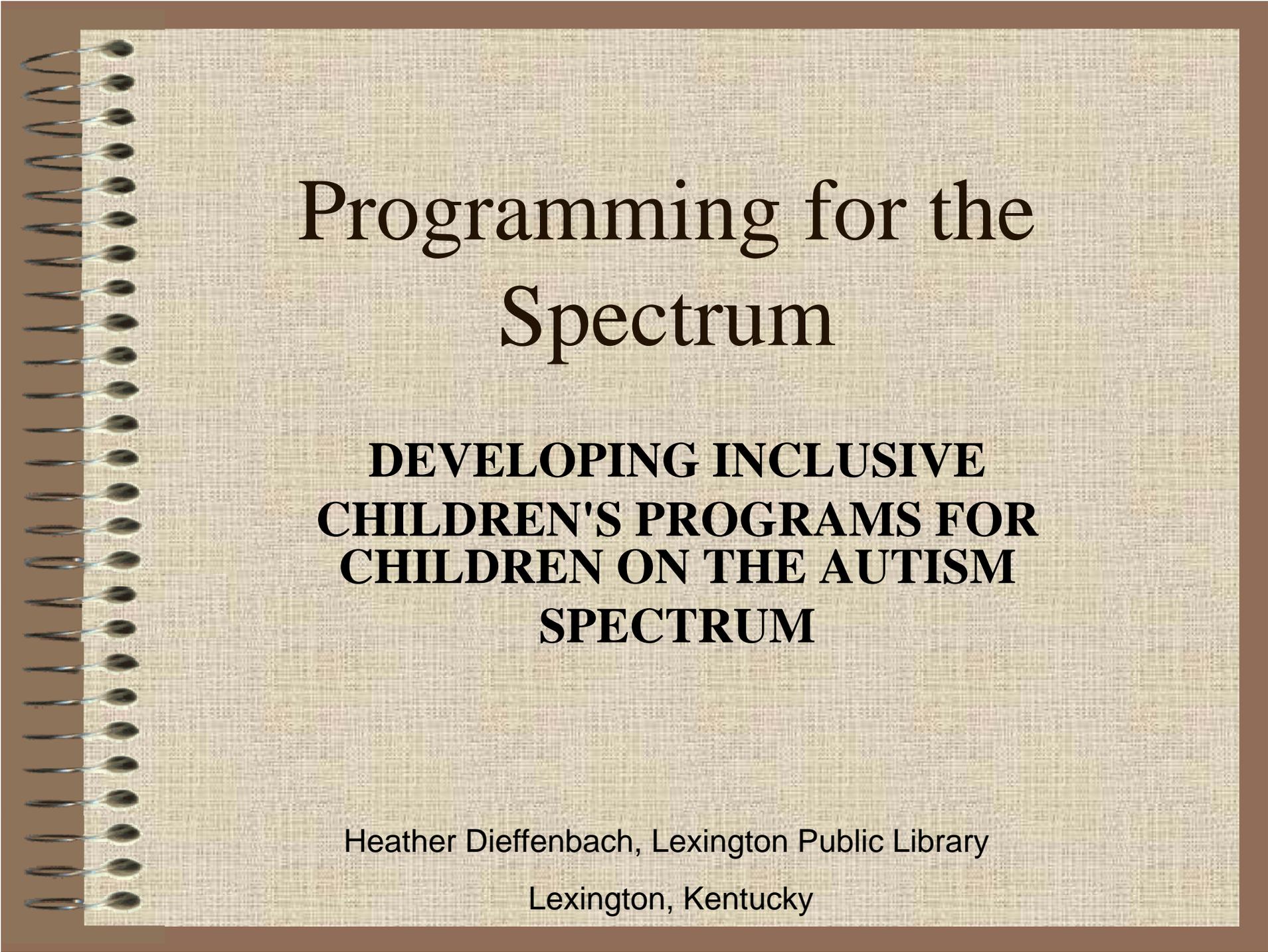**Programming for the Spectrum: Developing Inclusive
Children's Programs for Children on the Autism Spectrum**

**Heather Dieffenbach
Lexington Public Library**

As more and more of the children and families served by our libraries are effected by Autism Spectrum Disorder, the fastest growing developmental disability in America today, it becomes important for librarians to understand both the rewards and challenges of serving this population.   We will look at characteristics of children with Autism, challenges for their families in utilizing library services, and focus on modifications we can make to existing library programs to better accommodate children with Autism, developmental delays, and Sensory Integration Dysfunction. By using techniques such as picture schedules, priming, repetition, and sensory activities, storytime can become a valuable experience for all children. While we will focus on programming for preschool children, we will also discuss solutions for serving older children, as well.
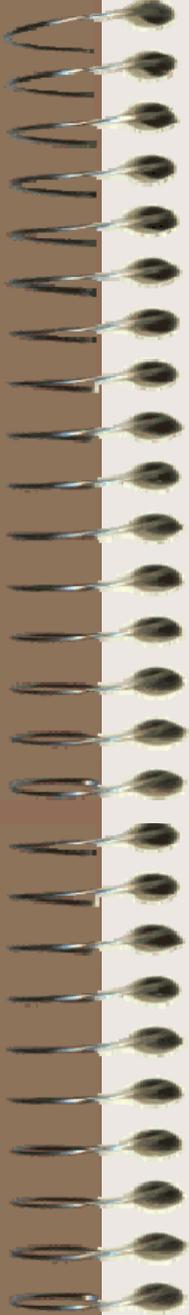
Programming for the Spectrum

## DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Heather Dieffenbach, Lexington Public Library

Lexington, Kentucky

- What is Autism?
- Barriers for Children With Autism in the Library
- Benefits of Storytime for Children with Autism
- Adapting Storytime for Children with Autism
- Resources

What is autism?

- Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others.

- Autism is a spectrum disorder and it affects each individual differently and at varying degrees.

Autism Society of America
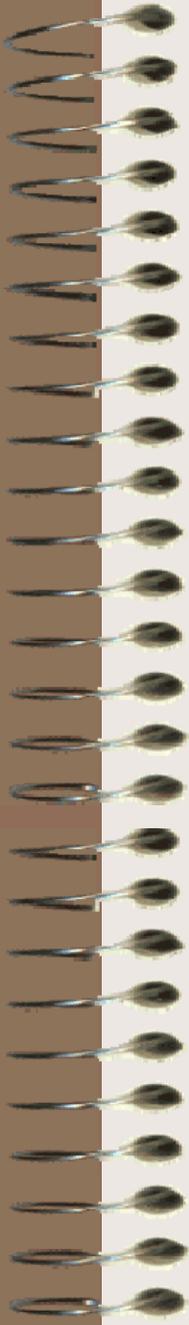
Individuals with autism often exhibit some of the following characteristics:

- Lack of or delay in spoken language
- Repetitive use of language and/or motor mannerisms (e.g., hand-flapping, twirling objects)
- Little or no eye contact
- Lack of interest in peer relationships
- Lack of spontaneous or make-believe play
- Persistent fixation on parts of objects

Autism Society of America
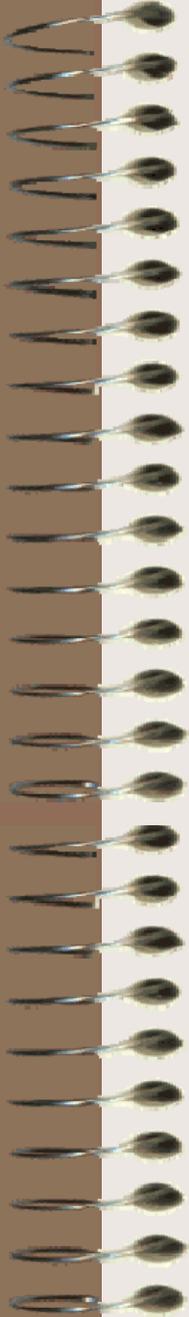
Because people with autism also process and respond to information in unique ways, they may also exhibit some of the following traits:

- Insistence on sameness; resistance to change
- Difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures or pointing instead of words
- Echolalia: Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language
- Laughing (and/or crying) for no apparent reason; showing distress for reasons not apparent to others
- Preference to being alone; aloof manner
- Tantrums
- Difficulty in mixing with others
- Not wanting to cuddle or be cuddled

More Traits of Autism

- Little or no eye contact
- Unresponsive to normal teaching methods
- Sustained odd play
- Spinning objects
- Obsessive attachment to objects
- Apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain
- No real fears of danger
- Noticeable physical over-activity or extreme under-activity
- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Non-responsive to verbal cues; acts as if deaf, although hearing tests in normal range
- aggressive and/or self-injurious behavior

Autism Society of America
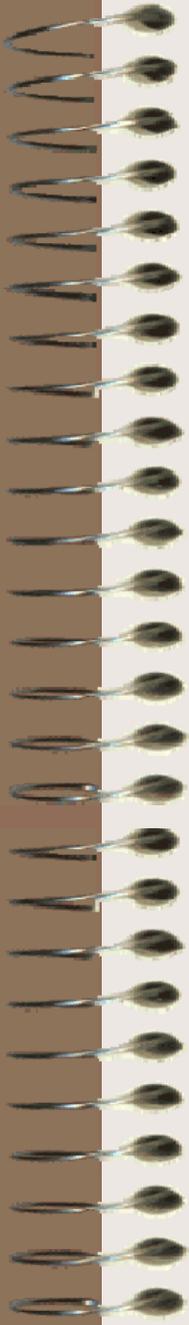
Not everyone with autism will display the same behaviors.

