autism

Recreation and Leisure Activities

Let’s Have Fun Together!
Types of Autism

Autism is a spectrum. Every person is different.

- **Autism Disorder**
- **Childhood Disinintegrative Disorder**
- **Asperger’s Syndrome**
- **Rett Syndrome**
- **Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (NOS)**
Characteristics of Autism

A person with autism may have challenges in 3 areas:

• difficulty interacting with others
• difficulty communicating
• restricted or repetitive behavior or interests
About the Disorder

• There is no single cause of autism

• Genetics, environmental factors, and their interaction are possible causes being studied. Comprehensive research into the causes, prevention and treatments is ongoing.

• A person cannot “catch” autism by interacting with someone who has the disorder

• Autism is a lifelong disorder

• Effects can be reduced through education and intervention

• Early diagnosis and appropriate intervention are important
• Approximately 1 out of 100 people in the U.S. population is diagnosed with autism

• In New Jersey, the prevalence of autism is 1 in 94 people

• Prevalence is 1 in 64 boys in New Jersey

• Autism occurs within every community, geographic location, race, religion, and social status
Difficulty with Social Interactions

A person with autism may…

- have trouble modifying activities
- prefer to be by self
- not let others join his/her activity
- have difficulty waiting patiently
Difficulty Communicating

A person with autism may…

• have poor eye contact
• have difficulty expressing him or herself or have no language (non-verbal)
• use physical contact to get needs met
• not use gestures such as pointing, nodding yes, shaking head no
• have difficulty following directions
• repeat something that was heard earlier
• be unable to identify common objects
Common Behaviors

A person with autism may…

• not respond when name is called (may seem deaf)
• not share enjoyment
• have repetitive, self-stimulatory or “stimming” behaviors (e.g. hand flapping, spinning, rocking, screaming, humming, etc.)
• have difficulty shifting from one activity to another
• get upset with a change in routine
• over-react to things
• act unexpectedly
Autism and Safety

A person with autism may …

• be unaware or unresponsive to people and warnings
• be unable to express distress or warn of danger
• have a tendency to wander and may not know where they are or that he/she is lost
• not understand the context of the word or hand gesture for safety commands like “STOP!” or “LOOK OUT!”
• be attracted to certain unsafe objects that spin, move quickly, or have repetitive movement
• seem unaware of pain, heat, or cold
• try to hide in places that are insecure or unsafe
• act or behave inappropriately when confused by a situation
Recreation - A Person’s Rights

A person with autism has the right to…

• get an assessment to determine needs and interests
• a plan developed by family and staff to meet those needs
• participate alongside people without disabilities
• participation with supports (e.g. extra staff, rules changes, adaptive equipment, and more)
• participate at the same fee charged people without disabilities

John McGovern, JD  President, Recreation Accessibility Consultants
Adapted from the National Center on Accessibility and National Center on Physical Activity and Disability monograph: Recreation Access Rights Under the ADA (http://www.ncaonline.org/index.php?q=node/742)
Recreation and the Law

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

- Right to the Most Integrated Setting
- Right to Participate
- Right to Reasonable Accommodations
- Right to Adaptive Equipment
- Right to an Assessment or Evaluation
- Disparate Impact (policies cannot have a greater impact on people with disabilities than on people without disabilities.)
- Fees (no higher fee or surcharge for the cost of accommodations or for providing the most integrated setting.)
The ADA and Recreation

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was adopted in 1990.

Over the last decade, we have seen many administrative complaints and many court decisions. The vast majority of these decisions have upheld the right of people with disabilities to enjoy recreation in the most integrated setting.

Some of these decisions speak about the right to an individualized assessment… most integrated setting and one-to-one staff accommodations…behavior management plans and accommodations…changes in rules and policies… and the retention of recreation programs for people with disabilities.

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Only two types of entities are exempt from the ADA provisions…

- **private clubs**
  Where membership requires a nomination and a substantial initial fee, along with substantial annual obligations

- **religious organizations**

However…the ADA does not exist in a vacuum:
State or local laws may apply similar non-discriminatory requirements to religious organizations and private clubs

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Families Talk

“I don't know the last time I've actually seen the end of the movie because of the crowds, sounds, and lights. It just gets too difficult and we have to leave.”

