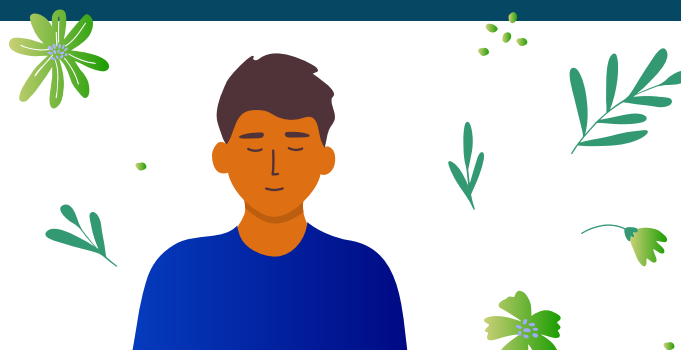# Adolescent Autism
Tip Sheet

A utism, or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a developmental disability that can impact the development of social skills, communication, and cognitive function (National Autism Association, n.d.). Individuals with ASD may communicate, act, or interact differently from individuals without ASD (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). ASD is referred to as a "spectrum disorder" because individuals with ASD can have a range of symptoms that vary in severity and may need differing levels of support (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Project Amp participants with autism may have unique needs related to planning and engagement. As a mentor, you have the opportunity to meet youth "where they are" and walk through the Project Amp materials in a way that is person-centered, catered to each person's unique experiences, and builds upon their strengths.

Tips for Supporting Youth with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a Project Amp Mentor

When meeting with youth with ASD, you may need to use different communication styles, make changes to your meeting environment, or try different engagement strategies to meet their needs. Some examples and suggested tips are below.

Communication and Planning

- Some individuals with ASD may take things you say literally and have trouble with figurative or metaphorical language. Be clear and concise when communicating during Project Amp sessions (Wise, 2021). For example, you may avoid saying phrases like "settle down," and opt to guide youth through breathing exercises or mindfulness (Moreno & O›Neal, 2000).

- Allow youth to talk about their emotions in their own way (Barber, 2018).

- Youth with ASD may need additional time to fully think through their responses—allow for silence (Kluth, 2019).

- Share information about any changes to meeting location, date or time, or structure of sessions as soon as possible (Wise, 2021).

- At the end of each session, offer a preview of what's ahead in the next session to allow them to prepare for any changes or ask questions (Wise, 2021).
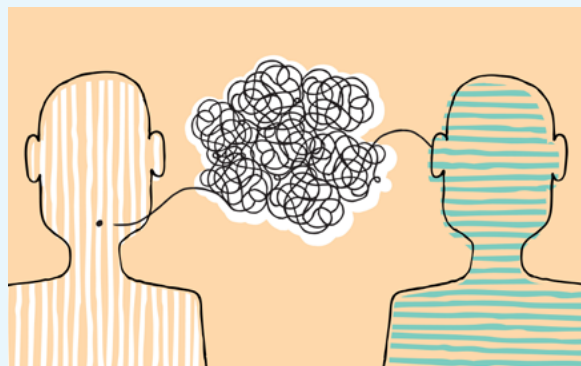
Environment

- Some environments may be overstimulating for individuals with ASD. Work with youth participants to decide what changes to the physical environment may make them more comfortable. This may include using softer lighting, adding a white noise machine to your office or meeting space, playing calming music, and removing clutter when possible (Autism Speaks, 2018).

- Some youth may benefit from a change in environment: consider changing the meeting space by going for a walk, sitting in a park, or meeting somewhere else. Before you make the change, check that the new meeting space has been approved by your school or site, and is of interest to the youth participant (Kluth, 2019).

- Add fidget toys to your office for youth to use during Project Amp sessions. Popular fidgets include Rubik's Cubes, fidget spinners, and pipe cleaners.

- Allow youth to bring familiar items with them to Project Amp sessions (Wise, 2021).

Engagement Strategies

- Engage in shared decision making throughout your sessions. Encourage youth to make decisions such as whether they work on worksheets independently or together with you and whether you will discuss topics out loud or write them down. You can also work together to decide how frequently you meet and for how long.

- Take time to build rapport. Allow youth to discuss their interests and use innovative strategies to engage them in the curriculum. For example, you can use guided imagery by asking youth to think about and describe something that brings them joy.

- Find commonalities with youth and use your shared interests to engage in the curriculum.

All youth participants will bring their own unique needs and preferences to Project Amp sessions. As their mentor, you can meet them where they are to best support them. Some youth, including youth with ASD, may have unique needs. Remain person-centered, trauma-informed, and seek feedback and ideas from your supervisor, other mentors, and teachers.

References

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