



Team Tailgate

Serving Youth With Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder? (ASD) Autism is a term used to describe a group of complex neuro-developmental disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). People with these disorders often display challenges related to communication, social interaction and repetitive behaviors and interests..

What is different about people with ASD?

Things that may make youth with autism different can also be seen as exceptional abilities. It is important to recognize him or her as intelligent, even if language or behavioral difficulties reveal intelligence in different ways.

- Youth with autism often display some of these characteristics: challenges with understanding language, social cues and gestures

- Limited speech or no speech
- Repetitive speech related to one topic
- Limited or no eye contact
- Difficulty participating in back-and-forth conversations or interactions
- Social awkwardness
- Intense interest in unusual topics and objects
- Repetitive behaviors, such as pacing or lining things up, spinning, hand flapping or rocking

Managing Challenging Behaviors

When a child with autism exhibits challenging behaviors or has a meltdown, it's important to remember that these are simply responses to something in the environment.

There are three stages of challenging behavior. Understanding these stages and keeping each child in mind can help inform your plan and response for helping them. It is important to note that these stages might be expressed differently with each child.

1. Rumbling - In this stage, the child might display mild behaviors that are typically unusual for them, like tapping their feet or fingers. The behavior can escalate as the child becomes more anxious or aggravated.

When this happens:

- Know the warning signs and be aware of any subtle changes in behavior.
- Try to intervene without escalating the situation. Use a proven calming technique or a distraction method (e.g., sending the child on a task) or allow the child to go to their designated quiet space. - Tip: Giving the child their own designated space allows them the right to have their own safe space to cool down when feeling anxious or a place to hang out if they feel overwhelmed or need a break. Some Clubs use pop-up tents as "safe houses" for youth.

2. Meltdown - During this stage, the child may be unable to regulate their emotions and may completely lose control. The resulting behaviors can be displayed either internally, which might be shown through withdrawal, or externally, which might be expressed by hitting or screaming.

These behaviors may have an impact on the child's safety and the safety of the other youth and staff. The most promising practice is to prevent the child from getting to the meltdown stage. As an adult and a youth development professional, if you notice a behavior that hints a child is in the rumbling stage, you should do everything you can to prevent them from progressing to the meltdown stage. For a young person, having other youth witness them in the meltdown stage can be a serious setback socially. Other youth may not understand why the child is having a meltdown, which can result in the isolation of the child with autism. For some children with autism, making friends is already a challenge, so a meltdown can be a major stumbling block for them.

When this happens:

- Be prepared with a plan. You should know who to call and where to move other youth if they are nearby. Remember which staff will be there to support you in the event of a meltdown.
- Remain calm and prioritize safety for youth, yourself and other staff members

3. Recovery - By this stage, the behaviors have ended. However, the child may not be ready to resume Club activities. In this stage, it is important to remember that children with autism thrive with predictable routines. If their routine does not continue as expected, the child may experience another meltdown.

When this happens:

- Give the youth a simple task related to the Club activity that will aid them in re-entry.
- Consider framing the activity around the particular strengths of the youth to help motivate them during their recovery period.
- Be sure to communicate what happened with the youth's family and other staff. You can learn a great deal from a meltdown, like what triggered it and how your response helped to alleviate or agitate the child's behavior. Having conversations with the staff and family can help to prevent future rumbling stages from turning into meltdowns.

Tips for Challenging Behaviors

The complexities of autism often make challenging behaviors difficult to understand and address. Autism Speaks provides these tips for preventing challenging behaviors:

- Recognize behavior as communication. Try to understand what the child is trying to communicate by exhibiting this behavior.
- Recognize and reward good behavior.
- Provide organization and supportive transitions.
- Communicate expectations, use short-term schedules, warn of changes to routine or personnel and prepare them for unexpected events.
- Offer choices and provide some sense of control.
- Consider sensory needs and interventions.
- Respect their personal space.
- Be aware of known triggers that may result in frustration, overload or anxiety. Work to avoid these triggers. Make a list of them and share it with other Club Staff.