



Help develop well-rounded youth, better prepared for success in the world.

Tips For Working with Youth on the Autism Spectrum

Autism is a spectrum.

**"If you've met one autistic person,
You've met one autistic person."**

- There is a huge range in language, skills, attention span, interests, and sensory sensitivities.
- Supports will vary from one individual to another.
- It is called the Autism Spectrum as everyone with Autism varies on their abilities or challenges.

Neurodiversity

There is value in different ways of thinking!

Individuals on the spectrum are different but not less!

Some individuals consider autism an important part of their identity and can give new insights and perspectives. As hyper focus is a great strength, individuals on the Autism spectrum can give specialized knowledge on specific topics! Be curious about their interests, and you might learn something amazing!

Preferred Language

Use the language that the person prefers.

"They are autistic"; "They are on the autism spectrum"; "They are a person with autism"

Support Labels vs Functioning Labels

- ☒ "She needs a lot of support"
- ☒ "They do not need support putting on their jacket, but will need support with cutting and painting"
- ☐ "He is high functioning"
- ☐ "She is low functioning"

Social-Emotional Reciprocity

- May have differences in back-and-forth interactions such as conversations or taking turns.
- May still be learning a variety of social skills.
- May find it challenging understanding others' perspectives.
- May need to be explicably taught unspoken social rules- e.g. keeping distant from each other, hands to self, no yelling.



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Language Skills

Understand that there is a *range of communication methods* for individuals on the spectrum.



May or may not use verbal speech to communicate:

- Full sentences
- Short phrases
- Sign Language
- Picture Communication Systems
- Assistive Devices such as an IPAD

Remember, just because someone does not talk, it does not mean that they do not understand, and it does not mean that they can not communicate.

- Find out how they prefer to communicate and match it!
- Presume competence, not incompetence!

Non-Verbal Communication

- May have difficulties reading facial expressions, tone and gestures, and may not be socially aware how to read these and may need to be taught.
- May need to be explicitly taught idioms, sarcasm and jokes. (Ex. “beating around the bush” or “that’s the way the ball bounces” which they may not understand the hidden meanings of and may take as literal statements.)
- May prefer to not make eye contact, and this preference should not be taken as disrespect.

Repetitive Behaviour

Repetitive Speech

- Topics of interest, repeating lines from TV, movies

Repetitive Play

- Lining up pylons, stacking pucks, pacing in patterns

Repetitive Motor Movements:

- Pacing, spinning, flapping hands, rocking



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Understand that repetitive motor movements can be a self-soothing technique called “stimming” for those on the Autism spectrum. If the individual is not self-harming or harming others, do not stop them from this behaviour as this can escalate their behaviour and cause more harm to the individual. The stimming techniques may increase with stress or excitement.

Resistance to Change

Individuals on the Autism Spectrum do well with routine and knowing what to expect during their meetings. Changing the routine may result in unexpected behaviour, repetitive questioning and other signs of anxiety such as pacing.

Stress occurs when there are changes to:

- Routines- stick to the routine of meetings, be consistent each week and use visual aids such as a printed meeting schedule/itinerary they can follow along with.
- Expectations on behaviours for everyone in the group - Code of Conduct
- Volunteers or fellow youth/friends at the meetings - do they have someone at the meeting that they best connect with? If that volunteer or fellow youth member can't attend a meeting, call the family to advise them so that they can prepare the youth with what to expect prior to walking into the meeting.

Sensory Considerations

May experience hyper or hypo reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest/fixation with aspects of the environment. Different people perceive their sensory environment differently.

➤ May be sensitive to the light or sound - are you in a loud gym with bright or pulsing lighting? An enclosed space with a large group of loud youth? Many autistic individuals experience hypersensitivity to bright lights or certain light wavelengths (e.g., LED or fluorescent lights). Certain sounds or smells can also be overwhelming. This can result in sensory avoidance – trying to get away from stimuli that most people can easily tune out.

➤ May be hypo or hyper reactive to pain - someone with hyposensitivity may not experience feelings of being hot, cold, or in pain the same way others would. On the other hand, those with hypersensitivity may experience extreme feelings of being hot, cold, or pain.

