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Reflections on “The World of Autism” in the World of Libraries

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On Thursday morning of the 2009 OLA Annual Conference, attendees at “The World of Autism” session received a crash course in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its implications for the library. As an observer at the session, I gained an understanding of how ASD affects individuals and what this might look like in the library. I walked away with notes full of ideas for how to make the library a more comfortable place for ASD patrons. The presentations also stirred a research curiosity in me; I wanted to know more about library services geared towards autistic patrons. This article shares the presentations from the conference session along with some outside resources and articles. I hope they are as informative and inspiring to you as they were to me.

“The World of Autism” session featured presentations by Judith Belk Ph.D., Speech-Language Pathologist with the Center for Communication and Learning Skills who presented “What Librarians Need to Know About Interacting with Persons Who Have Autism;” Sharron Donnelly, Occupational Therapist with Advanced Pediatric Therapies who discussed “The Misunderstood Child: Understanding and Treating the Child with Sensory Processing Dysfunction in the Library Setting;” and Stacy Cayce, Chapter Representative and Board Member for the Autism Society of Oregon and parent to a six year old with ASD who gave an “Overview on Autism.” The presentations focused on children with ASD, although adults with ASD often have similar library issues. PowerPoint slides of the presentations can be found at <http://www.nwcentral.org>.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism is a spectrum disorder. It affects individuals differently and to varying degrees. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a term encompassing classic Autism, Asperger’s

Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder:

- Insistence on sameness; resistance to change
- Difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures or pointing instead of words
- Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language
- Laughing (and/or crying) for no apparent reason showing distress for reasons not apparent to others
- Preference to being alone; aloof manner
- Tantrums
- Difficulty in mixing with others
- Not wanting to cuddle or be cuddled
- Little or no eye contact
- Unresponsive to normal teaching methods
- Sustained odd play
- Spinning objects
- Obsessive attachment to objects
- Apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain
- No real fears of danger
- Noticeable physical over-activity or extreme under-activity
- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Non responsive to verbal cues; acts as if deaf, although hearing tests in normal range.

provided by Stacy Cayce

Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Rett Syndrome, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. Symptoms range from mild to severe within each of these five subcategories.

Autistic patrons in the library may be more common than previously thought.



According to a 2007 Centers for Disease Control report, the autism incidence rate is currently one in 150. It is believed to have both genetic and environmental causal factors. Symptoms emerge somewhere between birth and age two and a half, and ASD in boys is more prevalent than in girls by a ratio of four to one.

Language, Social Skills, and Sensory Processing

ASD generally impacts individuals in three areas: language, social skills, and sensory processing. According to Belk, ASD may cause difficulties with communication and speech. Autistic patrons may be non-verbal, may be unable to express their needs, or may exchange gestures for oral communication. Conversely, some individuals with ASD talk at length, use extensive vocabulary, and have difficulty with social cues signaling the end of conversations. ASD individuals think literally, so idiomatic expressions such as “Knock it off” and metaphors can be problematic. Some exhibit echolalia, repeating certain words or phrases they have heard previously. Making eye contact can also be challenging.

Individuals with ASD exhibit a range of social behaviors as well. They may find it difficult to interact with others and may avoid contact with librarians and other patrons. Children with ASD may prefer to play side-by-side instead of with other children (Farmer and Sykes 2008, 25). Those autistic patrons who do seek interaction may find it difficult to consider the perspective of others, take feedback or suggestions, infer how others feel, identify conflict, or understand when a conflict has been resolved.

Donnelly explained that other behavioral challenges that accompany ASD are due to sensory processing issues. The central nervous system in most individu-

als is able to take in sensory information and produce an adaptive response, an ability called sensory integration. A common problem for ASD kids is sensory defensiveness, which causes sensitivities to sounds, sights, movements, or smells. With sensory processing dysfunction, an overload of sensations can produce what Donnelly referred to as “a traffic jam in the brain.” Instead of an adaptive response, a person with autism may display emotional outbursts, distractibility, or other responses listed.

Clinical Implications of Sensory Processing Dysfunction:

- Can't sit still
- Fidgety
- Stands or moves often
- Seeks movement
- Refuses movement
- Difficulty sitting squarely in chair: slips out, wraps feet
- Hold pencil too lightly/tightly
- Crash into objects/people in the environment
- Not able to do things without looking
- Stands up to work/learn
- Lays on floor or table
- Generally inactive
- Frequent hitting, hugging, pushing, squeezing, pinching
- Poor tactile discrimination
- Tactile defensiveness
- Hyperactivity
- Oral defensiveness
- Attention deficits
- Articulation difficulties
- Decreased visual perception

provided by Sharron Donnelly



In her presentation, Donnelly stated, “All behavior has meaning,” which is a compelling way to stress that behavior that may seem out of place is often a way for an ASD individual to meet his or her sensory needs.

