Getting Started: Leading the Way to an Autism-Friendly Inclusive Environment
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**Goal:** To learn what steps your organization needs to take to incorporate youth with autism into your program.

**A Commitment to Inclusion and Diversity**

Youth with autism constantly experience barriers to experiencing the enjoyment of so many activities that the rest of us take for granted. Their abilities are overlooked and their capacity underestimated. The barriers they face are often more a result of the environment in which they live rather than a factor of their ability to participate.

Downloading this guide is an important step in your commitment to inclusion and to valuing the lives of all youth. You are creating an opportunity for children with autism to experience the community activities that are so important to the development of our youth.

Successful inclusion will only happen with an organization-wide commitment to serving all of your community’s youth. All levels of staff and volunteers must adopt an inclusive philosophy, and this new way of thinking can transform the organization. Your organization will be a true reflection of the community you serve.

**Overcoming the Fear of the Unknown**

“Initially I had some apprehension about incorporating children with autism into our regular activities. By the end of the session though, I saw how much their inclusion had changed all of us for the better – my team and the other campers. Seeing them strive to overcome obstacles and persevere helped all of us grow and become a closer group. Our campers with autism are my inspiration.

*Working with children with autism has provided me with an opportunity to see the world in a different way. I see them strive to overcome obstacles and persevere, and learn to persevere myself. They are my inspiration.*

- Steven, YMCA Summer Camp

Inclusion is going to take time, preparation and patience. One of the first barriers that you may have to overcome is the negative attitudes and fear of the unknown. Your staff and volunteers may fear that their time will be taken up almost exclusively by youth with special needs, leaving little time for other program participants. Typically developing youth may be afraid of being with others who aren’t like them. Fear is a natural reaction to something we don’t understand and/or have experience with. However, we need to make sure that fear faced instead of avoided. When fears are avoided, we see people with disabilities either excluded all together or integrated physically, but not socially.
Conquering Fear

- Don’t pretend fears and negative attitudes about people with disabilities don’t exist among your staff and volunteers. Address them and design a plan to help your team overcome them.
- Question all the stereotypes or beliefs you may have about autism, and do your homework. Refer to the About Autism section of this guide and the resources provided to learn more. Remember, you are relating to a young person, not a disorder.
- The most effective way of eliminating fear and changing attitudes is through exposure. As your team and program participants are exposed to more people with autism, their attitudes will change.
- Focus on similarities instead of differences; strengths instead of limitations.

Five Steps to Becoming an Inclusive Youth Organization

1. **Examine your organization’s mission statement.** Does it encompass your philosophy on inclusion and your desire to serve people of all abilities? An example of a strong inclusive mission comes from the Boys and Girls Clubs of America:

   “To enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive caring, responsible citizens.”

   Make sure that your mission statement is not exclusionary and invites participation from all. If you aren’t sure what message your mission is sending, share it with a few others and ask for feedback.

   Share your inclusive mission statement wherever you can. Display it in your facilities. Include it on your website and on printed materials. This is a statement that all staff and volunteers should be familiar with.

2. **Review your admissions policy.**

   Take a moment to review your admission policies. Are they very rigid? Are they mostly based on achievement of certain skills? Youth organizations must have policies related to admission and enrollment, but it is important to make sure they do not exclude groups of people by demanding a particular skill.

   **Example of a Rigid Policy**

   An organization’s policy states that youth will not be allowed in the swimming pool with flotation devices. Many children with disabilities would benefit from the opportunity to be in a pool with their typically developing peers, but would not be able to participate without a flotation device. Therefore, an inclusion support you could provide would be to allow a youth to participate with a flotation device.

   **Example of a Skills Based Requirement**

   A music camp may have a requirement that to participate a child must perform a solo song, dance or instrumental arrangement. This may not be possible for all children. An example of an inclusion support would be to find another way for the child to participate – perhaps as a technical assistant.
3. **Create or modify your existing intake and enrollment process to be mindful of inclusion.**

A youth organization’s intake and enrollment process helps acclimate the family to your services and gives them the opportunity to provide you with the information you need to serve their child.