If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.
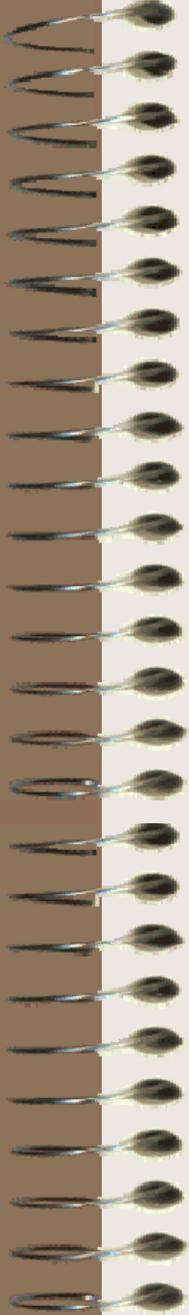
Other disorders included in or associated with the autism spectrum

- PDD-NOS

- Asperger's Syndrome
  - No speech delay
  - No cognitive delay

- Rett's Disorder

- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder

Myths About Autism

- Everyone with autism has a savant ability
- People with autism are not affectionate
- Everyone with autism is mentally retarded
- Everyone with autism flaps their arms
- Autism is caused by poor parenting

Sensory Processing Disorder

- Also known as Sensory Integration Dysfunction and Sensory Integration Disorder

  - **Sensory processing** is a term that refers to the way the nervous system receives messages from the senses and turns them into appropriate motor and behavioral responses. **Sensory Processing Disorder** is a condition that exists when sensory signals *don't* get organized into appropriate responses.

   Dr. Lucy Jane Miller, founder of the SPD Foundation

How does Sensory Processing Disorder Feel?

- Dr. Stanley Greenspan, author of <u>The Challenging Child</u> describes it with this analogy:

"Imagine driving a car that isn't working well. When you step on the gas the car sometimes lurches forward and sometimes doesn't respond. When you blow the horn it sounds blaring. The brakes sometimes slow the car, but not always. The blinkers work occasionally, the steering is erratic, and the speedometer is inaccurate. You are engaged in a constant struggle to keep the car on the road, and it is difficult to concentrate on anything else."

How could Sensory Processing Disorder affect a child during Storytime?

- Child may have difficulty sitting still. She could feel as if gravity wasn't effecting her enough to hold her body to the ground.
- The lights in the room may be too bright.
- Music played or sung during the program may be too loud.
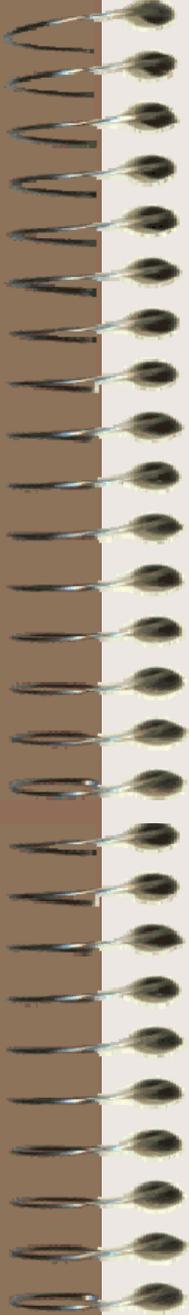
How could Sensory Processing Disorder affect a child during Storytime? continued

- Child may push too hard with crayons to color his craft.
- The smells in the room could make the child nauseous.
- If someone touches the child it could feel like sandpaper on their skin.
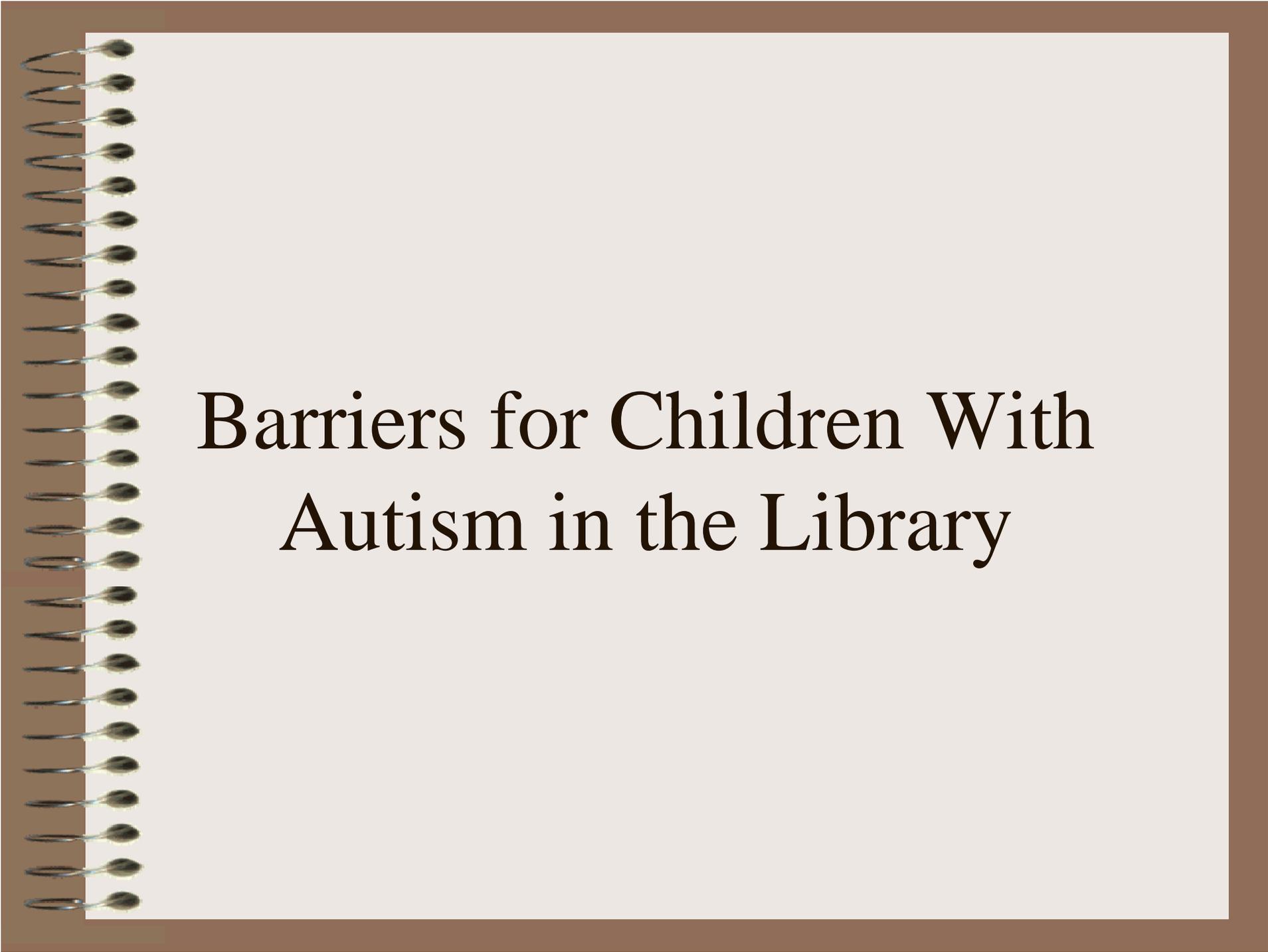
Barriers for Children With Autism in the Library

