

## Tips for Interacting Effectively with People with Autism

- Be aware of sensory dysfunctions, unusual sensitivity to noises, smells, tastes, etc. Loud or sudden noises are especially stressful (alarms, bells, chairs scraping across the floor, balloons popping, etc.) And sensory overload, in response to too many visual and auditory stimuli experienced at once, is a frequent problem. If possible, simplify the person's environment and be watchful for signs that particular stimuli are a problem.
- Offer a quiet space or a quiet time as often as possible. People with autism often need time to themselves to re-group, to put their nervous systems back in order, especially if they spend part of the day in a busy environment. They need "down time," even though this seems useless or senseless to other people. Sometimes repetitive motions, like rocking or swinging are especially soothing.
- Many people with autism have special collections or special fascinations. It is sometimes the weather, reading maps, or collecting something that might have little meaning for other people. As much as possible, respect this need in people with autism
- People with autism have an excessive need for order, predictability, and control. Possibly this comes from feeling the world *is* unpredictable, and that other people *are* trying to control them much of the time. Decide where you can safely give up control and allow the autistic person as much decision making as possible.
- Sometimes making out a schedule of the day's activities or giving a map of where you are going is very reassuring. People with autism are often visual learners, hence the schedule or map or other visual materials are very helpful and can be very reassuring.
- Don't expect that they will always follow spoken instructions, especially if these are complicated. Even high functioning people say they can't keep in mind more than three steps (for example, finding a place). A problem with sequences is a hallmark of autism.
- People with autism are often bothered by fluorescent lights. Whenever possible put them in a place where there is natural light. Working by a window might be a lot easier than in an enclosed room where there is a buzz and a flicker.
- Use a buddy system when you can. If they are paired with someone with complimentary skills, the two of them often learn from each other, as well as compensating for each other's difficulties.

- Autism seems to be an extreme “attention deficit” condition. People with autism have trouble switching attention rapidly and integrating sense impressions from several different sources at once. This is just another reason to simplify the environment, to respect down time, and allow them some repetitive behaviors.