



## **Meeting Community Social Needs in Autistic Visitors**

After reading this brief, you should be able to,

- Describe common situations when social skills are needed
- Provide strategies for developing social supports
- Outline safety factors

Have you ever found yourself in a crowded shopping center where you can't find your car? Or been in a store and asked a person to help you find something – and found they didn't work there? Or tried to use a complicated gas pump and couldn't find any instructions on how to fill your tank? Each of these situations require some degree of social skills – usually related to knowing when and who to ask for help, being able to effectively communicate what you want or need and being able to navigate a social setting to seek information – and use it. Some autistic people have challenges when managing the social expectations that life in their community can ask of them. There are common challenges related to social situations - and effectively managing them can go a long way to meeting the needs of autistic visitors. Community settings can provide environmental supports that minimize social distress and the behavioral outbursts that sometimes come along with them.

Keeping things organized and predictable goes a long way toward preventing jangled nerves. This doesn't mean that an environment needs to be boring or not spark interest, but instead, an environment that promotes easy navigation and minimizes the energy required to learn paths, rules, and expectations can be a user-friendly way to reduce distractions and allow a person to concentrate on the task at hand, whether it's a play, art exhibit, or trip to a local big box store. Incidentally, big box stores can be popular shopping spots for autistic people because they have predictable store layouts and expectations from one location to another.

Some offer lots of ways to get information about what is needed. When employees wear clearly designated uniforms, they are easier to locate, and this makes asking questions simpler - and safer. Uniforms that are bright and easily identified can help more than wearing blue jeans and a polo shirt, too. Displaying a photo of an employee dressed in their work uniform and saying, "Need help? Ask me!" can provide further assistance. An employee who has a "Can I help you?" card with a graphic "Help?" image stored in their pocket can solve a lot of dilemmas.

Promote safety. There are some sneaky potential safety violations out there – and some visitors without typical restraint may find themselves in harm's way. Remember being a kid and navigating the crowded checkout at the grocery store? There was always gum or candy to bait you, and it looked like your name was written all over it. Some of you might have even snatched a piece. Consider your own community place and take a look at the things throughout it that might cause difficulties, especially if the trouble zones are located in bottle necks or traffic jams and visitors have plenty of time to admire them. Are sharp objects out for display? Are toxins at eye level? Are poisonous plants out of reach? Even pleasant holiday displays featuring poinsettias are danger zones because the plants are poisonous.

Keep people moving. One thing that many autistic people usually avoid is crowds. Many parents of autistic children report horror stories of their child running away from situations that have too much crowding and traffic jams of fellow shoppers and visitors. Walking through your venues at peak times can be eye opening. Posting crowded and sparse visiting times can help people make decisions about when to visit.

Let technology help you out. Using digital scanners is a great way to bypass tricky human interactions and using technology to answer frequently asked questions can also be a great help. Some autistic visitors might also appreciate having a keyboard chat with an employee rather than a face-to-face interaction. Centralizing technology supports in a consistent and easily found location will also help autistic customers and visitors. The more predictable, the better.

Post success stories for autistic people. Do you recall being so excited to receive a coloring book page and tiny box of crayons at a restaurant to pass the time? Providing a customer with a well-designed success story that describes a typical experience people have at this place, instead of promising it will be so fun, is a great way to give an autistic customer some information about the expectations associated with this venue. The story can also provide helpful suggestions for having a great visit. An example is a sentence in a success story that might read, “At a hockey game, some fans and officials might use air horns to celebrate – and it is ok for me to use ear protection so the sound won’t seem as loud.”

Manage community safety factors. Knowing safety protocols ensures that all visitors have a good experience at your community venue. Some autistic individuals have worries about safety, and so do their families. Posting information about hazards in easily understood language or images will help some autistic people – and their families – relax. Another factor is to make all entrances and exits clearly marked and distinctive. Knowing where to go in emergencies is important to some visitors - and posting information in a variety of ways helps them know these things.

All in all, many social factors can be met by delivering information in a variety of ways, including images and different languages. They can also be supported by human and technological options for gaining information. These types of supports not only help your autistic visitors, but also those who do not speak English or understand your culture and expectations.