

Tips for Youth Group Leaders

Common characteristics of youth on the Autism Spectrum:

LANGUAGE

1. Literal – Youth on the Autism Spectrum tend to take things literally. Although many can understand sarcasm or metaphor, be sure to explain EXACTLY what you mean. And don't make a fuss if they get it wrong – they're not trying to be funny or challenging.
2. Body - Youth on the Autism Spectrum may not understand body language. They may avoid eye contact, and most likely will not appreciate any form of physical contact. Arrange seating so youth can have "privacy" for/from facial expressions. Don't think they're not engaged or not listening! Don't try to force eye contact—this causes distress.
3. Hesitation - Youth on the Autism Spectrum sometimes repeat words or hesitate between words – this is usually because they think most readily in pictures and are having trouble choosing which words to use. Be patient and don't finish sentences – AS youth often have amazing insights and it is worth waiting for them to verbalize.
4. VISUAL - Youth on the Autism Spectrum prefer written instruction to verbal, and picture illustrations to verbal ones. Speaking urgently or loudly will cause them distress, and too much audio input will cause them to "shut down." Always have a quiet area available for decompression from too much input.
5. Monologuing - Youth on the Autism Spectrum are often "deep" learners – studying a narrow topic field exhaustively. They tend to "monologue" or "perseverate" on these preferred topics and be unaware of social cues that they have gone on too long. Help them by intervention and redirection.

SENSORY

Many youth on the Autism Spectrum are hypersensitive to their sensory environment. Helping them be comfortable will assist in their engagement with the group.

1. Light – flickering or buzzing lights can be painful. Replace bulbs or fixtures if necessary. Many AS youth find darkness or sudden changes in light uncomfortable. Try not to use darkness or changes such as flicking lights on and off as a signal.
2. Noise – Youth on the Autism Spectrum are extraordinarily sensitive to sound, and are easily overwhelmed in crowds, or when several people are talking at once. Try to assist the group in taking turns in conversation. Allowing the youth to wear ear plugs or headphones will also help.
3. Personal Space – Youth on the Autism Spectrum are often completely oblivious to personal space and may unintentionally offend others. It's OK to gently remind them to "step back."
4. "SAFE" Space – providing an agreed-upon "safe space" where youth can retreat when overwhelmed will help them stay engaged with the group. This space should be within eye and earshot of the group, but allow the youth to turn away.

TRANSITIONS

Many youth on the Autism Spectrum have difficulty shifting direction or attention from one topic or task to another

1. A VISUAL cue is preferable to verbal

2. Staged “warnings” of transitions will help – “In ten minutes, we will...” “5 more minutes..” etc.
3. Clarity – Mean what you say and say what you mean. Use a timer, set limits and stick to them. Youth on the Autism Spectrum are very literal and rigid—if you say “I’ll be back in 10 minutes” then please do your best to stick to that. Being loose about terminology or times will cause distress.

CHANGE

One of the hallmarks of people on the Autism Spectrum is a resistance to change. Autism Spectrum Youth universally prefer all things in an unvarying order, and will not assume that general rules and expectations apply in new situations.

1. Preparing these youths for any changes in routine, in agenda or in expectation should be done as much in advance as possible.
2. Even minor changes can be stressful – Autism Spectrum youth do not “generalize” from one situation to another. Just because a rule applies in one space doesn’t mean to them that it applies in others.
3. Explicit “rules” about expectations in each and every space the group uses will reduce anxiety.

EMOTIONAL MATURITY and “NO FILTER”

An Autism Spectrum diagnosis is based on developmental delays. This means that Autism Spectrum youth can lag behind their peers in several ways—especially emotional maturity and social skills.

1. Put expectations in writing
2. Don’t assume youth know “correct” or “age-appropriate” ways to act
3. Understand that social skills and negotiating social situations are the equivalent of an unknown language to Autism Spectrum Youth. Other youth will probably also benefit from frank discussions about the “whys” of social behavior.
4. Many Autism Spectrum youth do not understand “social talk” – they are extremely honest and do not understand why what they say might be offensive to others.

OVERWHELMED

Sometimes youth on the Autism Spectrum become so overwhelmed they are unable to function. Most situations can be avoided by asking the youth to gauge their own comfort level. Because the body language of Autism Spectrum people is DIFFERENT from others, you may not be able to tell when a youth is becoming overwhelmed or agitated.

1. Shutdown – Under severe stress, they may refuse to engage or participate
2. Meltdown – Under severe sensory distress, they may cry or yell
3. The best way to deal with impending shutdown or meltdown is the use of “safe place” or allowing some time away from the group.

If, despite all strategies, a youth becomes overwhelmed and begins to meltdown the best strategy is QUIET AND CALM. Loud voices or even attempts at reasoned discussion may only exacerbate.

Read the attached for a different way to see Autism Spectrum Youth