Behavior

- – Noise: Loud or inappropriate utterances
- – Stereotypic behaviors and self-stimulation: Repetitive movements or patterns of behavior that seem unusual
- – Open spaces
- – Tantrums

Communication Barriers

- Difficulty with verbal communication
  - Might use an alternative communication method (sign language, PECS, augmented communication devices, etc).

- Difficulty understanding body language, tone of voice, or facial expressions

- Echolalia: Delayed or immediate

Cognitive Barriers

- Children may lack knowledge possessed by typically developing children: event sequencing, basic story structure, word boundaries…and a sense of the purpose of books.
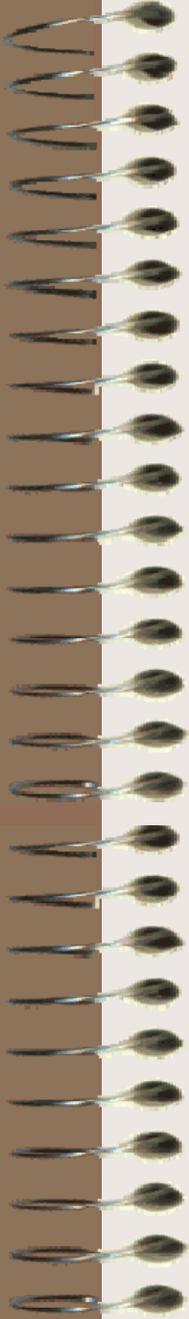
<div align="right">(Owens 1997)</div>

- Consider expanded age ranges for special needs storytimes. Many older children with disabilities may be functioning at a lower emotional and intellectual level.
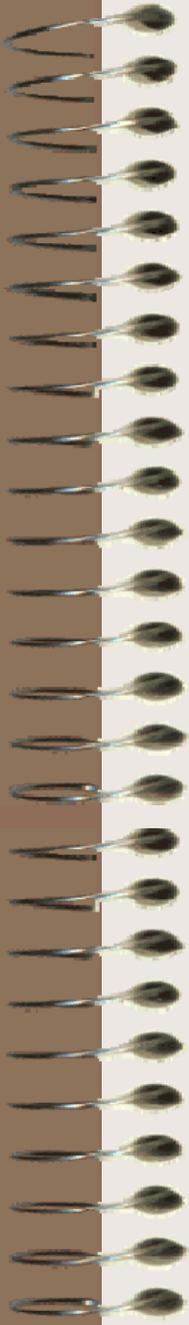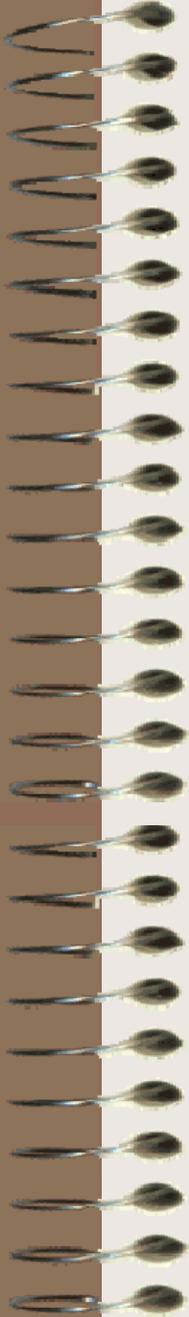
Social Interactions