This process usually begins with a telephone or e-mail inquiry from a parent. It is important that the people who respond to these general inquiries are aware of the organization’s commitment to inclusion and have participated in basic training. It is very easy for a parent who is used to running into roadblocks to get discouraged.

Usually, if there is an interest from the family, the parent and child will visit the program so they can see the facility and get more information. This is a good time for you to learn more about the child, what the family’s goals are and the need for accommodations or support might be. At the end of this section is a list of sample intake questions to use when speaking with families. This is also a good time to assure parents that the information about their child will be kept confidential.

Other things to consider with the family when they are enrolling their child:

- Establish a plan for ongoing communication, whether it is a written log, phone calls, e-mails, or check in at drop off or pick up.
- Be thorough in your description of activities. Ask questions and be a good listener.
- If the participant uses assistive technology, consider asking the family to train a staff member on the equipment.
- Invite the parent to share information about the child with program staff at a staff meeting or other appropriate time.

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**Registration Do’s and Don’ts**

- **If your program is full, you are not required to create a space for a child with a disability, but you also cannot deny a space if there is an opening because of the disability.**

- **Your registration and/or enrollment form should include a question that asks whether the participant requires any type of accommodation for a medical condition or disability.**

- **You may not ask for a diagnosis, but you should ask open-ended questions that will help you understand what kind of supports will be needed.**
4. **Evaluate your program from an inclusion perspective.**

Use the checklist provided at the end of the Inclusion section to evaluate your program as you plan for inclusion. Remember, for inclusion to be effective, the process must involve everyone from board members to program staff to the receptionist and the custodial team. Everyone working in the organization needs to understand the commitment to inclusion and be allowed to share their thoughts and have an impact on decision-making.

5. **Make a commitment to training for all staff and volunteers.**

Committing to ongoing training for staff and volunteers around inclusion is crucial to the success of your program. The organization’s philosophy of inclusion should be regularly communicated—and the most successful training not only raises awareness about people with disabilities, but also increases the knowledge and skills of your teams.

**Lots of Ways to Learn**

- All new employees and volunteers should receive orientation that includes information on inclusion.
- Provide orientation that includes information on inclusion for all new employees and volunteers.
- Give presentations at staff or other regularly scheduled meetings.
- Incorporate job coaching from supervisors or senior staff members.
- Attendance at inclusion-related conferences.
- Begin online training.
- Share stories about successful inclusion experiences in organizational materials.
- Assign seasoned staff to present training that they have researched at meetings with other staff.
- Have families of children with autism speak at meetings.

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**Inclusion involves all team members**

- The board and executives who help craft the inclusion policy and establish the commitment to an inclusive youth organization.
- The financial team who develop budgets.
- The program or administrative staff.
- The marketing team who design printed and web materials.
- The people who answer the phones and are the first point of contact for families.
- The facilities and custodial staff who ensure the environment is conducive to inclusion.
Sample Non-Discrimination Statements

The Department of Parks and Recreation actively seeks and supports participation by all people with a variety of interests and abilities in our programs and services.

The Mathematics Foundation of America does not discriminate based on gender, race, creed, color, national or ethnic origin, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation in the administration of its educational programs, admissions policies, employment practices, financial aid, or any other programs. At Canada/USA Mathcamp, we strive to create a diverse community that welcomes students and faculty from all backgrounds; we feel that this diversity is one of our greatest strengths.

Tips: Reaching out to the Community for Participants

“Since taking a more inclusive approach to marketing, we have seen an increase in membership of kids with disabilities in the Boys & Girls Club. Making a few small changes has made the Club more welcoming. Kids with and without disabilities have formed new and lasting friendships. Creating an inclusive environment is teaching our children to embrace the diverse community in which we all live.”

- Develop relationships with organizations and professionals in your area that serve people with autism. The Autism Speaks Resource Guide is a great place to start to find out what groups are serving people with autism in your community.

- Include information about your inclusion philosophy in all of your marketing materials – your website, brochures, flyers, posters, e-mail, social media.

- Make sure that non-discrimination statements are on all of your promotional material, and that material is welcoming and inviting.

