



EDI Perspectives

Are Libraries Autism-Ready?

Neurodiversity is the concept that some people's differences in brain functioning—exemplified by autism, dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), etc.—are normal variations. Like other forms of neurodiversity, autism affects people on a spectrum that ranges from mild to severe. It is a neurodevelopmental disability that presents social, behavioral, and communication challenges, including extra sensitivity to sensory stimulation such as light or noise. While autistic children and their families can benefit from participating in library services, libraries have not always made efforts to accommodate their needs. The Autism-Ready Libraries Project at the University of Washington iSchool is using funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to change that.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PROJECT

In 2021, the CDC reported that one in 44 8-year-old children in the U.S. has been diagnosed with some form of autism. Recognizing the importance of literacy services for these children, a team at the University of Washington iSchool submitted a grant proposal for the Autism-Ready Libraries Project, which focuses on early literacy services for autistic children in libraries. The project was awarded an IMLS grant in 2020. I talked with several team members to learn more. Hala Annabi, an associate professor and master's of science in information management program chairperson, first became interested in the inclusion of neurodiverse people in the workplace. She was part of the research team for the Welcome Inclusion (WIN) initiative in Washington.

Michelle Martin, Beverly Cleary Professor for Children and Youth Services and M.L.I.S. program chairperson, is especially interested in the lack of training for future and current librarians in serving those who are neurodiverse. Milly Romeijn-Stout, a Ph.D. candidate, focuses on early literacy education for autistic children. Christine Moeller, a Ph.D. candidate and instructional designer, is concerned about professional development for adults and training for neurodiverse adults. The team has submitted a second grant proposal focusing on neurodiverse employees in libraries.

PREPARING LIBRARIES

While working on WIN, Annabi learned more about neurodiversity and discovered that it was not adequately addressed by libraries. Autistic people often have dyslexia and other reading disabilities. The Autism-Ready Libraries Project aims to prepare libraries and their staff members to work with autistic children. Autistic children have the same literacy needs as other children and can benefit from similar strategies, including participation in storytime programming. A major difference, though, is the format of the storytime program. It may include dimmer lights and may take place at off hours when the facility is quieter, since bright, buzzing lights and noisy areas are distracting. Programs can also include sensory therapy components such as scarves, feathers, or stretchy bands, as well as other physical elements. Professional development should be available for library staffers to learn about the needs of autistic children. Libraries should also cultivate a compassionate environment where families with autistic children feel welcome without judgment. Although the project started with libraries in Washington, the group has branched out to working with libraries in other states as well, surveying parents and librarians and conducting focus groups.



Hala Annabi



Michelle Martin



Milly Romeijn-Stout



Christine Moeller

THE FUTURE OF LITERACY PROGRAMMING

The final product of this project will be a toolkit of best practices and specific



designs for literacy programming. It will be available on a program website and will feature training materials for library staffers as well as service suggestions and guidelines for developing a community of practice. Other components will include an introduction to autism, stories from autistic adults, suggestions about acceptance and inclusion, and an environmental audit of library spaces. The toolkit will be based on what librarians have said they want and need. Developed with input from focus groups across the U.S., this openly available toolkit should be online in fall 2022.

It is certainly sad to hear stories like that of a family with an autistic child that

was asked to leave the library because the child was too loud. Library staffers did not ask how they could accommodate or include the child. The family did not return to the library. If the family had been able to effectively access the library, this might have encouraged the child to love reading by participating and taking books home, leading to a more literate youngster. However, many librarians and library users have had better experiences and have participated in beneficial activities. The project team hopes that the Autism-Ready Libraries Project will impact how libraries view and serve neurodiverse children and their families as well as how library school students are trained. The toolkit will provide a starting point for those in the field. Early literacy is just one part of a growing awareness about neurodiversity. This team has already applied for another grant related to neurodiverse adults and hopes to continue working in this area. Librarians love to help users and are ingenious about working things out. We can make real improvements in the lives of neurodiverse people, whether they are just learning to read or are already adults.

LINKS TO THE SOURCES

IMLS Awards \$1.5 Million to iSchool-led Research Projects
ischool.uw.edu/news/2020/07/imls-awards-15-million-ischool-led-research-projects

Welcome Inclusion (WIN)
welcomeinclusion.org

Gwen M. Gregory is associate dean for collections management at Northern Illinois University's Founders Memorial Library. Send your comments about this column to itletters@infotoday.com or tweet us (@ITINewsBreaks).

Neurodiversity Words

The Associated Press Stylebook website provides guidance on words related to neurodiversity (apstylebook.com; subscription required).

NEURODIVERSITY, NEURODIVERGENT, NEURODIVERSE, NEUROTYPICAL: *Neurodiversity* is the concept that differences in brain functioning such as *autism*, *dyslexia* or *attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder* are normal variations, with strengths and weaknesses. It is not a medical term. Individuals or groups that exhibit those variations are considered *neurodivergent* or *neurodiverse*. The larger population is said to be *neurotypical*.

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER, AUTISM: Umbrella terms for a broad range of developmental disorders that can involve widely varying degrees of intellectual, language and social difficulties, and repetitive behaviors. ... Many autistic people strongly prefer identity-first language: *She is autistic*; *he is an autistic student*. Some prefer person-first language: *She has autism*; *people with autism*. ... When a preference isn't known, and in describing groups of autistic people, use identity-first language.

DYSLEXIA, DYSLEXIC: *Dyslexia* is a learning disability characterized by problems identifying speech sounds and learning how to connect them to letters and words.

ATTENTION-DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER: One of the most common developmental disorders in children; often lasts into adulthood. People with *ADHD* may be overly active or may have trouble paying attention or controlling impulsive behavior. ... Do not use the outdated terms *attention-deficit disorder* or *ADD*.