➤ May be fascinated by water texture as a sensory input. For individuals with autism, water tends to offer a multisensory experience that fulfills multiple needs at once.

➤ May find clothing itchy or uncomfortable. Soft and smooth textures are often preferred by autistic individuals due to their calming and soothing effects. Neckers may be tight around the neck, and the uniforms may not feel soft enough against their skin or may feel tight to wear as it is not clothing that they are typically used to wearing. As an exception, parents can buy a cotton shirt or something the youth can wear in the same colour as the Section uniform so that the youth can wear something that feels more comfortable for them. Uniforms are a part of



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what Scouting is and they are not the program. Safety and emotional wellness take precedent over all else.

Thinking about Strategies

Remember to consider the individual! What are their personal strengths and learning styles. Not every strategy will apply, you may need to adapt or modify the strategies but always collaborate with the parents while doing so.

Build Rapport

Building a trusted relationship is the foundation!

- Find out what they like
- Find common interests
- Incorporate their interests into activities (Ex. Minecraft/Paw Patrol/SpongeBob game themes)

Make it fun! Be silly and energetic! Give lots of high fives and praise/verbal affirmations for positive behaviours! Them exactly what/why they are doing well so they are motivated to do it again!

Give Choices - This or That?

We feel empowered when we can make a choice.

Give closed choices:

- ✓ Two or more choices that you can reasonably offer and actually commit to doing.
- ✓ Use the wording "Would you like **this** or **that**?"

Examples of "This or That" Choices:

Instead of telling the individual what is NOT available, give them choices of what IS available.

- Would you like to play the game that everyone is playing by yourself, or would you like me to come with you?
- Would you like me to show you how to play the game first or would you like to observe the game from the sidelines to understand it before you play it?

Examples of Offering closed choices

"One or two times?"

"Would you like the balloon or parachute"

"I do it first or you do it first"

"Do you want to sit with me at opening or sit with your peers?"

"Do you want to help with the closing next week or at our next camp?"



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Motivation is the Key to Rewards!

We put in more effort to a task when we have an incentive to complete it.

We all work for a paycheque! We finish our chores so we can relax - maybe to watch a show or movie or play a game!

Knowing that an awesome thing is happening after a difficult task can build motivation to get through it!

Notice and reward positive behaviours like:

- ✓ Kids cheering each other on
- ✓ Good listening skills
- ✓ Being kind to others
- ✓ Following instructions

Find out what motivates the youth; Is it the game they like to play? Ask! They will tell you!

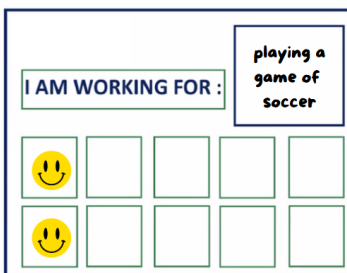
Points System

For motivation give points for positive behaviour or the behaviour that we want to see in a meeting.

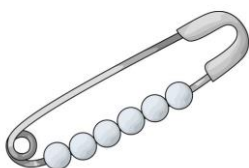
Work toward a fun game or activity using the points system!

How to use a Motivational Board - *get them to choose their goal first!*

- Use a board or a card to record the goals and the good behaviours.
- Tally up the points. Once they have completed the board they get to do their reward. The reward needs to be immediate and should not wait for the next meeting to do it.
- Use stickers, smiley faces, or a marker to tally up their good deeds! Once they have 10 completed squares, they are then able to receive their reward!



Another easy points system that can be used is the Safety pins and beads method! Much like the board, the safety pin can be pinned to the uniform, and any good behaviour is acknowledged and awarded with a new bead. You would need to ask what the reward for completion is ahead of time, so that the youth know what they are working towards!





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Enhancing Communication

Make communication accessible to a range of learners.

- ✓ Be concise
- ✓ Be specific
- ✓ Give time to process
- ✓ Model the skills

Be Concise

For instructions, less is more!

Did you know that the average attention span of a healthy adult is 8 seconds?

How you give instructions and information is important!

Rule of 3

- Give *no more* than 3 instructions at a time.
- Some youth will do best with one instruction at a time.
- Reduce the number of words you are using in your instructions.

Examples of giving instructions for an activity! Let's break it down...

