**Youth Yak May 20, 2011**

**Inclusive Library Programming for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD).**

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It is estimated that 1 in every 110 children is diagnosed with ASD. Their presence can be a wonderful reward when the library becomes a special place where they and their parents feel comfortable and included.

This program can help library staff:

* be attuned to others needs and ensure positive experiences for children and adults
* learn some of the characteristics and helpful tips for interacting with people who have ASD
* learn ways to provide inclusive activities

Autism is a biological disorder—the brain is built differently and things are experienced differently.

* Distractions set off behaviors. Sounds, smells, lots of people being around—these things can affect folks with autism disorders and they reach a breaking point. They don’t *misbehave* with intention.
* 3 areas of diagnoses: communication, socialization, and repetitive movements/behaviors.

Some characteristics of folks who have autism disorder often include:

* + Communication:
    - Sentences with many words are often misinterpreted. The person will focus on part of the sentence and get stuck on only part of the meaning.
    - Idioms/silly saying will be taken literally. i.e. *Keep your shirt on,* the person will wonder why that was said because they do have their shirt on with no intention of taking it off.
    - Inflexible to routines
    - Fine motor skills are often difficult, such as writing
  + Socialization:
    - Difficulty with peer-to-peer relationships
    - May be unaware of personal space boundaries
    - Does not pick up social cues and needs to be taught
    - Eye contact not very good, have some difficulty looking at someone and understanding what is being said all at the same time
    - Find it hard to share what they see with someone else, there is a social disconnect
    - Does not connect actions with emotions. i.e. hitting, laughing at inappropriate times. They have to be taught.
  + Repetitive movement/behaviors:
    - Repeats motions such as rocking back and forth, hitting head on surface, shaking hands/fingers, etc.
    - Repeats things over and over. Ie. Talking about the Titanic. Assumes you have equal interest in their interests.
    - Preoccupation with things, i.e. spinning wheels on toy car.

Awareness and suggestions for interacting with those with ASD:

* Let them know how things will proceed. They are often inflexible to routines and not knowing what to expect can be stressful.
* May read very well, yet comprehension may be lacking. It is often difficult to find the words to answer questions.
* May be very good at memorizing facts, yet organizing thoughts is difficult
* Children with ASD are now becoming adults and are better able to communicate what the disorder feels like and can better express what affect it has on them
* some lights, sounds, and smells actually cause physical pain
* are often visual learners, so having a story picture board, props, task strips, or pictures of expected behaviors (someone making a shhh motion with finger to lips) is helpful.[ Boardmaker is a source for task strips; <http://www.boardmakershare.com/Activity/819868/go-fish-sentence-strips> ]
* Use fewer words, concise positive statements. ASD folks need time to process what you said.
  + say *hands down*, instead of *don’t hit.* This helps avoid the chance that the person with ASD will be stuck on the word hit.
  + Use statements of expectation: 1st we will do this, then…, and then….
* Avoid the words *never* and *always*. ASD folks take things very literally.
* Post rules with visuals too. Those with ASD appreciate rules.
* Start and end storytime with a routine, such as a song, feltboard, etc.
* Use a carpet to define the area for storytime
* Reinforce positive behavior, use stickers, punch cards
* Think outside the box
* Be aware that what may work one time may not work another and what is a distraction (lights) one day may not be a problem another day.
* Parents of children with ASD already know the negatives, give them the positives
* Communicate with the parents—they know what works/helps.