Practical Suggestions: Library Environment

Just the idea of going to the library can cause anxiety for individuals with ASD. To remedy this, two libraries in New Jersey created a customizable book template that uses a picture book format to introduce ASD individuals to their local library (see resources section below). Belk also mentioned the idea of a booklet of pictures or a chart of sequential library procedures that a patron could carry with them in the library.

Libraries can also focus on making the library a more welcoming place for ASD patrons once they are there. Large rooms can be distracting and overwhelming. Distractions include noise, fragrances, and unexpected interruptions. Libraries can consider creating small cozy spaces, removed from noisy areas. Small quiet spaces that can be reserved for a set amount of time are even better. Natural lighting is preferred over fluorescent lighting, which some autistic individuals are sensitive to (Farmer and Sykes 2008, 26).

According to Donnelly, certain objects in the library can help autistic children navigate their sensory needs. Beanbag chairs and rocking chairs help produce slow, rhythmical movement, which is calming. Having something in the hands or in the mouth can calm and focus a child. “Brain toys” such as koosh balls, pipe cleaners, and hair elastics can create acceptable ways to fidget. Oral aides include water bottles, drinking through a straw, gum, and chewy necklaces.

Practical Suggestions: Programming

Library programs geared specifically for autistic children have the potential to improve communication, social, and cognitive skills. Research shows that children with ASD “benefit from oral reading, storytimes, multimedia, song, and literacy efforts” (Akin and MacKinney 2004, 35). Routine and predictability are the keys to a successful storytime or other library programs for ASD children.

Stacy Cayce offered suggestions for storytimes geared towards autistic children: storytimes held during less busy library times, shorter storytimes than normal, clearly defined activities, commitment to a defined schedule, and the use of fidget toys and visual cues. Visual cues for storytime would display what and when activities would take place. Being accepting of children who cannot make eye contact and being flexible with personal space issues were other qualities that would be ideal in library staff when presenting to ASD children. Another idea for library programs is to utilize music with a regular rhythm and beat to facilitate movement and help with transitions, an idea presented by Donnelly.

Donnelly also recommended the use of social stories. Social stories are those that teach a social or behavioral skill with visuals. Belk suggested the use of social stories regarding library behavior and policies. In general, pictures and visuals are recommended over wordiness.

In the article “Autism, Literacy, and Libraries,” authors Lynn Akin and Donna MacKinney provide additional ideas for library programs for ASD children. Books with repetitive language, picture dictionaries, and word books are recommended, as well as songs, circle time, drawing, and singing. Again, repetition and routine are key.



Practical Suggestions: Computers

The use of multimedia is another recommendation for libraries wanting to reach out to ASD children. Computers in particular are enjoyed by many autistic patrons. Using a computer is a non-social, repetitive, predictable, and kinesthetic experience. It does not require social interaction or verbal communication, and can improve both attention span and creative expression (Farmer and Sykes 2008, 26). Computers may even relax and comfort ASD children, as research shows that ASD children use less self-stimulating behaviors when at the computer (Akin and Mackinney 2004, 37).

Knowing what to expect in the library makes ASD patrons more comfortable and knowledge of ASD makes library staff more comfortable. The first step toward opening the library world to the autistic patron is educating library staff to recognize, understand, and accommodate the challenges of ASD. When noticing an ASD patron who is facing sensory overload, for example, Cayce recommends simply noting the behavior to the individual or parent, and asking if there is anything you can do to help. This in itself shows a commitment to accepting ASD patrons in the library, and being open to helping make their experience a positive one. 🌿

References

Akin, Lynn and Donna MacKinney. 2004. Autism, Literacy, and Libraries: The 3 Rs = Routine, Repetition, and Redundancy. *Children and Libraries* 2(2): 35–43.

Farmer, Lesley S.J. and Maureen Sykes. 2008. Library Services for Students with Autism. *California School Library Association Journal* 31(2): 25–27.

Recommended Resources

Playing, Laughing, and Learning with Children on the Autism Spectrum: A Practical Resource of Play Ideas for Parents and Carers by Julia Moor, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2002

The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder, Revised Edition, by Carol Stock Kranowitz and Lucy Jane Miller, Perigee Trade Books, 2006

<http://www.nwcentral.org> (PowerPoint slides from “The World of Autism”)

<http://www.autismspeaks.org>

<http://www.autism-society.org>

<http://www.oregonautism.com>

<http://www.pdppro.com>
(brain toys and fidgets)

<http://www.thejointlibrary.org/autism/resources.htm> (customizable library introduction book, downloadable training video, and downloadable visual cues)

<http://www.cookieimag.com/homefront/tips/2009/03/autistic-partygoer> (written by a father of an autistic boy as a guide to understanding his son’s behavior at a birthday party)