- Difficulty deciphering social cues

- Difficulty interacting with other children

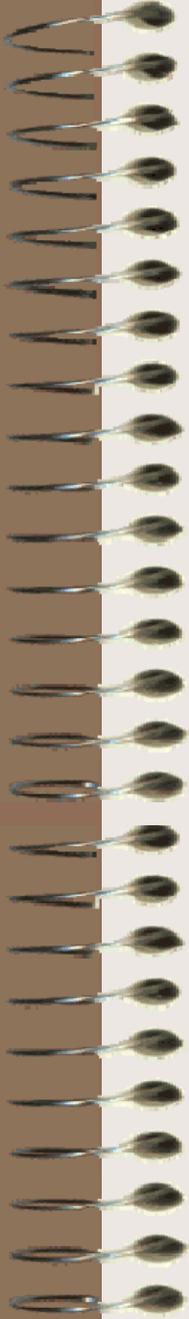- May not respond to greetings or questions

Changes in Environment

- Difficulty adapting to a new environment

- Difficulty adapting to changes in a familiar environment

Perceptions of Library Staff and Other Customers

- Parents worry that child's behavior will anger library staff

- Parents are afraid of being judged by other parents

Recommendations for Interacting with Children with Autism

- Say exactly what you mean.
- Be clear about the rules.
- Do not insist on eye contact.
- Watch out for signs of emotional distress.
- Avoid touching.
- Set a positive example for people nearby.
- Interact with children in a manner consistent with home or school situations.
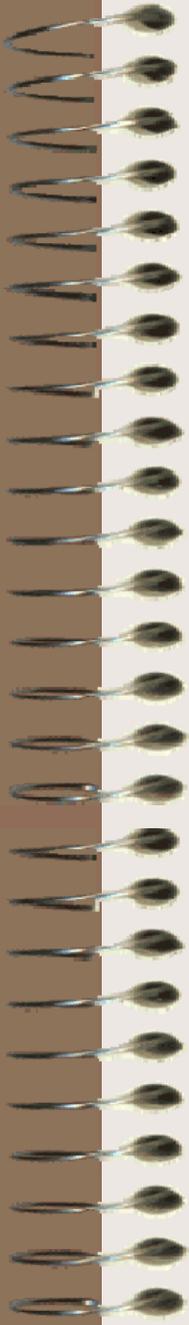
(Halvorson 2006)

Benefits of Storytime for Children with Autism
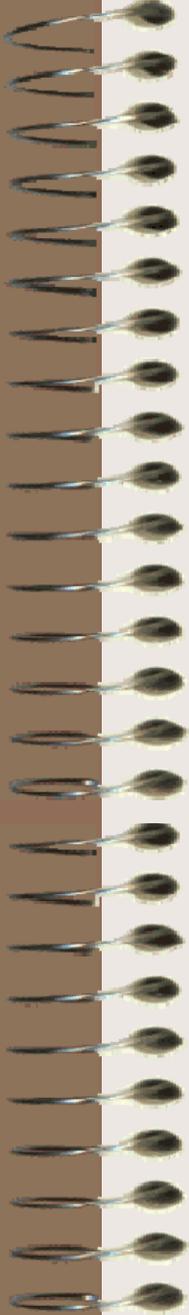
Improvement of Reading Skills Can Help Children Improve Oral Language Skills

- Frequent and repeated shared book reading can lead to increases in oral language and attention and decreases in echolalia, stereotypic behaviors, and verbal outbursts.
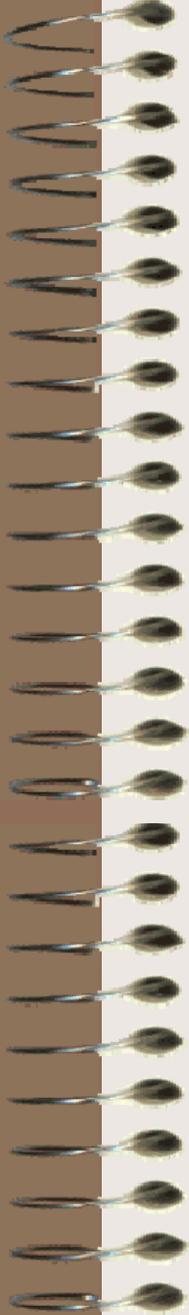
(Owens 1997)

Improvement of Reading Skills Can Help Children Improve Oral Language Skills, continued

- Children with autism have difficulty understanding the function of literacy. We can help by promoting it's use in a natural environment.
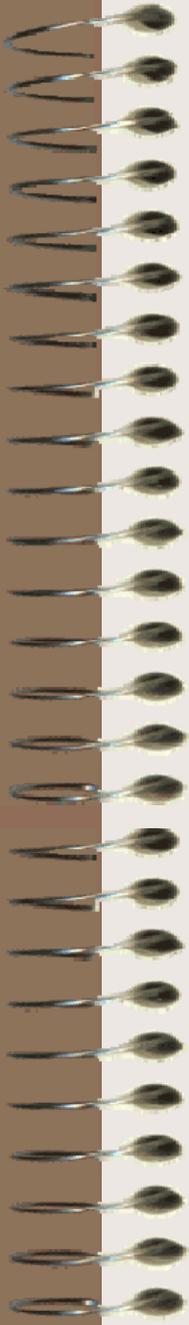
  – Use a flip chart during songs and fingerplays.

(Owens 1997)

Improvement of Reading Skills Can Help Children Improve Oral Language Skills, continued

- Literacy rich environments are essential to the development of all modes of language for children with language impairment.