“When we go (out), so many people roll their eyes and start whispering. When we have to stand in a long line, she starts making noises and grabbing stuff. So now I just avoid taking her out in public.”

“Simple situations like community gatherings are not so simple at all.”

“I don’t want sympathy or pity like, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’ What I do need is for people to be patient, kind, and understanding.”

Anonymous Quotes
Expectations

A person with autism and their family should expect…

• a professional, knowledgeable, courteous and welcoming staff
• an invitation to be part of the decision-making process
• the opportunity to participate in every… program, use every facility, register for every child care agency, and use every business in town

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Role in the Community

Recreation providers have a role to help people with and without disabilities …

- become valued and active through community-based leisure activities
- develop meaningful and supportive relationships
- surpass physical and attitudinal barriers that deter or prevent participation
- make personal choices
Understanding and Accepting

By understanding that many behaviors and habits are not by choice, people are more likely to be accepting.

With increased knowledge, interactions may be more positive and friendships may develop.
Friendships are important to quality of life.

Participation in leisure, recreation and social events helps develop friendships.

Recreation providers need to actively promote positive interactions and acceptance between people with and without disabilities.
Accessibility vs. Inclusion

Accessibility: Physical Access
Refers to removing environmental barriers so that a person with a disability can participate and have choices. Physical access is only the beginning.

Inclusion: Understanding and Acceptance
Every person should have welcoming, meaningful and purposeful opportunities to participate in all facets of the community.
“We need to know there’s a place for us, not just a space for us.”

Source: HM Government Valuing People Now
A Person with Autism

When talking to or writing about someone with autism, use person-first language

- a person on the spectrum
- people with autism
- a boy with Asperger’s Syndrome
- an individual with special needs
- a family member with Rett Syndrome
Approaching a Person with Autism

• Approach the person in a calm and friendly manner.

• Start a simple social conversation using questions or comments such as:
  
  “I like your cool shoes.”
  “What’s your name?”
  “What town do you live in?”
  “What’s your favorite food?”

• Serve as a positive model. Others will notice your friendly attitude and interact in the same way.

• If the person seems to be agitated, redirect the activity or ask a simple question to help calm.
Let’s Talk!

- Talk directly to the person, not a family member or caretaker
- Listen carefully
- Don’t speak too forcefully or loudly
- Don’t use slang, sarcasm, or complex language
- Try to keep the conversation on topic
- Pause between statements to allow for processing. Allow sufficient time for person to respond
- Using pictures may help comprehension
Alternative Communication

Some people with autism use alternate forms of communication

Such as:
• gestures
• sign language
• sounds
• objects
• photographs / pictures / symbols
• voice output devices
• computerized and technological devices
• writing
• physical contact
Approachability

Recreation providers become stronger and more vital when they welcome and include all members of the community

A Welcome Statement makes an important first and lasting impression to customers

- Have a written policy statement welcoming patrons with disabilities

- Prominently display your welcome statement and include it on business, marketing materials, and forms

- Provide information on ways of adapting services, programs, and venues
Welcoming Participants

Sample Recreation Welcome Statement

__________ is committed to inclusion and accessibility for individuals with disabilities and strives to provide equal, integrated participation in all programs, activities and services. __________’s policy is to reasonably accommodate all program applications in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). We welcome persons with special needs in our programs. __________ is committed to providing quality recreation and leisure opportunities for everyone. We encourage those with special needs to participate in our programs and to make us aware of what we can do to make your experience with us the best it can be.
Autism affects families, relationships with extended families, friends, and social interactions within the community.

Don't

- assume or presume
- pass judgment
- ask a family to participate separately from other families

Autism affects the entire family. Provide ways for siblings and other family members to be included.
Inclusive Programming

“With appropriate resources, sensitivity, and support, community organizations can include individuals with disabilities as regular and active participants without the need to create separate and specialized programs.”

Coalition for Inclusive Communities
Strategic options for recreation providers

A. Include people with disabilities in existing recreation programs. Work with Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS) or other professionals to help balance program requirements and individual needs.

