

# Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

## Overview

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the name given to a variety of related developmental disabilities. People who have an ASD experience impairments in language and social skills, and often have some type 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 ASD's are autism and Asperger's syndrome. In the library setting, a person's ASD-related behaviors may not be readily apparent.

A patron with ASD may not be verbal, or he or she may talk "at you" rather than converse. This patron may repeat what you say, speak too loudly, 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 people with ASD lack the ability to read body language or other social cues. Some people are not aware of socially appropriate behaviors—not understanding the rules of social distance, appropriate touch, taking turns, 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 disruption.

Following these guidelines will make library visits comfortable and can minimize frustration for people with ASD. However, if a patron with ASD becomes very disruptive 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 provided with appropriate support. Creating a comfortable environment encourages 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 his or her behavior.
- 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 himself 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 his or her 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.

## **Recommended Assistive Technology**

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

# Resources

- [Autism Society of America \(ASA\)](#) has been a major source for information, research, and referrals, with state chapters that serve local communities since 1965.
- [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) is a source of the autism national standards report.
- [Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support \(OASIS\)](#) offers quality information, support groups, and more.