



Experience Speaks!

Marianne Sullivan, Autism Speaks Assistant Director of National Outreach and Resources, responds to Frequently Asked Questions from a Facebook Q and A session, emails and phone calls.

As a result of increased public awareness about autism and strong family advocacy efforts, more people with autism are taking advantage of summer camp programs and other community recreational events. When someone with autism participates in their community activities, there are many benefits. They can learn from a wide range of social and educational activities than may not be available in more traditional classroom settings. As a result, they develop higher levels of self confidence and autonomy so they can function more independently in the community.

As the parent of a 19-year-old son on the spectrum who has explored a number of community activities with noticeable benefits, I look for more opportunities. The benefits have always outweighed the risks. Our goal is to take full advantage of every community activity we can.

My advice to other parents is to do the same--seek out opportunities. Don't assume your child can't do something because he or she has autism! In pursuing activities, you may need to provide some special structure, involve yourself at the start to help facilitate your child's participation, and do some advanced planning, but in the end you will reap the rewards and see your child grow from your efforts!

HOW MUCH INFO SHOULD I SHARE WITH THE STAFF AT THE COMMUNITY AGENCY?

An important ingredient to a successful community experience is staff's understanding of autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and more importantly staff's appreciation that each person with ASD has their own specific set of strengths and weaknesses.

Many families can feel intimidated and worry about behavioral issues that may come up. Large organizations like YMCA or Challenger sports teams tend to have staff members with experience who are better informed about ASD. Preparing and informing the staff is always part of creating the community experience for your family member.

HOW DO I DEAL WITH A SITUATION THAT GOES BAD?

It pays to be realistic and know ahead of time what could go wrong. Upfront planning and finding options is critical. You will find that this can be hard work, but you will also see that it is worth every ounce of effort you put into it. No matter how much you want an activity to work; there is always the chance that it won't. You may run into difficult or uncomfortable situations that you cannot change. You will learn a great deal from a situation not going well, and can use the experience for the next community adventure.