B. Modify your specialized programs so that they attract and include people without disabilities.

C. Work with professionals to develop universal programs that integrate people of all abilities as part of overall program development.
Registration

• Program descriptions should explain activities, prerequisites, and risks

• Registration processes should be designed to gather significant information and prompt if further assessments are needed

• Include questions about basic interests, strengths and needs which can signal need for appropriate accommodations and supports
Some Important Things to Know

- What interests or passions does the person have? How could they be of value to the community?

- Are there existing programs or activities that would enable the person to pursue those interests? If not, can opportunities be created?

- How can these activities support particular learning goals?

- What supports are available to enable the person to participate? How can they be obtained? Are there opportunities to share/pool resources with other agencies?

- How will other participants be integrated?

- What strategies and resources are available to maintain these programs going forward?
• An assessment is a systematic process used to identify a person’s abilities and limitations.

• Provide staff with participant's goals, strengths, challenges, and needs. To uphold privacy, provide medical and other details only as needed and only with the caregiver’s permission.

• An assessment is not a one-time effort. As people age and develop, their strengths and needs may change. Conduct regular evaluations of objectives, modifications, and supports.
Accommodations and Adaptations

- Providing special accommodations does not mean increased costs
- Often requires only basic adaptations and accommodations
  - respecting skill and tolerance levels
  - adjustment of rules, schedules, and time limits
  - modified environment (markings, lighting, visuals, sounds, etc.)
  - simplified, direct instruction, activities, handouts
  - use of photographs, schedules and other visual aids
  - flexibility (e.g. providing another opportunity to complete an unfinished project)
  - pre-teaching skills
  - breaking down activities into smaller parts
  - availability of modified equipment
• Use visual schedules so a person knows what to expect. Allow sufficient time for person to transition between activities. Try to communicate any changes ahead of time.

• Communication is important for everyone. If a person has a personal augmentative communication system, use it consistently. The system should always be accessible and be understood by staff.

• Orally and visually communicate rules, limits, and boundaries in simple, specific language. Post and review prior to each session. Demonstrations may help with understanding.

• Think of adaptations as temporary and transitional. Work to reduce the need for special accommodations over time.

• Use hand over hand assistance when necessary. Fade assistance to lead to independence.
Designing Accommodations

• Assess preferences of materials
  Does the person prefer crayons or colored pencils? Will the colors be in paint, pencil or chalk? What type of paper does the person prefer?

• Determine how instructions will be given
  Are verbal instructions enough or does the person need visual cues through writing, pictures, or models? Is physical assistance needed to begin?

• What level of participation should a person expect
  Will the person participate in the full 30 minutes of the swimming lesson or only be required to be there for 10? Can they be on the basketball court with their team and run up and down the court without handling the ball? Are they allowed to simply sit with the group for activities that are more challenging for them?

• How much support is needed
  Does the person need to have an aide present to encourage involvement? Can peers offer more natural support throughout the day? If peers offer support, they may need support, as well.

Adapted from Making Camps Accessible for All, Kim Davis
Special Accommodations

- People with autism may need private, personal assistance of a parent or caretaker during their outing

- Support accommodations for family restrooms, fitting rooms and locker rooms at your facility

- Post signs that clearly indicate who to contact for these types of accommodations
Staff Awareness and Training

- Supportive training and consultation is readily available
  - Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS)
  - Regional Park and Recreation Association – Therapeutic Recreation Branch
  - Adaptive Physical Education Instructors
  - Behavior Analysts
  - Special Education Teachers

- Provide staff with a general overview of Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Emphasize focus on a participant’s abilities and interests, not the disability

- Encourage creative ways to adapt or modify activities
Encourage Participation

- Value the dignity of each individual
  Maintain the respect of all participants

- Break tasks into small parts. Avoid multi-step directions. Be patient and allow person time to complete each task.

- Develop a signal when a break or help is needed

- Clearly define boundaries (circles of intimacy)

- Use respectful and age-appropriate ways to modify activities
Encourage Participation continued

- When offering help, first ask what help is needed. Promote independence by fading your assistance.