 – Parents of children with disabilities may give up reading aloud after becoming discouraged.

(Owens 1997)

Improvement of Reading Skills Can Help Children Improve Oral Language Skills, continued

- Parents who do read to their children tend to dominate the reading too much. We need to teach the benefits of reciprocal or dialogic reading.

- Reciprocal story reading enhances children's vocabulary and syntax development.

(Owens 1997)
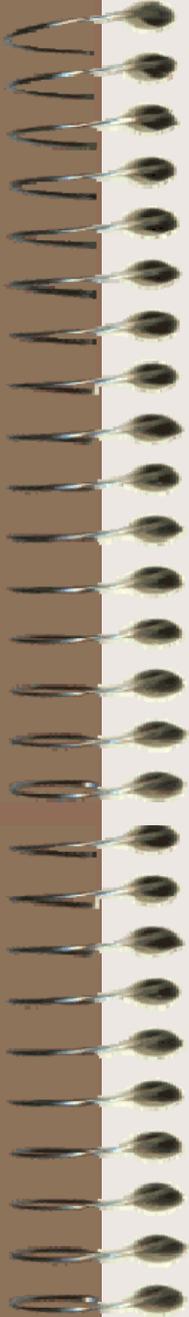
Improvement of Reading Skills Can Help Children Improve Auditory Skills

- Children might hold up a cut-out character or a puppet when they hear its name. Such active learning in literacy tasks has been shown to improve comprehension in language development.

(Owens 1997)

Adapting Storytimes for Children With Autism

Priming

- Priming is a method of previewing information or activities that may be difficult for the child, prior to the actual event.

  Dr. Chris Whalen

  – Methods of priming include Social Stories, video priming, and practicing in the actual location of the event.

Social Stories ™

- A Social Story™ describes a situation, skill, or concept in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses in a specifically defined style and format. The goal of a Social Story™ is to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner that is easily understood by its audience.

Carol Gray

http://www.thegraycenter.org/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.display&page_id=30
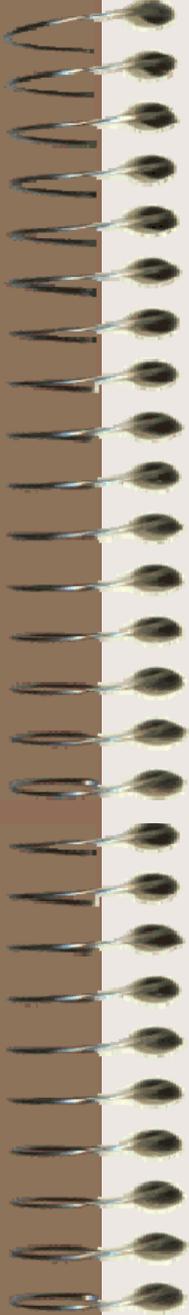
Going to Storytime Social Story

"When it is story time I sit on the floor with my friends and look at the teacher. The teacher reads a story to the class and shows us the pictures. Sometimes I want to say something about the story. When I talk while the teacher is reading it is hard for my friends to hear the story. When I want to talk about the story I will try to first raise my hand, then wait for the teacher to say my name, then I can talk."

http://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com/The_SPD_Companion-social-stories-and-spd.html

Visual Schedules

- Provide a picture schedule of storytime events.

- Keep pictures simple and concrete.

- Consider using actual photographs of the child or a program like Boardmaker
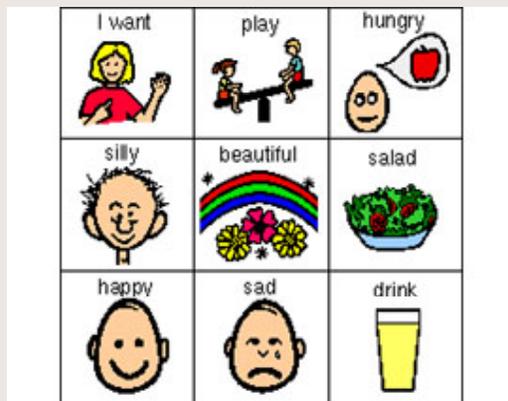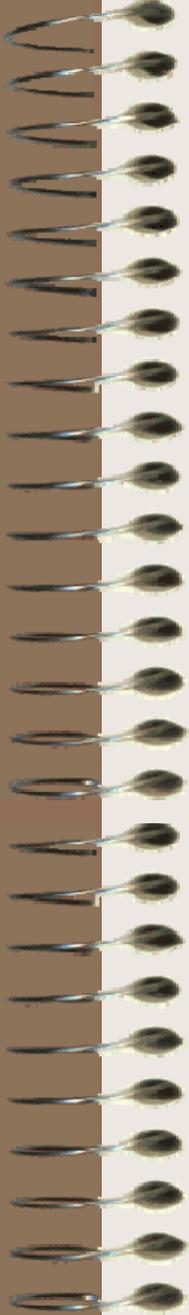
Other Methods of Priming

- The parent and child can visit the library before opening.
- The child could spend some time in the storytime room before the program begins.
- The parent could be provided with storytime materials in advance of the program to practice at home.

