

Creating Successful Interactions with Children with Autism

Staff Tips for the DMA

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorders, “refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication, as well as by unique strengths and differences” (Autism Speaks, 2017).



An individual with autism may:

- Avoid eye contact or social interactions
- Perform repetitive behaviors (ex. hand flapping, rocking)
- Have restricted areas of interest (ex. interested in only robots or trains)
- Have difficulties with back and forth conversations
- Use words or phrases that seem odd
- Have an unusual tone of voice that may sound flat or robot-like
- Use an electronic device for communication
- Be sensitive to new noises, smells, or changes in routine

(NIH, 2016)

I have autism and this is what I'd like you to know about interacting with me:

- I like it when you use an age-appropriate voice (ex. try not to speak in a sing-song or baby-talk voice)
- I may not be comfortable with physical touch like handshakes or hands on my shoulder.
- I like it when you use calm and positive tones of voice.
- I understand best when you say what you mean! I have a hard time understanding expressions or metaphors. (ex. try not to say “Hold your horses!” Instead, actually say “slow down”)
- It may take me a while to respond to what you say. I sometimes have a hard time understanding people or sharing my thoughts. This doesn't mean I'm not listening.
- Using pictures while you communicate may help me to understand.
- I might not understand gestures or facial expressions. (ex. putting your finger to your mouth to signal to talk quietly)
- Give me positive instructions! (ex. say, “Please keep your hands to yourself. Paintings are for looking at with our eyes” instead of saying, “Don't touch!”)

(Autism Speaks, 2013)

Person-First Language

Words are powerful! First and foremost, people with disabilities are just that – people! Person-first language stresses the person, rather than the disability. By placing the person first, the disability is no longer the primary, defining characteristic of the individual, but rather just one of several aspects of the whole person.

Your words are impactful! Please remember to use accepted terminology when talking to individuals. Some words that were commonly used in the past are no longer considered respectful.

No Longer Used	VS	Currently Accepted
1. Autistic person		1. Person with autism
2. Retarded; Idiot; Slow		2. Cognitive disability
3. Handicapped		3. Person with a disability
4. Non-verbal person		4. Person who may use a communication device
5. The disabled		5. Person with a disability
6. Deaf-and-dumb		6. Deaf or hard-of-hearing
7. Hearing impaired		7. Deaf or hard-of-hearing
8. Confined to a wheelchair		8. Person who uses a wheelchair
9. Crippled		9. Person with a disability
10. Birth defect		10. Congenital disability
11. CP victim		11. Person with cerebral palsy

(Snow, 2009)

Meltdown: How to Respond

If a child becomes upset, agitated, or has a meltdown, here are some suggestions and ways you can help the situation:

- Stay calm and keep your voice slow and steady.
- Excessive talking can be overwhelming. Try to be concise.
- Ask the family how you can help or if they need assistance.
- Direct parent to nearest quiet location, if needed.



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