- Environments that are over-stimulating present additional challenges.

- Encourage activities for family interaction that relieve dependence on the other members. This helps create a positive experience for all.

- Learn a person’s interests and provide opportunities for involvement and sharing.
Helpful Materials

Written material may help people with autism prepare for an outing or activity. Information may include:

- available equipment and/or services
- background information about the event or activity
- disability accommodations
- “escape routes”
- expected participation and simplified rules
- general timeframes
- order/schedule of activities
- overall facility layout (bathrooms, exits, customer service, etc.)
- sensory input (intensity of volume, lights, movement, etc.)
Limiting Distractions

Limit environmental distractions

- loud, unexpected, unnecessary sounds/noises
- visual challenges (bright lighting, complex layouts, numerous colors, excessive wording, etc.)
- sudden transitions
- unnecessary interactions, movements, changes in a physical arrangement or a schedule
Transitioning Between Activities

• Transitions between activities can often be difficult for a person with autism

• Prevent negative reactions by preparing the person ahead of time and by using environmental cues before and transitions
Working through Transitions

• Verbally and/or visually remind when a transition will occur
  “In fifteen minutes, this will happen”… “In ten minutes this will happen.”…
  “In five minutes this will happen”…. “Now we will do this.”

• Use an illustrated schedule to show a sequence of events
  (Activity Schedule)
  Provides a visual description of what has happened, the current focus, and
  what to anticipate.

• Use picture stories with familiar photographs and simple text
  (Social Stories)
  Helps with familiarity and predictability.

• Use music or sound cues to lead into new activities
• Associate an object or visual symbol for each transition

• Provide help with unexpected changes
  Engage in an activity to divert attention (e.g. word or guessing games, simple discussions)

• Prevent anxiety if activities are not completed
  Provide periodic reminders, break activities into smaller steps, reassure that completion is not required, give respectful assistance
Concerns with Disruption

A recreation provider should intervene when behaviors are…

- embarrassing for the individual or family
- stigmatizing to the person
- disrupting core business operations
- tantrumming is injurious to self or others
- destructing property
- offensive interactions with participants and/or employees
- inappropriately sexual in nature
If a person with autism shows signs of aggression, most often it is a result of frustration or a need for attention. The person may not have the skills to express him/herself appropriately.
Managing Difficulties

• Approach the participant who is having difficulties
  Observe the situation and ask simple questions to identify any environmental causes for the upset.

• Engage in calm, undemanding social conversation
  Predictable conversations can help to focus and reduce anxiety (e.g. “I like your cool shoes.” “What’s your name?” “Where do you live?” “What is your favorite food?”)

• If a situation or task seems to be causing the behavior, calmly and slowly redirect attention to another place or activity

• Attend to other participants who appear anxious
  Discreetly offer to relocate them without passing judgment or making personal comments.
Harmful Behaviors

- Ask the caretaker to help

- If a person is injuring him/herself, another person, or damaging physical property, call security or dial 911

- Protect those who are in harm as you await help

- Provide adequate space Avoid standing too close
Offer Comprehensive Programs

Recreation programs are important for all members of the community. Consider inclusive strategies for all activities that support a full range of functional and adaptive levels, including:

- bowling
- swimming
- gardening
- horseback riding
- gymnastics
- art and music
- yoga
- field trips and expeditions
- cultural appreciation
- dance
- shopping
- karate
- team sports
Autism and Physical Fitness

“There is a small, highly overlooked demographic commonly labeled "special needs" children, with autism being a prevalent diagnosis among this group. You do not see too many young individuals with autism in fitness facilities or working with fitness professionals, but they, as much as any other group in the nation, require the attention and expertise of the fitness community.”

Eric Chessen
Physical Fitness Programs

- Break down the steps for each exercise taught so that each component is learned and mastered.

- New activities and movements may not be initially enjoyable or reinforcing for an individual with autism. Pair the exercise or movement with a reinforcing activity (such as music, playing with a favorite toy, or the opportunity for a break).