Sensory Activities

- Movement activities
  - Encourage participation
  - Aid memory and sequencing.
  - Enhances the experience for children needing gross motor input.

  (Owens 1997)

- Find tasks that give children the sensory input they need: heavy work, jumping, movement and music activities.

Repetition and Routine

- Children will gain both enjoyment and comprehension from repeated readings of the story.
  - Encourage parents to read the story every night for a week before they come to storytime.
  - Read the story more than once during storytime.
- Children with autism function well within routines. Try to keep as much as possible constant in your storytime: location, songs and fingerplays, order of activities.
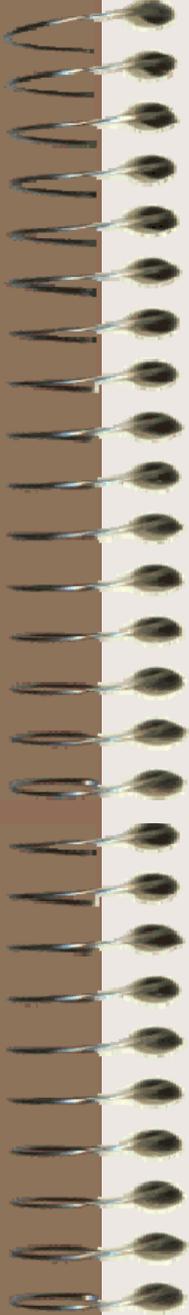
Peer Modeling and Peer Buddies

- While some families may feel more comfortable in a special needs only storytime, children with ASD benefit from mainstreaming.

- Children with autism work well when taught by their peers.

- Receiving help is less socially stigmatizing when it comes from another child rather than an adult.

- Consider matching a child with a disability with another child who may be interested in the friendship.

Errorless Learning

- Children with autism learn from what they do. Errorless learning is used by some therapists to prevent children from learning an incorrect behavior or becoming frustrated.
    - Example: "What does the brown bear see? A red bird….What does the brown bear see?"
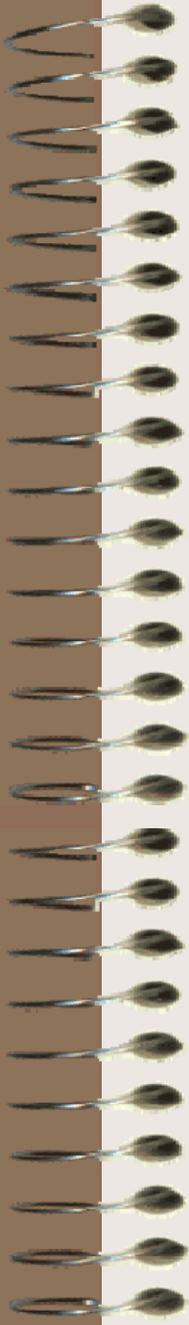
Choosing Books to Use with Children with Autism

- Predictable and Pattern Books
  - Provide a simple and supportive context for reciprocal reading.
    - Then move to changing context to encourage generalizations.

  - Provide a framework for understanding the story.

(Owens 1997)
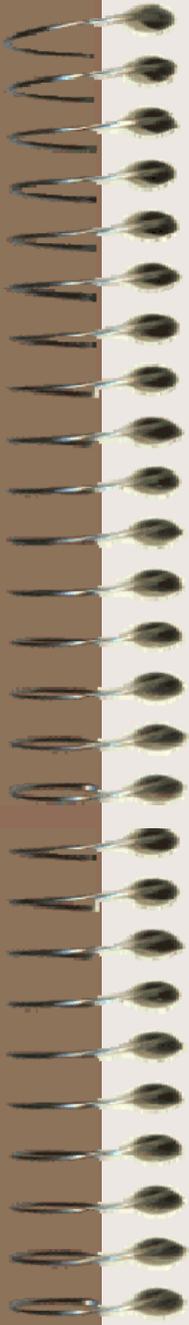
Evaluating Storytimes for Children with Autism

- May receive little validation from children, so check with the parent.

(Akin 2004)

Resources--Articles

Akin, Lynn, Donna MacKinney, "Autism, Literacy, and Libraries", <u>Children and Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children</u> 2(2004): 35-43.

Bellon, Monica, Billy T. Ogletree, William E. Harn. "Repeated Storybook Reading as a Language Intervention for Children with Autism: A Case Study on the Application of Scaffolding." <u>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</u>. 15(2000) 52-58.

Resources--Articles

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Farmer, Lesley, Maureen Sykes. "Library Services for Students with Autism." CSLA Journal 31(2008): 25-27.

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Resources--Articles

Kaiser, Crystal. "Is Your Early Childhood Literature Collection Disability-Inclusive and Current?" Children and Libraries. 5(2007): 5-12.

Lanter, Elizabeth, Linda R. Watson. "Promoting Literacy in Students With ASD: The Basics for the SLP." Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools 39(2008): 33-43.

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Resources--Articles

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Programming for Children With Special Needs Lets
Them Know That They are Valued Library Patrons."
School Library Journal. 39(1993): 36-38.

Wojahn, Rebecca Hogue. "Everyone's Invited: Ways to
Make Your Library More Welcoming to Children With
Special Needs." School Library Journal. 52(2006):
46-48.

