
- Using third person language to refer to self, and articulate needs
- Difficulty expressing feelings

### **Responding to Communication Behaviors**

A child with ASD may not have the same language skills as others in their age group, and teens and adults with autism may have a manner of speech, which is not common or familiar to you. You should be patient with these differences, and respond professionally as you would to any patron. It is important that your tone of voice matches the age of the patron, and that you do not speak to adults or teens like children. If a patron struggles to articulate their feelings, you can offer a feeling chart that depicts common emotions to help him or her express how they are feeling. More information on additional types of visual supports, like this feeling chart, will be discussed in a following section.

### **Restrictive, Repetitive Behaviors**

Examples of Restrictive, Repetitive behaviors you may observe in people with ASD

- Repetitive actions and rituals
- Fixation on specific details
- Upset by changes in daily routine
- Difficulty with transitions between activities

### **Responding to Restrictive, Repetitive Behaviors**

As with different manners of speech, some behaviors you may observe, a fixation with details, and repetitive actions for example, need to be accepted patiently. Keeping things simple can help with understanding. You may need to break directions down into simple steps with clear and concise language. If a patron needs to check out a book, you may say: "First walk to the desk; Second hand your book and library card to the person behind the desk; Third wait for her to hand it back to you". Patrons with ASD may have difficulty following a program that does not have a clear routine. Similar to the feeling chart, a visual schedule, is a visual support that follows the structure of a program, and can be a useful tool to aid patrons.

### **Sensory Integration Challenges**

Examples of Sensory Integration Challenges you may observe in people with ASD

- Unusually sensitive to sounds, lights, textures, or smells
- Overwhelmed by too much sensory input

- Disturbed and uncomfortable, because of a lack of sensory input

### **Responding to Sensory Integration Challenges**

Because people with autism all have different sensitivities, there is no one way to accommodate their needs. The most important thing is to accept that different needs exist; provide a welcoming environment for patrons to explain their needs, and to be open to finding solutions.

Sensory integration challenges may result in Stimming behaviors.

Self-Stimulatory Behavior or Stimming is the repetition of physical movements, sound, or repetitive movement of objects. People with autism use stimming behaviors to calm themselves, if they are upset or distressed. Stimming can help ease anxiety, reduce fear and combat sensory overload. It is important to respect the patron's need to engage in this behavior due to sensory integration challenges. Should a patron with autism exhibit stimming behavior give him or her space, and assure other patrons that he is ok, and just needs some time, space and quiet.

### **Understanding Sensory Integration Challenges**

Sensory integration challenges can be difficult to understand, if you do not personally experience them. The following video provides a glimpse into how the world can appear to an individual with sensory integration challenges.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lr4\\_dOorquQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lr4_dOorquQ)

### **Accommodations**

Like all patrons with disabilities, patrons with ASD may need accommodations to access Library services. It is important to be flexible, and open to a variety of accommodations. Some common ways you can accommodate patrons with ASD is to allow the following:

#### **Eating**

Individuals with ASD may use snacks as part of their behavior therapy. Eating snacks at certain intervals can be a huge motivator for engaging in positive behaviors. This may be more common with younger children, for example if they sit for 5 minutes during storytime they receive a snack.

#### **Noise**

A patron with ASD may engage in loud auditory exclamations as part of their sensory integration or communication challenges. Trying to quiet the patron will not be helpful. Accepting a louder than usual conversation will be more effective and help you have a successful interaction with the patron.

#### **Flexible service points**

Patrons with ASD often struggle with transitions. Moving from one area or floor of the Library to another to checkout materials for example can cause anxiety. Offering to check out materials, where the patron is, or allowing them to remain, where they are comfortable, and taking the items to check out for them can be helpful.

## **Environment**

Creating a welcoming physical space is an important to providing services for patrons with ASD.

Quiet areas are important for patrons, who may be disturbed by loud sounds and lots of stimuli. For adult and teen patrons a quiet table can be an easy accommodation with a big benefit. Pick one table in a part of the branch that tends to already be a quiet spot, create a sign, and place it on the table.

For children you can consider creating a Calming Corner. These should be located in the children's space near where programs are held. Pop-up tents, bean bag chairs, puppets, soft toys, and a few books, can create an area for a child to be calm, and relax.

## **Materials**

In addition to creating quiet tables and calm corners there are various materials to keep on hand that may be beneficial for patrons with ASD. Consider storing some of these items behind the circulation desk for patrons to use while in the branch or for use in programming.

Fidgets and other supplies are available through approved vendors. A list of items are available [here](#).

## **Visual Supports**

Visual Supports - such as the feeling chart shown earlier - can provide clear and simple ways to communicate, which can be helpful, when serving patrons with autism. Generally, visual supports refer to using a picture to communicate with someone, who has difficulty understanding or using language.

For example, pictures of common items within the library can help aid a patron with ASD who may have communication challenges. One sheet of various items such as a printer, computer, book or copy machine can be kept behind the desk to help lower frustration and more accurately help a patron find what they are looking for.

