

## Manual Excerpt

### AUTISM AND ANXIETY

People who think differently and who communicate differently have a hard time in our world. Imagine yourself without language skills or cultural reference points in a foreign country. Imagine that even your parents & siblings were part of this foreign culture with many unspoken social rules. Additionally, imagine the world to be extremely loud or bright. How would you feel? Now consider this question: How do we treat people who look like us and sound like us but who routinely mess up the social rules or over-react to sensory experiences that the rest of us don't even notice? Usually, the answer is: Not very nicely. In fact, adults with autism report that often the hardest part of being on the spectrum is how everyone else treats you.

Many recreation programs are finding themselves routinely hosting kids on the autism spectrum. Whether or not families disclose a diagnosis, it usually becomes apparent from their behavior that certain kids need extra support. People with autism behave differently, because they THINK differently, and accommodating some of these differences is the key to their success in your program.

### INTRODUCTION SUMMARY

The following factors make it difficult for people with autism to understand the expectations at a new place:

- **Anxiety:** none of us are good listeners when we're anxious
- **Auditory processing is difficult:** long verbal statements can be hard for kids to follow, while visual information is often processed more easily
- **Difficulty interpreting tone of voice or facial expressions:** people with autism often overlook social nuance in voice tone or face. For example, if you use, the "I'm getting frustrated" tone, a camper with autism might completely miss the implied hint to knock it off.

The trifecta of being anxious, having verbal language challenges, and missing social cues makes it extremely likely that kids with autism will behave oddly and/or anxiously at a new program. Luckily, there are some easy and affordable ways to set these kids up for success.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

### **Review your administrative processes**

The first step to inclusion is to review your administrative processes to make sure you can collect helpful information about the kids you'd like to include. This also allows you to decide who you can practically include and who you don't have resources for. For example, if you have a program that could easily be modified to include kids who communicate differently and need a little extra social support, but you can't imagine finding staff to help a 13-year-old kid wipe their bottom or use a

diaper, then you need to collect information about people's needs. You need a gentle and friendly way to tell a family that your program isn't a good fit for them, and you need language to be able to ask follow up questions for confusing information.

Walk yourself through this list as an audit of your intake procedures:

1. **Look at your website or landing page.** Does the description of your program indicate what kind of kids will fit into your program? If not, update it with language that makes sense for your parameters.

***Example:***

*NEW! FALL HIKING & CAMPFIRE CLUB! In this group, we hike to a new spot each week, have a campfire, and make s'mores! Our program is a good fit for kids 8-10 years old, who love the outdoors. We have a 1:5 staff ratio and our program takes place at Richmond Hill State Forest. We hike some pretty steep rocky trails, so participants must be able to walk at least a mile on their own. There are bathrooms at the trailhead and we expect our hikers to take care of their own toileting needs. We enjoy a diverse group, and we welcome kids with special needs in our group. Give us a call with questions!*