When playing a game - "1, 2, 3, GO!"

When explaining how to tie knots - "Come up and take a white and red rope, have a seat on the lines, wait for your visual instructions from there."

When we arrive at the Scout meeting - "Sign in, find your patrol, do your gathering activity together."

Give Time to Process

Allow time for processing. Some participants may need extra time to process the instructions.

If a youth does not respond immediately, allow 5-10 seconds then:

- Repeat the instruction
- Try re-phrasing
- Break the instructions down into smaller chunks

Be Specific

Tell them exactly what, when and where!

What:

- "Stand with your hands by your side"
- "Hold the handle of the knife"

When

- "Until I say go!"
- "For 5 seconds"

Where:

- "On the red line"
- "Around the cones"



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Model the Skills - Show them how to do it!

Help the youth to understand how to do skills by showing them what it looks like.

Encourage them to watch your body movements while doing the skill to observe.

Show and Say! - Pair actions with verbal instructions, remembering the rule of 3!

Give tips on how they can copy you (ex. "Good! Now bend your right knee!")

Use Visual Supports

Increase independence by asking what types of visual schedules they typically use and why they prefer to use them?

- Use visual cues in the environment
- Visual communication tools reduce reliance on the volunteer

Frontloading

Provide information about what will happen before it happens to better prepare individuals.

Frontloading increases predictability and reduces anxiety.

Think of examples in your own life:

- Visiting a website before going to the location physically
- Reading restaurant reviews
- Looking up a map to get to a location
- Keeping an agenda or calendar

How can you frontload youth about Section meetings?

- ✓ Visual Schedules sent ahead of time!
- ✓ ScoutsTracker - give a lot of notice for meetings! Some need time to prepare ahead of time both physically and mentally!
- ✓ Send a "booklet" of visual instructions - storybook style or e-mail.
- ✓ Frontload expectations! Let them know to try their best, be positive and help their Section. Tell them of the expected behaviours during the activity!

Other Great Visual Cue Ideas

- Send a "Welcome to Scouting" package to parents to show youth and parents where they can park for meetings, a picture of the "school gym" that you are holding the meetings, a picture of the front entrance of where youth need to go through to get to the meeting space, pictures of the volunteers of the Section and their names (both real names Scouter names) so youth can look for a familiar face and know they are in the right place.
- Create a blank agenda of the schedule – Step 1. Sign in 2. Gathering Activity and meet your patrol 3. Opening Ceremony 4. Section Activity 5. Game 6. Closing Ceremony and 7. Sign out.



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- Section meeting either on a card stock or a poster where you can point out where you are on the agenda as a visual cue.
- Frontload the youth ahead of meetings with what to wear, what to bring, what activity they will be doing, if they will be outside or inside for the meeting, and if they will be going to a new “place”, take a picture of it and send it out to the youth in advance to help reduce anxiety and make it a familiar place before the meeting time.
- At the meeting, use pictures. For example, “we are now going to do our opening ceremony” - show a picture of an opening. “We are now at the part of our meeting for our main activity” - show a picture of what the main activity is or show the “demo” of a completed project of what that activity is – “are you building a Cub Kar?” - show one that is completed so that youth know what they are doing next using their visual cues.
- Take pictures of the camp that they will be attending: The front gate, the parking lot, where they will be sleeping, what the kitchen looks like, where will they be eating, where will they have a campfire, where can they have a quiet space if needed. Send these out as a welcome to camp e-mail/storybook to help with the anxiety! At the meeting, go through the camp pictures with the youth and ask them their thoughts about it. Get their perspective on their anxieties or fears. If the youth is adamant that they will NOT be camping, ask them to come for the day to explore the camp as a day trip and observe the camp before they commit to attending a camp. Use the “This or That” wording, “would you like to observe what happens at camp for a day trip or try to stay the night with the rest of the group?” to give reasonable options and choices to the youth.

Transition Warnings

Let the youth know when an activity is going to end or change.

Examples:

- You have 1 minute left on your activity before we start the game!
- 10 seconds then colouring is all done!
- 2 more times to do this, then it is home time!

Set timers on your phone so that it isn't personal. Let them know that you are setting a timer for the transition ahead of time to frontload the expectation that the transition is coming.