

AUTISM

INCLUSIVENESS

“ Think of it: a disability is usually defined in terms of what is missing ... but autism ... is as much about what is abundant as what is missing, an over-expression of the very traits that make our species unique.”

(Paul Collins, *Not Even Wrong: Adventures in Autism*)

The Aim of Scouting is to promote the development of individuals, enabling them to grow and take their place in society as active citizens. As we move forward with the Canadian Path we are much more aware of each individual's personal progression, inclusive of their varying abilities. This inclusiveness within Scouting uniquely positions us to play an important role in modifying community attitudes and behaviour towards individuals with identified needs; it starts with Scouts.

Please use this guide for a better understanding of youth with Autism; how as Scouters, we can make a difference through simple interventions, program modifications and knowing where to get help when needed.

DESCRIPTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurobiological disorder that impacts normal brain development. It leaves many individuals with communication challenges, difficulty with typical social interactions and in some cases a tendency to repeat specific patterns of behaviour. There is also a markedly restricted repertoire of activity and interests. Individuals on the autism spectrum tend to have varying degrees and combinations of indicators.

CHARACTERISTICS/BEHAVIOURS

Communication/Language

- Varies from non-verbal to fluent language, but can be delayed
- Speech may be pedantic with peculiar characteristics such as a monotonous or high pitched tone, or soft or loud volume
- Non-verbal communication, both expressive and receptive may be impaired, including use of gestures, facial expression or poor eye contact
- May take what you say literally
- May have difficulty using language to express needs
- May have difficulty reading, writing and understanding spoken and written language
- May repeat everything “parrot fashion” or use repetitive phrases, often used as a tool to process what is being said to them
- May have trouble understanding instructions or following conversations
- May have poor conversation skills

Behavioural

- May have difficulty transitioning into a new activity, often preferring well established routines
- May prefer to do things in the same order or way
- Repetitive patterns of behaviour (e.g., line up toys or objects)
- Preoccupation or fixation with certain objects or narrow field of interest
- Can be very gifted in a specific area (i.e., music, art, great memory etc.)
- May exhibit repeated body movements (i.e., hand flapping, finger twitching or rocking), which may serve to lessen anxiety in stressful situations or an indicator of excitement for a particular activity
- There is often anxiety, especially in unpredictable situations or when dealing with criticism or imperfection
- May display disruptive or obstinate behaviours
- May kick and pinch others out of frustration for no apparent reason
- May like to run a way
- May display odd, eccentric, inappropriate behaviours and responses (e.g., giggling or laughing, wanting to touch people)
- May have a very different sleep pattern



Social

- Possible lack of reciprocal play or interaction
- May find it difficult to form or hold social relationships
- May be clumsy or have poor coordination
- Hyper/hypo sensitivity to sensory stimulation, which often comes at a time of heightened anxiety or a feeling of being overwhelmed (e.g., sound, touch, taste, smell)
- Often poor organizational and planning skills
- May give little or no eye contact, often when not feeling confident or secure
- May have a tendency toward interacting with adults rather than their peers

IN A SCOUTING SITUATION

- Establish a relationship with the parents to understand triggers for the youth with autism and how to best handle any challenging situations should they arise.
- Strive to have youth see you interacting positively with their parent(s)
- Scouters need to be thoroughly acquainted with the individual
- Ensure all Scouters have a consistent team approach so that everyone interacts the same way with the youth member
- Don't be concerned about 'odd' behaviours unless they are socially inappropriate or dangerous
- Explain any changes to routine or program before it takes place
- Support verbal communication with gesture or signs if necessary
- Recognise strengths and build on these to increase confidence
- Procure a support youth advocate for mentoring at meetings and outings/camp
- Have basic reading material of interest to youth available and on hand
- Obtain simple toys, fidget gadgets, and activities that keeps youth positively and developmentally occupied
- Understand that youth may focus on multiple tasks at once to keep their brain active, especially while listening
- Proceed slowly with youth contact, connecting at their level of interest without touch and without very close proximity (e.g., would they read a story to you from their book)
- Accept youth into group games at their level of capability without forcing youth to participate
- At camp you may wish to explain to anyone camping nearby that if they see the individual wandering around — would they bring him/her back to you
- Some individuals with Autism may carry some identification explaining their condition when they are out so that if they get lost anyone finding them would know where or who to contact

PROGRAM MODIFICATION SUGGESTIONS

- Be aware of the youth member's response to sounds, smells, touching, tastes, lights
- Keep instructions simple and do not assume they have been understood
- Help in a game until the individual starts to understand what is going on
- Make eye contact when addressing the youth
- Wait for and expect a response to verbal greeting or question
- Accompany instructions with visual demonstrations
- Keep instructions brief and clear
- Break down the activity/instructions into small steps
- Small groups work better than the larger group
- Provide opportunities for the youth member to interact with other youth
- Use positive reinforcement
- Accommodations for a Personal Support Worker (PSW) may be necessary for youth who are low functioning, with identified needs

FURTHER ASSISTANCE

This Info Sheet is a resource guide only and is not intended to be therapeutic, diagnostic, medical, or legal advice. Our best source of assistance for youth with identified needs is the youth's parents or caregivers; the information provided is designed to support the relationship that exists between a youth and his/her parents or healthcare providers and the Scouters involved with the youth.

SOURCES

Autism Canada Foundation, ANCA Naturally Autistic and material adapted and used by permission of The Scout Association (UK), Scouts Australia and Scouting Ireland.

