Environmental Analysis Tool

This Analysis Tool is intended for Local Children's Roundtables led by the Lead Dependency Judge and Children and Youth Administrator to improve the experiences of children and parents diagnosed with Autism within the dependency system. Opening communication and making simple changes to the physical environment can lead to tremendous success for everyone within the dependency court system.

The Autism and Dependency Court Taskforce created this tool to promote systemic reform across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The options, strategies, and guidelines were intentionally designed to be simple and positively impact as many children and parents as possible.

Current statistics collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that 1 in 44 children and more than 5.4 million adults in the United States have a diagnosis of Autism. This tool was designed to help counties analyze their courtrooms, waiting areas, and child welfare agencies with the goal of creating a more friendly environment for children and parents with Autism needs.

In addition to the physical environment, this tool was designed to support people diagnosed with Autism who may have unique communication needs. This tool helps counties assess their ability to meet these unique communication needs and provides suggested adaptations and strategies. The tool also provides considerations to help prepare persons with Autism to experience new environments and situations, both of which can be triggering events.

The first step in making a system change begins with communication and preparation. Communication will be vital to obtaining the needed information for planning, including input from the children and parents that we serve.

Environmental Analysis Tool

Communication and Preparation			
Questions	**Yes**	**No**	**Options/ Strategies/Guidelines**
Does your county have a way to communicate to the Judicial Officer the possible unique/individualized needs of a child or parent diagnosed with Autism?			Check the CPCMS dropdown for possible indications of Autism. Create an agreed-upon communication method between the Agency or other parties to the case and court, so the Judicial Officer is provided with the child's or parent's individualized needs ahead of time. Be sure a greeter is ready and willing to meet the child/parent. Create a checklist to be discussed with the child's caregivers to include questions such as: • What makes you feel calm/safe? • What makes you feel uncomfortable or triggers you? • What are some of your favorite things? • What can we do to help you if you are upset? (Contingency plan of support) • What time of the day is the best time to be at the courthouse?
Can the court adjust the time of the hearing to accommodate the child's or the parent's best time of day?			• Consider having children or parents diagnosed with Autism as the first hearing of the day to prevent long wait times or delays. • Ask caregivers if the child or parent has a time of day that is best for interactions and schedule the court hearing at that time.
			Ways to help prepare:

Environmental Analysis Tool

Do you prepare children or parents with Autism to visit the courthouse or agency?			• Allow a tour of the courthouse/agency before the hearing or appointment ➢ Meet the Judge and other courthouse staff or agency staff ➢ Consider having a designated person as a greeter to assist the child/parent through the courthouse ➢ Arrange the tour for a time of day the courthouse is not busy or crowded • Create County-Specific Social Stories ➢ Video tour of the courthouse/agency ▪ Post on the county website ▪ Provide a link to the video ➢ Social story of the specific courthouse/agency ▪ Provide a paper copy (laminated) ▪ Provide on the county website for viewing and/or printing ➢ Posters showing the different areas of the courthouse/agency • Provide a list to parents/caregivers of reminders to assure the child's needs are met before the court (similar to what the school provides before PSSA testing) ➢ Get a good night's sleep ➢ Eat a healthy meal ➢ Follow schedules or routines as much as possible (including medication schedules) ➢ Review the Social Story or Video
Do you allow a child's or parent's designated support person into the courtroom/appointment with them?			Find out who the child's or parent's support person is and allow them to be in the courtroom/office with them. This could include a provider, relative, or kin who can help the child or parent communicate and help alleviate any anxiety.

Environmental Analysis Tool

Physical Environment Analysis			
Going to the Court Room or Meeting Place			
Questions	**Yes**	**No**	**Options/ Strategies/Guidelines**
Do children and parents in your county have transportation resources sensitive to sensory needs available?			• Practice the trip to the courthouse or CYS agency before a court or appointment times • Consider the weather that is occurring that day- is it thundering, and is that a trigger
Does your courthouse have a noisy or busy lobby?			Consider planning for the child or parent with Autism by • Offering an alternative entrance to the courthouse that is less busy and quiet ○ *ensure alternative entrances do not have active alarms when in use* • Adding signs and directional arrows to the walls and floors to help someone navigate their way through a busy area
Does your courthouse have a metal detector at the entrance?			Consider planning for individuals with Autism by • Using an alternative entrance ○ *ensure alternative entrances do not have active alarms when in use* • Silencing the machines • Allowing fidgets and other comfort toys past the security point • Allowing assistive technology beyond the security point
Do you need to use an elevator to access the courtrooms and waiting areas?			Consider planning for children and parents with Autism • Offering stairs