- Spread the word via current parents and participants, teachers, community leaders that your organization is an inclusive program.
Working with Parents

“I spent months trying to find a summer camp that would accept my five-year-old son, Corey, who has autism. Because he is non-verbal, all of the camp directors were hesitant to include him because they had never worked with someone with autism before. When I finally found a camp that accepted him without hesitation, I almost didn’t believe what I’d heard. He attended camp with typical peers along with his aide. It was an incredible experience for him that really impacted his social development for over the next year.” - Corey’s mom

The people who know the child you will be working with best are the parents or caregivers. Your relationship with them is important to building an environment of success for youth with autism.

Building Successful Relationships with Families

• Be considerate of the family’s needs and expectations.
• Be a good listener. Listen with compassion and respect. Always respect the family’s confidentiality.
• Invest in the relationship. Take time to get to know the family members and build a rapport. This will go a long way toward developing trust.
• When presenting concerns about their child, make sure to frame them in a positive way and be ready to develop solutions hand-in-hand with the family.
• Communicate, communicate, communicate.

Inclusion is Happening Now

A number of youth organizations are developing programs and practices to attract and accommodate youth with disabilities. Following is a partial list:

• Academy for Educational Development
  • Big Brothers Big Sisters
  • Boy Scouts of America
  • Boys & Girls Clubs of America
    • Camp Fire USA
  • Chabot Space and Science Center
    • City Year
  • Girl Scouts of the USA
  • Imagination Stage
  • Mass Mentoring
  • Minnesota Conservation Corps
• National 4-H Council
• National After School Association
• National Recreation and Park Association
• National Wildlife Federation
• Operation Fresh Start
• The After-School Corporation
• The Corps Network
• The Washington Center
• Utah Conservation Corps
• Wilderness Inquiry
• YMCA
Reflect:
What are your current attitudes about people with autism or other disabilities?

_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________

How can you support your team members in becoming more comfortable working with people with autism and other disabilities?

_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________________________

Resources:

Kids Included Together
http://kitonline.org/
Kids Included Together (KIT) specializes in providing best practices training for community–based organizations committed to including children with and without disabilities into their recreational, child development and youth development programs.

Autism Education
www.autismeducation.net
Their primary purpose is to provide information and training to families and professionals regarding best practices in autism treatment.

Autism Internet Modules
www.autisminternetmodules.org
The Autism Internet Modules were developed with one aim in mind: to make comprehensive, up-to-date, and usable information on autism accessible and applicable to educators, other professionals, and families who support individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Written by experts from across the U.S., all online modules are free, and are designed to promote understanding of, respect for, and equality of persons with ASD.
“About Me” Profile Form

Student’s Name: ____________________________________________

What are some of the things that you are most interested in? ____________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What upsets you? _____________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What are you afraid of? _________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What makes you laugh? _________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What is ONE thing you would like to get better at this year? ____________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What calms you down when you are overwhelmed or upset? ____________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What rewards work well for you? _______________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What do you do after school or on weekends? _________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Person completing form: ____________________________________________

Relationship to student: ____________________________________________

Email address of family or caregiver contact: ___________________________

Phone number of family or caregiver contact: ___________________________

What is the best way to contact you? _______________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

What days or times are convenient for you to meet with the school team? ____________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Are there any issues that you would like to discuss or hear more information about? ____________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
Parent Questionnaire: Creating a Successful Experience for Your Child with Autism

About Our Program

What do you see here that you think your child will really enjoy? What are his favorite activities?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What are some of his fears?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Do any particular sounds, smells or tactile sensations bother him?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

How can we adjust the environment to meet him/her needs?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What kind of accommodations can we make to help him be successful in our program?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
Special Interests and Talents

What does him/he like to do at home in his free time?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

What are his favorite books, games, and television shows?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

What is he really good at?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

Development

Does him/he require any adaptive equipment?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

What does he do when upset? What helps to calm him down?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
How does he communicate? Does he use words, pictures, or gestures? Does he use assistive technology for communication?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Does him/he need assistance when using the toilet?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Are there specific things that he needs help with (opening his lunch or blowing his nose)?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Safety

Does your him/he have allergies?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Does your child require a special diet? What are him/he preferred snacks and eating schedule?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Is the child a flight risk (i.e., does him/he run away)?

