Autism and Scouting

A practical guide to helping leaders understand and support individuals with autism

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Autism

• Centers for Disease Control says the prevalence is 1 in 68 children (1 in 42 boys)
• Autism is defined as a Neurological disorder and a complex developmental disability that affects each person differently and to varying degrees of severity. It is a spectrum disorder.
• Although there are many on the autism spectrum who show similar characteristics, no two people with autism are the same.
Characteristics of Autism

• A child could be verbal or non verbal
• Difficulty navigating social interactions, reading social cues and communicating wants, needs and emotions effectively
• Impaired sensory function (over sensitivity or under sensitivity)
• Difficulty with short term memory
• A child can hyper focus or perseverate on a selective interest.
Characteristics of Autism Continued

• Difficulty with gross motor or fine motor skills
• Individuals with autism need extra understanding and their families need extra support.
• Many co-conditions: ADD/ADHD, anxiety, learning differences, seizures, OCD, SPD, Tourette Syndrome, mental health challenges
Person First Terminology

• People with autism are people first. Do not define a person by their diagnostic label.
• Person first terminology is about respect, acceptance and setting a positive tone.
• Using person first terminology allows us to see each person as an individual.
Get to Know the Scout and the Scout’s Family First

• It will be important to be prepared to have a child with autism in your scouting group.

• The family can provide you with a lot of information on how to have success with their child.

• Take time to speak with the family and learn ways to support their child before the scout begins with the group.

• Ask the family what is their primary goal for their child: make friends, camping, hiking, etc.
Accommodations

• Accommodations for your scout can include:
  • - sensory related accommodations
  • - physical accommodations
  • - dietary restrictions
  • - learning support
Family Involvement

• Before the scout starts find out how the family will be involved.
• Will someone be participating with the child?
• Will a family member volunteer for the overnights?
• Will the family use this time to get a break and therefore will not be available to you during meeting times?
Get to Know Your Scout

• What are your scout’s strengths?
• What are your scout’s interests?
• These can be great conversation starters...
• You can use the child’s special interest to get conversations started and even as an incentive or reward
• Be mindful of the privacy of the scout and his family (re: diagnosis)
Areas to Provide Support in Scouting

• **Sensory Processing** - the taking in and processing of sensory information about the environment and from within their own body

• Taste, touch, vision, hearing, smell, vestibular differences & proprioception

• These differences can greatly affect the experiences and interactions of the child

• Be sensitive to this by making accommodations accordingly.
Sensory Continued- Food

• Sensory differences can affect a child’s taste and food preferences.

• Many children with autism also have gastrointestinal issues. Some children may be on gluten free and casein free diets, sometimes even dye free.

• Always have a safe alternative when serving food
Sensory- Touch

- Children with autism can be sensitive to touch
- Clothing, fabric and various materials can feel painful, itchy or uncomfortable to that child
- Sometimes what looks like a behavioral challenge really is a sensory challenge
Sensory Challenges -Continued

• Some children are bothered by loud or sudden sounds.
• Try to give warnings when loud sounds will occur
• Give the child a break from the sound when needed

• Some children are bothered by a variety of smells.
• Smells can cause a child to become dis-regulated or dis-engage from their peers.
• Be sensitive to these concerns and provide accommodations when needed.
Sensory Challenges Continued

- **Lights** can bother a child with autism.
- Lights can actually give off a humming noise that irritates the child.
- Some lights such as strobe lighting can cause seizures.
- Vestibular challenges can affect a child by making the child more sensitive to motion.
- At times a child can be more of a risk taker or other times, a child may be more clumsy or uncoordinated.
Communication Differences

• Children with autism can interact with their world differently in the area of communication and social interaction.
• The child might dis-engage
• The child may have a hard time staying focused and therefore miss important opportunities.
• The child may have a harder time relating to peers.
• If the child is non verbal he may use a communication device
Assistance with Self Regulation

• This is the person’s ability to control his/her behavior and emotions.
• This develops over time and it can involve many aspects of social, emotional and cognitive functioning.
• Some examples of dis-regulation can include: hand flapping, crashing, humming, swaying, etc.
• Children with autism will try various ways to self regulate and make sense of their environment.
How to Engage the Child

• Get to know the child and his/her interests.
• (Just give him the whale story)
• Create a positive reward system for participating
• Give lots of encouragement
• Let the child watch the activity first
• Use a schedule so the child knows what to expect
How You Can Help

• Stay organized, on task and on routine
• Use visuals to support learning and engagement
• Use timers or clocks to help
• Use checklists or picture schedules
• Give extra time for the scout to understand when there is a change and how he/she can adjust
Be Sensitive to Bullying or Harassment

• Children with autism often miss social clues so they can become the victim of bullying quite easily.
• Children may misunderstand relationships and the social dynamic of the group
• It would be helpful to have a buddy system for the child with the disability.
Safety Issue- Wandering

• 92% of children with autism are reported to have had issues with wandering at some point
• Be extra vigilant
• Know your exits and wear a watch
• Always have a buddy and when you are away on a campout or hike, count heads and check in more often
• Ex: mark the backpack, or wear a cap, etc.
Other Possible Health and Safety Concerns

• Up to 40% of children with autism are reported to have seizures at some point in their lives.

• Children with autism have more depression and anxiety than other children

• Children with autism tend to have more allergies than other children
Take Home Points

• Accept scouts for who they are and where they are
• Enrich their lives by teaching them lifelong skills
• Inspire them to be exceptional
• Empower them by giving the tools to be self sufficient and successful
Thank you!

• Always keep the lines of communication open with the family.
• Stop and celebrate what is working along the way.
• Stop and reflect on what you can make better.
• Ask for help when you need it!