Advocating For Autism-Inclusive Early Literacy Services at Your Library

This resource includes information about the importance of autism-inclusive early literacy services, and step-by-step guidance for library professionals to advocate for autism-inclusive services.

This guide includes:

- Background information on the early literacy needs of autistic children and their families
- The importance of autism-inclusive early literacy services in libraries
- An advocacy checklist with step-by-step guidance

Why are autism-inclusive early literacy services needed in libraries?

Families with autistic children are in need of early literacy support

Autistic children often struggle with developing reading and writing skills at school (Westerveld et al., 2018). Up to 50% of school-age autistic children are identified as having reading challenges (Arciuli et al., 2013). Additionally, researchers have found that a lack of support for autistic children at two years old predicts reading performance at five years old (Davidson & Ellis, 2014). Autistic children also have less exposure to literacy materials and activities at home (Van der Schuit et al., 2009). This has a negative impact on early language development as well as early literacy learning for autistic children.

Key library early literacy services are inaccessible to autistic children and their families

Research suggests that libraries' early learning services support children and families in ways that promote early literacy skills (Albright et al., 2009), providing needed services to families who may be unable to access them elsewhere. However, current library spaces, social environments, policies, and procedures act as significant barriers for families with autistic children to access library services and resources (Kaeding et al., 2017; Matoushek et al., 2017; Prendergast, 2017). These barriers include sensory barriers due to a lack of sensory support in library spaces and programs, as well as social barriers such as a fear of being judged for having a child who may be unable to meet the social expectation to sit still and quiet.

Barriers present in library programs for autistic children include:

Families feel unwelcome - families with autistic children feel excluded from library programs, and fear being judged negatively by library staff and other families

Inaccessible sensory environment - autistic children can be sensitive to loud noises in library programs, as well as fluorescent lights, and busy visual environments

Previous negative experiences - many families have faced negative judgement in the past from other attendees, or been asked to leave a program by a staff member

Few inclusive elements - programs may not provide multiple ways for different types of learners to engage and participate, such as visual supports or nonspeaking participation

Unpredictability - families do not know what will happen in the program so they can choose a good fit for their autistic child(ren), or prepare their child(ren) ahead of time

Physically inaccessible - there is often limited wheelchair/stroller accessibility in programs, and families have safety concerns such as stacked chairs or open doors

How can I advocate for autism-inclusive services at my library?

This checklist provides step-by-step guidance on making the case for autism-inclusive early literacy services to library management and other library officials. Effectively advocating for these services and programs includes providing information that is specific to your service area and library.

☐	**Step 1**: Collect information about your service area	• How many autistic children live in your town, city, or county? • The U.S. Census Bureau allows you to search by ZIP code, city, county, and/or state to find a specific area's characteristics • For regionally collected indicators or statistics, also check your local, county, and state government web sites
☐	**Step 2**: Identify service gaps in your area	• What services are already provided for families with autistic children in your area? • What gaps might exist related to early literacy?
☐	**Step 3**: Identify autism organizations in your area	• What organizations could you reach out to in order to support your autism-inclusive services?
☐	**Step 4**: Identify possible barriers at your library for autistic children and their families	• Utilize our Environmental Audit Checklist to identify barriers • Identify possible items to purchase to mitigate barriers using our Sensory Kit Checklist
☐	**Step 5**: Create a sample autism-inclusive library program	• Utilize our Storytime Templates and Program Plans • Prepare a budget for your library program
☐	**Step 6**: Review and synthesize your information into a report you can present	• The number of autistic children and families in your area • How your library or system can support their early literacy needs • A list of organizations your library may be able to partner with • Specific changes to mitigate barriers at your library • A sample budget for these changes • Specific changes to increase autism inclusion in your children's programs • A sample budget for an inclusive program

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