Environmental Analysis Tool

			• Change the location of the hearing or meeting
Waiting Areas			
Questions	**Yes**	**No**	**Options/ Strategies/Guidelines**
Does a child/parent have to sit in a waiting area or lobby before their scheduled court hearing or meeting?			Consider offering: • Sensory toy kits **(ASERT Handout)** • Alternative quiet room • Noise-canceling headphones • Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats) • A tent for a child to use

Does your waiting area or lobby have:
 	
• Ability to adjust the lighting (bright lights/dimmer switch)
• Variety of seating options to support someone with sensory challenges
• Sensory toy box (fidgets, etc.)
• Quiet area or ability to have music
• Place to charge assistive technology
• Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
• Noise-reducing headset or disposable earplugs
• Snacks
• Comfort dogs/service animals
			Consider offering:
			
			• Sensory toy kits (ASERT Handout)
			  ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies
			  ▪ Disinfecting wipes
			  ▪ Disinfection spray
			  ▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking
			• Alternative quiet room
			• Noise-canceling headphones
			  ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies
			  ▪ Disinfecting wipes
			  ▪ Disinfection spray
			  ▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking
			• Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats, swing)
			• A tent

Environmental Analysis Tool

			• Comfort dog/service animals
Hearing and Meeting Rooms			
Questions	**Yes**	**No**	**Options/ Strategies/Guidelines**

Does your courtroom have:
 	
• Ability to adjust the lighting (bright lights/dimmer switch)
• Variety of seating options to support someone with sensory challenges
• Sensory toy box (fidgets, etc.)
• Quiet area or ability to have music
• Place to charge assistive technology
• Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)
• Noise-reducing headset or disposable earplugs
			Consider offering:
			
			• Sensory toy kits (ASERT Handout)
			  ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies
			  ▪ Disinfecting wipes
			  ▪ Disinfection spray
			  ▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking
			• Alternative quiet room
			• Noise-canceling headphones
			  ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies
			  ▪ Disinfecting wipes
			  ▪ Disinfection spray

Environmental Analysis Tool

• Snacks • Comfort dogs/service animals			▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking • Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats) • Comfort dog/service animal - if the child/parent is comfortable with having a comfort dog/service animal
Do you know who in your courthouse can provide basic adjustments to the physical environment?			Who can: • Adjust the blinds • Adjust the temperature • Adjust the lighting • Bring the Comfort dog/service animal • Provide alternative routes to the courtroom such as stairs or less used elevator
Do you have alternative ways to have the hearing or meeting?			Considerations: • Hybrid of virtual/in-person for witnesses to limit the number of people in the courtroom • In Chamber Hearings • Hearings at the school or other location the child is comfortable (in extraordinary situations only) • Use a quiet room • Judicial Officer questioning to minimize trauma and assist with the focus of the proceedings; “Tell me something good.” • Judicial Officer sitting with the child or parent

Environmental Analysis Tool

Do you allow a child's or parent's designated support person into the courtroom/appointment with them?			Find out who the child's or parent's support person is and allow them to be in the courtroom/office with them. This could include a provider, a relative, or kin who can help the child communicate and help alleviate any anxiety.
Do you allow a child to have a special place in the courtroom?			Consider having a safe spot within the courtroom, such as: • Alternative seating (bean bag chair, egg chair, etc.) • The child sitting in the jury box, if available • The children walking around during the hearing
Monitoring Progress			
Questions	**Yes**	**No**	**Options/ Strategies/Guidelines**
Does your courtroom/agency have a suggestion box for feedback?			• Consider having a brief survey about the physical environment of the courthouse/agency for all participants to complete and use the results to guide changes. • QR code to access an electronic survey • Anonymous survey with a locked box for responses • Provides a built-in Continuous Quality Improvement/ Monitoring

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