Imagine going to a school library in search of a certain book, but when you look on the shelves you perceive that the books are arranged by color or by size as opposed to the Dewey Decimal System. As we go about our daily routines at home or in school, it is easy to take for granted that our world is conducive to the way most of us think and process information. We tend to overlook the notion that not every brain works the same way. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disability that affects an individual's social interaction and communication development and may result in restrictive interests, repetitive or problem behaviors. Individuals with ASD struggle to live in a nonsensically structured world.

Libraries as Comfortable, Low Stress Places

The number of individuals with ASD visiting school libraries continues to increase as the diagnosis of the disorder increases. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2012) reported one in every eighty-eight children is identified with ASD. Rather than being another confusing environment, school libraries have the potential to contribute to the students' educational plan. Autism Speaks, the world's largest autism science and advocacy organization, has identified leisure participation in libraries as excellent environments for individuals with ASD (Autism Speaks, 2011). Libraries are comfortable, interesting, and low stress places for people with ASD. Libraries have predictable rules, logical layouts, systematically arranged materials, and some quiet areas—all characteristics of environments that support this population. Technology—another common interest of students with ASD—that enables them to function independently is often available (Ennis-Cole & Smith, 2011). Libraries are important avenues for accessing community resources and have the potential to serve as a safe and acceptable location to explore interests, connect with others, and participate in self-directed learning.

Modifications, Big and Small

How does your school library support this very diverse group? Let us consider how adjustments can be made in the school library environment to support the needs of individuals. A problem that persists in settings such as a classroom or library is the number of distractions. For an individual with ASD, these aspects of the environment can make or break their concentration and comfort level. It is easy to overlook certain things, like posters on the wall, the pattern on the floor, and even the amount of light in a room that may result in the student fixating or focusing all attention on the pattern rather than engaging with the learning materials. Lighting is also a common problem when there are bright lights or large windows distracting.

Students with ASD generally benefit from routine, another reason why the library can be a good learning environment for them. Students with ASD are likely to be more comfortable knowing that every time they visit a place they will have a similar experience. This can be supported by keeping the furniture and books in the same place, having a specific place for technology, and paying close attention to the structure of walkways. Using a self-checkout system is also helpful because this process is consistent, and once the student learns to use the system successfully, it can be continued on each visit.

A Simple Space Solution

A simple corner can be utilized to create an environment with minimal distractions. Furniture can be turned to face the corner, away from any windows or other disturbances. The reason a corner is more effective than just a desk barrier is that “even when some learners have a visual barrier, they are so distracted by the noise of other activities that they constantly get up and look over or around the barrier” (Janzen, 2003). Sometimes the barrier itself can be somewhat
distracting. Remove any clutter or decorations from the walls. If possible, replace bright overhead lights with lamps or low light. This quiet space may enhance the student’s ability to focus comfortably and help him or her feel in control of the environment.

Visual supports and cues can play a critical role in understanding the layout and structure of the library, the process for finding and checking out books, and the library rules. Visual cues can be anything from item labels to describing the procedures of checking out a book.

Visual supports provide an alternate format to enhance understanding of the library’s structure, organization, and processes.

**BENEFITS FOR ALL**

Making slight adjustments in the school library will reap benefits for individuals with ASD. These adjustments might have the added benefit of helping all students who need structure and routine.

**Resources about Autism and Libraries:**

Libraries and Autism: We’re Connected: [www.librariesandautism.org](http://www.librariesandautism.org)

This website provides guidance for librarians and library staff to help them better serve individuals with autism and their families.

**Project ENABLE:** [http://projectenable.syr.edu](http://projectenable.syr.edu)

Housed at Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies Center for Digital Literacy, this project provides a high quality, comprehensive, train-the-trainer continuing education program for New York’s school librarians to help them create and deliver effective library and information services to students with disabilities, but it is open to anyone.

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**Suggestions from the point of view of an individual with ASD:**

A simple, clutter-free environment will help me focus.

- I am more comfortable in a space with limited visual or auditory stimulation. Piles of books on carts or papers on the walls divert my attention and may increase my stress.

**I like things to be the same.**

- Consistency is important. I like it when the furniture and other materials stay in the same place. A simple floor map can help me get started and will help again if furniture or displays have been rearranged. Once I find my way around, I can rely on that knowledge when I return.

**I am most comfortable when I can access a quiet space.**

- A desk or a soft, comfortable chair placed in the corner of a room is ideal. Having secluded workstations throughout the library can make me feel like I can work and read without being disturbed. It can also serve as a spot I can go to when being involved with the other students gets to be too much for me. I can take a few minutes to refocus and de-stress.

**For me, picture signs and simple written text are more helpful than oral directions.**

- I am a visual learner. A list or picture board of the library rules is important. Pictorial labels on bookshelves at the end of aisles make more sense to me and may provide the support I need to learn the Dewey Decimal System. Directions on how to check out books or use the computer are also very helpful.

**It may be hard for me to communicate my wants and needs or ask for help.**

- I may not be able to speak to you easily. Looking at people’s faces and initiating conversations can be difficult, especially if I do not know you. I can use visual cues, such as pointing or nodding, or a communication device such as picture symbols. A self-checkout desk would be beneficial to me because I could be independent. I feel comfortable not needing to interact with someone else.

**I have special interests.**

- This is a good thing because when I come to the library, there are topics or activities I am going to enjoy. However, it can also be difficult for me when I do not get to spend time on what I want. I prefer doing what I want to do, and making changes to different topics or activities can be very hard.

**I may get stressed or upset and not be able to tell you what is happening.**

- The behaviors I exhibit when I am upset or stressed are my way of communicating. I may have different hand or arm movements, may squeal or make odd noises, walk or appear agitated. I want you to be aware that there is something wrong. Help me by remaining calm and prompting me to communicate using pictures, or showing you if I am having trouble using words to communicate.

**I may respond to noise, lights, crowds, or distractions differently than other students.**

- Windows or the hum of fluorescent lights can be especially distracting when I am trying to focus. Too much sensory input, e.g. lights, noise, textures, or smells can affect my ability to participate and learn. You may not even notice this, but I do. I am not being “difficult” on purpose. It is just the way my system works.

**Signs and labels will help me understand my environment.**

- There is much to be aware of in a library environment. Labeling will help me learn to interact effectively. Screen shots are terrific (my neurotypical friends like them too) for directions in specific areas, like computers.

**I aim for independence.**

- I want to be able to use a library like everyone else. Once I know the correct procedures and have the supports I need, I can enjoy the benefits of the library on my own.