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________________
Baseline Autism Quiz
By Sonia Dickson-Bracks

Name ________________________________________ Date____________

1. When a child receives a diagnosis of autism, he needs to meet diagnostic criteria in three areas. What are the three areas?

   1. sensory, behavior and language
   2. communication/language, social and behavior
   3. language, social and special diets
   4. language development, behaviors and sensory

2. What are the current statistics for the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in the USA?

   1. 1:150
   2. 1:88
   3. 1:166

3. When supporting a student with autism, what key areas will you need to address first in order to support learning, social skills and independence?

   • communication, organization and sensory
   • behavior, learning and friendships
   • social, play, academics

4. What is a Positive Behavior Support Plan?

   • A plan that is put in place after a functional assessment is completed to address behaviors and teach replacement strategies for those behaviors
   • An intervention plan that is used to provide consequences for behaviors when they occur
   • A system that all staff needs to follow and take data on

5. Why do some individuals with autism exhibit behaviors?

   • because they are willful and stubborn
   • because they often have challenges expressing their needs verbally so they use behavior to communicate
   • because they are angry
   • because they hate school and want to avoid all work

6. Sensory dysfunction is:

   • a process by which you motor plan a movement
   • challenges processing incoming sensory information that affects the your response to the environment
   • hyposensitivity to smell
7. ABA stands for:
- Autism Behavior Analysis
- Applied Behavioral Analysis
- Autism and Behavior and Advice

8. When supporting a student in the classroom, what is the staff’s primary role?
- helping the student to access the academics, socialize with peers and develop skills that will help him manage the group/classroom setting
- doing everything for the student and making sure he has everything he needs
- speaking for the student, staying next to him and never leaving his side

9. A schedule provides a student with autism with:
- a list of what he has to do in the exact order it’s written
- a visual representation of the day’s events that he must follow at all times
- a system by which he can organize himself, understand daily occurrences, be warned of unexpected changes, and know the who, what, where of the day

10. What does ASD stand for?
- Autism, Symptoms and Disorder
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Autism, Solutions and Decisions

11. Why is autism described as a spectrum disorder?
- it covers a range of symptoms from mild to severe, and the symptoms present in each individual differently
- the spectrum is an overview of what autism may be
- it affects students of all races and ethnic backgrounds

12. If you had to define what you think autism is to someone who does not know, how would you describe it?

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

13. In the classroom it is your role to help support the student and also to help the student be part of the group. How best do you think you can help the student you support?

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
Sensory Processing Quiz
By Sonia Dickson-Bracks

Name ________________________________________  Date____________

1. List the five senses:
_______________________________________________________________________________________ ______
_______________________________________________________________________________________ ______

2. List the two “hidden senses”:
_______________________________________________________________________________________ ______

3. What is hypersensitivity?
   a. under responsive to a sensation
   b. senses running all around
   c. over responsive to a sensation

4. What is hyposensitivity?
   a. over responsive to sensory input
   b. sensitive to everything
   c. under responsive to sensory input

5. Tactile defensiveness is a condition in which:
   a. an individual is extremely sensitive to touch, which may lead to misinformation or behavioral responses regarding touch
   b. an individual needs light touch and craves brushing
   c. an individual likes to be brushed with a feather or withdraws from strong smells

6. The Vestibular System refers to:
   a. structures within the inner ear
   b. structures within the muscles and joints
   c. structures within the chest cavity

7. Dysfunction within the vestibular system may manifest itself in two different ways. Some individuals may be hypersensitive to vestibular stimulation and have fearful reactions to ordinary movement activities (e.g., swings, slides, ramps, inclines) OR some may actively seek very intense sensory experiences such as excessive body whirling, jumping, and/or spinning.
   True            False

8. Proprioceptive System refers to:
   a. the system that provides the body with information about head position and ear ache
   b. components of muscles, joints, and tendons that provide a person with a subconscious awareness of body position