Adapted from Movement Matters - Bringing Fitness into the Lives of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (By Eric Chessen)
Common Sports-related Issues

People with autism may have some of these common challenges related to participation in sporting activities:

- coordination
- reaction times
- mental processing
- attention span
- visual tracking
- fine motor skills
- understanding rules
- following directions
- game strategies
“Buddy” Programs

People with autism can interact with and learn from typically developing peers and mentors.

Many community activities and sports can be structured as a “buddy system.” A person with autism is partnered with another person to learn the basic skills of the activity or game.

This team-approach encourages understanding, inclusion, and relationship building.
At Play

Physical, social and sensory demands of playgrounds can be overwhelming and frustrating for people with autism.

Inclusive play is important because children of all abilities come together to interact and support each other.

Encourage and support acceptance and positive interaction during play.
Creative Play

- Helps in development of the imagination and education.

- Abstract concepts are often difficult for people with autism to understand. Creative play can still be introduced in different ways.

Adapted from Introducing Creative Play to Kids with Autism, Eisla Sebastian
Some Creative Play Options

Art Projects
- Various mediums including painting, drawing, sculpture
- Projects may need to be adapted around sensory issues

Music
- Music stimulates creativity in the brain and is logical in its organization
- Introduce music through listening activities, musical instruments or singing

Movie Making
- Good for those with a knack for electronics
- Help to film sequences of enjoyable things, then use software to edit together sequences, add sound effects, and music
- Develops creativity, problem solving skills, developing a vocation

Creative/Imaginative Play
- Don't give up on typical creative play activities
- Introduce role playing or creating stories with dolls or puppets

Adapted from Introducing Creative Play to Kids with Autism, Eïsla Sebastian
Informal Leisure Activities

- Provide opportunities to make and sustain positive peer and family relationships
- Encourage inclusive home-based group activities to encourage socialization and relationship building
- Arrange situations that develop talents and interests (e.g. informal reading groups, craft time, movie night, jewelry making, etc.)
Entertainment Venues, Theaters, Amusement Parks, and Sports Arenas

• Guest services staff should be knowledgeable and sensitive to people with autism and their families.

• A person with autism, caretaker or family member may need to make specific requests based on needs. Be careful not to challenge or criticize the request.

• Some individuals choose to disclose the diagnosis, others do not. This is a personal choice.

• Be flexible (e.g. waiting on long lines, entry with food, special seating, etc.)
Libraries

A library offer programs for all people – with and without disabilities

www.thejointlibrary.org/autism
Camps – Some Options

- **Inclusive**
  Combines people with and without autism in the camp experience

- **Specialty/Therapeutic**
  Provides accommodations, therapies and/or programs specific to autism

- **Sport**
  Offers fitness programs, team sports, and/or other physical activities

- **Creative**
  Provides opportunities to experience performing arts, visual arts, music, etc.

- **Day Camp**
  Drop-off and pick-up each day

- **Residential**
  Sleep-over camp for a specified period of time
Museums

Administrators can create supports and visual aids to shape and enhance positive cultural experiences.

“I went to the museum, along with a typical child… and took pictures of the child going through the exhibits. Then we sat down with the museum staff and broke down the tasks.”

Wendy Partridge, The Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project
Art and Music Appreciation

- Provides a non-verbal form of communication (speech isn't needed to paint, play music or dance)
- Tool that expresses creativity and inner feelings
- Helps develop self confidence and awareness
- Provides a non-competitive environment
- Incorporates many senses
Nature Activities

- Provides interactive learning experiences related to nature
- Encourages understanding, respect and responsibility for the environment
- Should be part of inclusive and specialized programs
People on the spectrum have different interests and hobbies

Many of these interests have related organizations that meet socially (e.g. art, chess, book, movie clubs, etc.)

Participation should be encouraged for all people – with and without disabilities
Community Organizations

Clubs, associations, and organizations should support accessibility, inclusion, and the personal interests of people with developmental disabilities. This includes opportunities for participation, social interaction, service, and leadership roles.
Autism Resources

- Autism Speaks
- Children's Specialized Hospital
- Autism New Jersey
- Recreation Accessibility Consultants
Make Friends with Autism

For more information about this initiative, call 1-888-CHILDREN   Extension 5343
www.makefriendswithautism.org

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