### **Visual Schedule**

A visual schedule has words and pictures that show different activities in a specific program. Visual schedules aid in change and transitions which can be difficult for people with ASD. They allow patrons to build routine and predictability as well as increase engagement and attention during a program.

### **Social Stories**

Social stories are great tools to help prepare new patrons with ASD to a visit to the library. A social story is a series of pictures that outline what will happen when an individual is going to a new place. The stories help ease anxiety and prepare people with ASD to visit a new place or specific program. They prepare individuals for social interaction as well as what to expect in a new environment.

Another type of visual support is pictorial directions. Breaking down common library requests into simple, easy to follow directions accompanied by images can be useful tool.

## **Library Programs**

Patrons with ASD are welcome to participate in any and all NYPL programs. In addition to general programming there are specific programs that can be offered for patrons with ASD.

### **Sensory Storytime**

Sensory Storytime is an inclusive program that combines the best practices from special education with the best practices of traditional storytimes to create an interactive, engaging program for children with disabilities. These storytimes use sensory materials, and visual supports to engage the children. Typically they are for smaller size groups, and you may need to register participants to keep the group size at an appropriate level.

### **Teen/Tween Social Hours**

Social hours are informal gatherings where teens or tweens with ASD and other special needs hang out to socialize with one another. These social hours are safe spaces for young adults, who may struggle with social situations and large crowds of people. They may include games, art projects, homework help and snacks.

### **Work Study**

School age individuals, age 14 - 21 with ASD visit a branch with school support, where they learn practical skills, such as filling out paper timesheets, sorting and collating copies and other activities they can complete at the branch.

## **Outreach Opportunities**

It is important to remember that not all individuals with ASD may be physically entering your library, and outreach to other organizations are an important way of engaging patrons with ASD. The key to this outreach is developing relationships with partners.

The same basic principles of you use for all outreach opportunities apply to organizations that serve patrons with ASD.

- Explore the organization's website to learn about their mission and services
- Find a point of contact
- Introduce yourself and your role at the library
- Provide list of services you can offer (make sure these are realistic for your branch)
- Drop off flyers and branch calendars

There are many different types of organizations that work with people with ASD and other developmental disabilities. Below are brief explanations of the types organizations, the services they provide, and some examples.

**An Agency** is a place that provides advocacy, parent training, resources and services to parents, guardians and caregivers.

Examples: Parent to Parent New York City and New York State, INCLUDEnyc, Skip of New York, AMAC, Kennedy Center

**An Organization** is specific to the needs of individuals with disabilities and provides services such as day habilitation, service coordination, recreation and respite services.

Examples: AHRC, Lifestyles for the Disabled, On Your Mark, A Very Special Place, A Very Special Place

**A Community Based Organization** is open to the general public and provides services to everyone within the community but can include recreation, socialization programs or summer camp for individuals with special needs

Examples: YMCA, JCC, CYO

## **Partnering with Special Education Schools**

Every child with a disability has the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education alongside their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible.

The NYC Department of Education provides special education services specially designed to meet individual needs of all children in New York City. Many of these education services serve children and young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

[This document](#) explains the different special education settings in New York City and how you can partner to serve students with ASD.

\*Please keep in mind not all students with ASD are in special education classrooms or receive these related services.

## **Staff Resources**

The LAIR Accessibility page is filled with resources to better help you serve patrons of all ages with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

The Resources for Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Developmental Disabilities page includes:

- Tips for Serving Patrons with Developmental Disabilities
- Resources for Serving People with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)
- Links to External Organizations that provide information, and services for people with ASD

You can also email [accessibility@nypl.org](mailto:accessibility@nypl.org) with any questions about serving patrons with ASD.

## **Use the LAIR Accessibility Page**

For the next set of questions you will need to open and search the [LAIR Accessibility Page](#), find the *Resources for Patrons with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Developmental Disabilities* page.

## **NYPL Collections**

There are many [titles](#) in our collection to further your own knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorder as well as to provide information for patrons.

[Tumblebooks](#) are online picture books that are animated, and include activities. They are interactive, and allow children to go at their own pace, so can be engaging for children with ASD.

Launchpads are preloaded tablet devices that contain a variety of educational learning games. They have a straightforward, easy to use interface that can provide children with ASD an independent learning tool. Launchpads are a great resource for families and special education classrooms as a developmentally appropriate technology experience. (Available at select branches).

### **Summary**

Serving patrons with autism spectrum disorder is an important in order to fulfill the Library's mission of inspiring lifelong learning, advancing knowledge, and strengthening our communities.

A few simple tools, such as visual supports, some reasonable accommodations - quiet zones, and flexible service points for example, and appropriate responses - not forcing eye contact, accepting different communication styles, and respecting stimming behaviors are easy ways to make our Library's welcoming, and provide service to patrons with ASD.