Resources--Books

Koegel, Lynn Kern and Claire LaZebnik. <u>Overcoming Autism: Finding the Answers, Strategies, and Hope That Can Transform a Child's Life</u>. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Kranowitz, Carol Stock. <u>The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun: Activities for Kids with Sensory Processing Disorder</u>. 2. New York: Perigee, 2006.

Kranowitz, Carol Stock. <u>The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping With Sensory Processing Disorder</u>. New York: Perigee, 2005.

Resources--Books

Miller, Lucy Jane. <u>Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder</u>. New York: Putnam and Sons, 2006.

Schiller, Pam and Pat Phipps. <u>Starting with Stories: Engaging Multiple Intelligences Through Children's Books</u>. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, 2006.

Resources--Websites

SPD Foundation

http://www.spdfoundation.net

Information on Sensory Processing
  Disorder

Autism Society of America

http://www.autism-society.org

Information about Autism

Resources--Websites

The Gray Center

http://www.thegraycenter.org/store/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.display&page_id=30

Information about Social Stories

Libraries and Autism

http://www.thejointlibrary.org/autism/

A customer service training video and other resources (including a fill-in-the-blank social story) from the Scotch Plains Public Library and the Fanwood Memorial Library about serving customers with autism spectrum disorders.
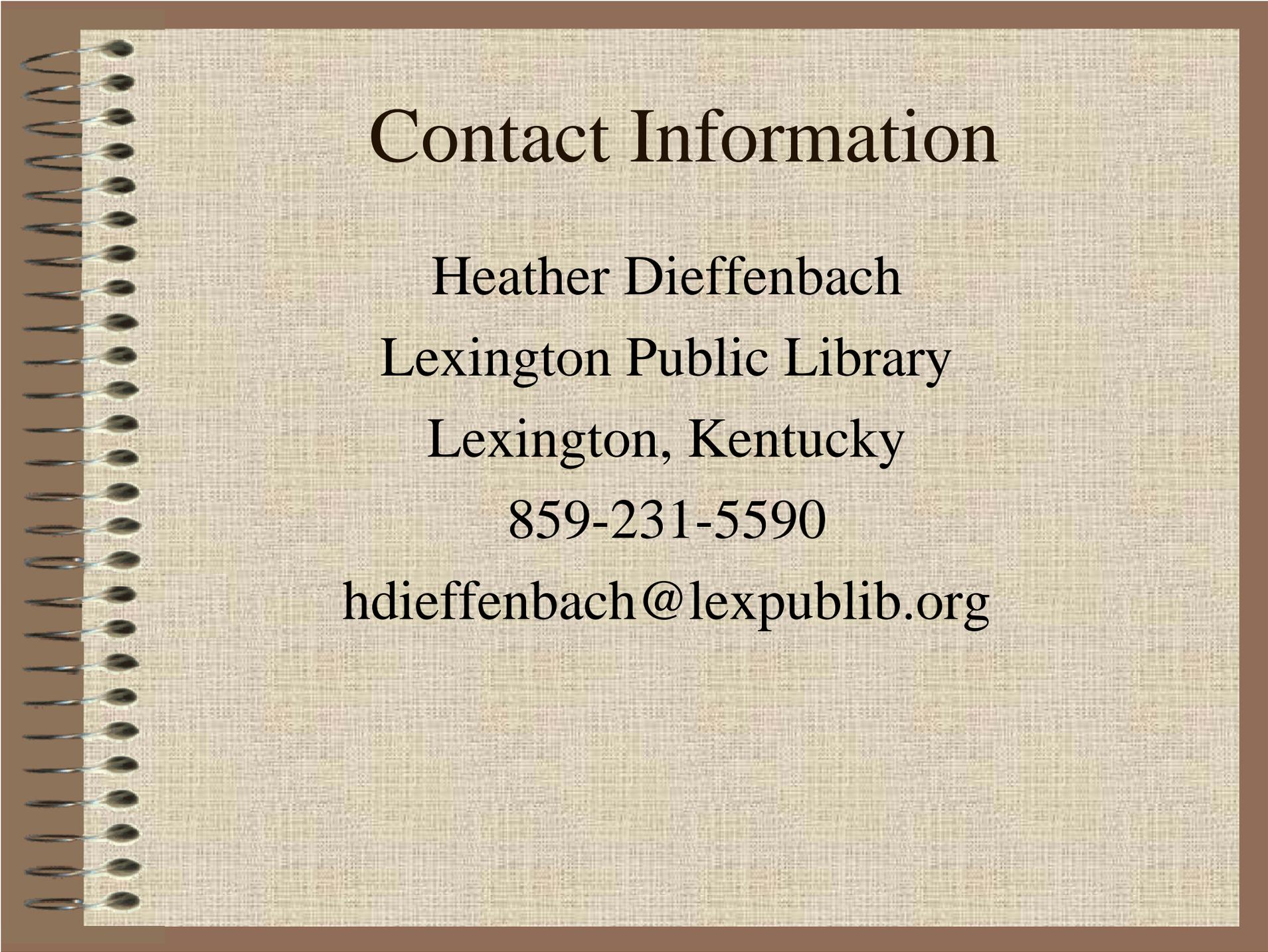
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