



INCLUSIVE 4-H: AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex, lifelong developmental disorder. Autism typically impacts a person's social skills, communication, relationships, and self-regulation. It is defined by a certain set of behaviors and affects people differently and to varying degrees. People with autism may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from people without autism.

A diagnosis of ASD now includes several conditions that used to be diagnosed separately: autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome. These conditions are now all called autism spectrum disorder.

Many people with Autism might repeat certain behaviors and might not want change in their daily activities. They may also have different ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to things.

People with ASD might:

- Have trouble reading and expressing body language
- Avoid eye contact or engage in strong eye contact
- Be very interested in certain topics and show no interest in other topics
- Have trouble expressing their needs
- Not play "pretend" games
- Have trouble adapting when a routine changes
- Have hyper- or hypo- sensitivity to stimuli such as light, flavor, smell, feel, or sound. They may over react or under react to certain sensations.
- Prefer to be on their own
- Have trouble self-regulating in overly stimulating situations
- Have a difficult time understanding metaphors or idioms

Each person with ASD is different. Some people with ASD may not need any accommodations. However, it is still important to understand their needs as they are unique. The ability to adjust to the environment to avoid over-stimulation for someone with ASD can be crucial.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Have contact information for parents or guardians and the member's doctor in accessible places. An example of this would be behind the child's nametag and in the medical forms box which should be stored in the main office at 4-H events. This form should include information such as what kinds of medications the child is taking, allergies, if any adaptive devices are used, and other health conditions.
- Understand that some people may not feel comfortable talking about certain aspects of their condition or disability. Do not force someone to answer questions that make them uncomfortable. Remind them that any information they share is voluntary, confidential, and not required. Learn what the member enjoys and try to weave that into the 4-H experience (e.g., including their favorite food as a snack, having their favorite color marker for craft projects, etc.)
- No person with autism manifests the disorder in the same way. Visit with the member and his or her parent(s)/guardian(s) to find out more information about the member and their autism. Questions that can be asked include:
 - a. What can we do to make the 4-H environment inclusive for you?
 - b. What can we do to help you feel comfortable during 4-H activities and events?
- Children with autism often show a lot of interest in a few select topics and enjoy learning and doing research about these interests. Help each child find ways to incorporate these topics of interest into his or her 4-H experience.
- People with autism often benefit from having strict routines. Someone with autism may not respond well to deviation from a routine or having no routine or schedule to follow. During 4-H events, create a schedule, provide the schedule to the members, and stick to the schedule. People with autism may also have trouble transitioning from one activity to another; having the schedule ahead of time may help them prepare for transitions as well.
 - a. If a schedule does need to be changed, introduce the change to the child as early as possible and explain why the change is necessary.
- Communication can be challenging for children with autism. Determine their comfort level before asking them to participate in an activity which requires communication, such as public speaking or collaborative group activities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex developmental disability. New information is constantly being discovered due to ongoing research.

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

<https://www.autism-society.org/>

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/hcp-dsm.html>

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