9. What is sensory dysfunction?
Autism/Asperger Simulation Activity

By Lori Ernsperger, PhD

The following simulation activity is intended to be implemented with school teams to increase awareness and understanding of students with autism. The activity takes 5-10 minutes and can be used with staff at any grade level, or with peers from upper elementary and older. The steps for implementation include:

**Prep Work:**

1. Copy the following sheets on Pink, Blue, or White paper. If the paper says “Talk to the person with the Blue sheet” that page should be on Pink paper and vice versa. The sensory sheet is copied on to white paper.
2. Cut the papers in half.
3. Collate the pages into sets of Pink/Blue/White. The number of sets is determined by the number of participants. Each participant will receive one half-sheet of paper.

**Activity:**

1. Tell the group that they are going to do a fun interactive activity. Don’t share too much in the beginning. Let them come to their own conclusions.
2. Have participants get into groups of 3, this activity does not work with groups of 2 or 4 people.
3. Hand-out the sets of Pink/Blue/White papers to each group. Each participant should take a half sheet of paper and quickly review the instructions on their sheet only. Let participants know that they are not to read each other’s paper.
4. After a few seconds, tell the groups to begin. The participants with the Pink/Blue sheets should quickly begin talking about food.
5. The participants with the White sheets may need some encouragement to interrupt their colleagues to discuss the sensory system. Walk around and encourage all participants to follow the directions exactly as they have on their papers.
6. After two minutes, stop the group. Most groups will have uncovered the hidden meaning of this activity.
7. Discuss the hidden intent of this activity. Ask the following questions:
   - What did it feel like to play your role in the group? Have the participants explain in one word how it felt, i.e. awkward, lonely, annoying, uncomfortable, sad.
   - Ask the participants with the White sheets if they observed the non-verbal cue their peers were using when they were speaking. Did they observe the non-verbal cue?
   - How was it different for the people with the Pink/Blue sheets vs. the person with the White sheet?
   - Relate their experience to students with autism and their peers. How does this two-minute simulation impact the educational experience of students with autism?
   - Discuss the importance of teaching social skills to help to avoid these situations.
   - Discuss the impact on bullying and depression for older students.
Participant #1: Please follow directions below.

1. Have a normal conversation with the person with the Blue sheet only.
2. Talk only about the following topic: Food, which includes-
   - Favorite restaurants
   - Best meals
   - Recipes
   - What did you have for dinner last night
3. The person who is speaking should clasp their hands in front of them when they are talking.
   This non-verbal signal will indicate who is talking.
4. Carry-on a conversation for 3-5 minutes. Have fun!
Participant #2: Please follow directions below.

1. Have a normal conversation with the person with the Pink sheet only.
2. Talk only about the following topic: Food, which includes-
   - Favorite restaurants
   - Best meals
   - Recipes
   - What did you have for dinner last night
3. The person who is speaking should clasp their hands in front of them when they are talking. This non-verbal signal will indicate who is talking.
4. Carry-on a conversation for 3-5 minutes. Have fun!
**Participant #3: Please follow directions below.**

1. Speak Directly to your group.
2. It is your responsibility to share with your group the following facts:

   **The Sensory System**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactile System: located on the skin. This area has a density of cells distributed all over the body, which includes the mouth, hands, and feet.</th>
<th>The function of the tactile system is to provide information about the environment and object qualities i.e. soft, sharp, dull, cold, hot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual System: Located in the retina of the eye-stimulated by light</td>
<td>Provides information about objects and persons. Helps us define boundaries as we move through time and space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditory System: Located in the inner ear and stimulated by air/sound waves.</td>
<td>Provides information about sounds in the environment i.e. loud, soft, low, near, far.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gustatory System: The taste system is located on the tongue and closely related to smell</td>
<td>Provides information about different types of taste i.e. sour, bitter, salty, spicy, sweet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olfactory System: Located in the nasal structure.</td>
<td>Provides information about different types of smells i.e. musty, acrid, putrid, flowery, sweet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. It is extremely important that your group thoroughly understand the facts of the Sensory System. So, please be bold in your attempts to share the information.