Handout #1 Autism-Friendly Programming: WHY? HOW?
Prepared for the 2014 Texas Library Association Conference

Background: WHAT is Autism?? It’s Neurobiological

DSM-5 Definition: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the... deficits in:

1. Social-emotional reciprocity
2. Nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction
3. Developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships

Some Features of ASD:

Social Skills:
• May not read emotions, facial expressions, body language or other social cues
• May have difficulty adopting another’s point of view (theory of mind)
• May have little or no understanding of friendships, and possibly little interest
• May have little or no pretend play
• May not learn by imitation or emulation
• May not understand appropriate social distance or touch
• May not make eye contact
• May have difficulty turn-taking or sharing
• May not understand when a behavior or interest is socially inappropriate

Language and Communication:
• May be nonverbal or speak non-stop
• May talk “at” you, not converse
• May have strong decoding, limited comprehension
• May be too loud or may speak in a monotone
• May repeat what they’ve heard or read (echolalia)
• May appear deaf (not respond to language)
• May not understand idioms, abstractions, humor based on double meanings, hyperbole or sarcasm

Behaviors:
• May have obsessive interests or very limited interests
• May perform tasks in a highly ritualized manner
• May use stims (self-stimulatory behaviors like rocking or hand-flapping) when upset
Sensory Processing Issues:
• May have motor planning problems
• May have difficulties with balance
• May have a poor sense of body in space
• May be hyper- or hypo-sensitive to sensations (seeker or avoider)
• May be unable to process auditory and visual input simultaneously
• May be unable to block out background noise or other stimuli

Takeaway:
1. All of these features of ASD make the world a pretty scary place.
2. Frustration and meltdowns can occur when the world seems out of control.
3. But, people with ASD can feel safe when some elements in the environment are controlled or adapted.

Don’t Overlook the Strengths:
• Great at understanding concrete things
• Rote memorization skills
• Visual thinkers, and great recall for visual images
• Perfectionistic/Can be precise and detail-oriented
• Can have high intelligence
• Can be honest and genuine (no need to be “cool”)

Think About Your Regular Programs... Could a child/teen with ASD fit in? 
**Probably not, without modifications**

WHY Offer Autism-Friendly Programming:

The Incidence: 1 in 50 children

Where Are They?
• Isolated at home (probably on the computer or iPad)
• At school or therapies
• In your regular programs (but not fitting in very well)

Remember:
1. For people with ASD, the world can be a pretty scary place.
2. Frustration and meltdowns can occur when the world seems out of control.
3. But, people with ASD can feel safe (and function well) when some elements in the environment are controlled or adapted.
The Fix: Autism-Friendly Programming...

- Makes the library familiar and therefore safe
- Means a decrease in anxiety and problem behaviors & increase in desire to go to the library
- Leads to decreased isolation for the whole family

The Goal of Programming:

Making these children and their families feel welcome in the library!!

It's less about them participating in the program activities (though it's nice if they do)

An Example:

“It has had such a wonderful effect on [my daughter]. She now loves to come to the library weekly and we check out new books. This is something that we have tried numerous times over the years but it was always a struggle...Now she is so happy to come weekly and really looks forward to the monthly storytime with her new friends at the library.”

From a South Regional Library, Texas, Sensory Storytime parent, used with permission.

HOW? Autism-Friendly Programming:

First Decide on These:

- Inclusion or not
- Registration or drop in
- Size of the group (small is better)
- Age range of participants (small range)
- Number of adults present
- Special program or version of already offered program

Incorporate These Best Practices:

Preparation:

- Social Story, pictures or tour
- Talk to parents about special interests and triggers
- Let regulars know when things will change
**Visual Supports:**

- Visual schedule
- Behavioral expectations
- Task sequence

**Use:**

- Boardmaker software from Mayer-Johnson $$
- www.dotolearn.com (free)
- stick figures or photographs
- apps for making visuals

**Control The Environment:**

- Set up the same way each time
- Minimize visual and auditory distractions
- Avoid fluorescent lights (or get new bulbs)
- Designate seating/ give lots of personal space

**Provide Sensory Items and Activities:** (Think alerting or calming)

- Mint or cinnamon gum
- A quiet place
- Room to pace
- A weighted blanket or toy
- Sensory breaks
- Squeeze balls or other fidgets

Adapt supplies and snacks to allow for sensitivities or food allergies

**Build in The Three Rs: Routine Repetition and Redundancy**

From Lynn Akin and Donna MacKinney “Autism, Literacy and Libraries” *Children and Libraries*, Summer/Fall 2004

**Manage Transitions:**

- Give warnings before switching activities
- Tell and show what’s next

**Some Types of Programs to Offer:**

**Storytimes:**

*Adapted* (regular storytimes incorporating the best practices) or
Sensory (a storytime model that includes sensory integration activities)

**Book Discussions:**

Use Informational Books. Why?
- Clear organization and sequence
- Often has visual supports
- Little inference required
- Can be related to area of special interest

Fiction, on the other hand…
- Thoughts and feelings drive plots and motivate characters
- Readers need to infer, draw conclusions, predict
- May include language chosen for artistic value, not clarity
- After early readers, there are few visual supports
- May reflect the social rules of the target audience
  (All hard for people with ASD)

**Graphic Novels and Fantasy**
- Graphic novels are highly visual
- Lots of world building in fantasy and sci fi. The social rules are defined
- Formulaic plots increase predictability
- Appeal of superheroes and concrete good vs. evil plot

Provide:
- Written behavioral expectations and guidelines
- A fidget to use as a turn-taking object
- Concrete questions to answer (WH questions). Try flash cards or other tools to make it fun

**Arts/Crafts:**

Deal with fine motor difficulties, problems with delayed gratification, sensory sensitivities and communication issues.

Provide:
- Visual supports
- Adaptive tools
- Personal supplies
- Lots of assistants
- Simple, clear directions

Email for a free copy of this great resource: Room to Grow: A Guide to Arts Programming in Community Spaces for Families Affected by Autism, from the Queens Museum of Art autisminitiatives@queensmuseum.org
Gaming (Video, board games, LEGOs, etc.)

- Provide verbal and written guidelines
- Model expected behaviors
- Have something else to do while waiting for a turn
- Offer sensory Items and opportunities

Social/Life Skills:

Some Ideas:

- Organize your backpack
- Dress for school success
- How to dance at parties
- Social Networking training
- Cooking
- Budgeting and Money Management

(Follow the guidelines for gaming or crafts programs as appropriate. Also, use teen volunteers as peer mentors and trainers)

Adapt Existing Programs:

What programs do you already offer? Can you make them more autism-friendly?

You Try It: Group Exercise:

Participants were given handouts describing programs and a check list. They were asked to decide as a group how they would make those programs more autism-friendly.

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The material in this presentation is just a small part of what is covered in Barbara Klipper’s book, *Programming for Children and Teens With Autism Spectrum Disorder*, published by ALA Editions, 2014. It is available from ALA Editions or Amazon.com