



# 2023 State Roundtable Report Autism and the Dependency Courts



## Taskforce Chairperson

Honorable Kevin M. Dougherty, Justice  
Supreme Court of Pennsylvania



# Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce

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## **History and Background**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as *a developmental disability that can cause a wide range of challenges in social interaction, communication, and behavior. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) defines ASD as the occurrence of persistent impairments in social interaction and the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, or activities.* As of March 2023, the new CDC estimate shows one in thirty-six (1:36) children are diagnosed with Autism. This is an increase from the previous estimate of one in forty-four (1:44). ASD was four times as prevalent among boys as among girls. Overall, ASD prevalence was similar across racial and ethnic groups.

During his tenure as the Administrative Judge of Family Court in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin M. Dougherty saw first-hand the potential adverse outcomes children and adults faced when interacting with the court and justice system. With this first-hand experience, Justice Dougherty was committed to changing how systems interact with these individuals. After his ascension to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, along with the persistent encouragement of Autism advocate and former Pennsylvania Speaker of the House of Representatives Dennis M. O'Brien, Justice Dougherty began his reform efforts.

In February 2020, at the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges, the issue of Autism and the Courts took center stage via a four-hour educational session. 186 Judges from across Pennsylvania attended the session. This session was the first time the issue of Autism was highlighted at the Conference.

Following the educational session's success, in April 2020, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) launched a statewide initiative focused on helping judges better understand and communicate with individuals with (ASD). The initiative, led by Supreme Court Justice Kevin Dougherty on behalf of the Court, was a monumental effort.

The initiative was a first-of-its-kind partnership and hoped to provide practical guidance, best practices, and resources to judges managing cases involving an individual with ASD, as well as court information and services for families. No other state in the country or country in the world's judiciary has prioritized this issue system-wide. Given that reality, it is not surprising that public participation and media coverage has been significant (with 40+ media articles, local news segments, and editorials being developed). Clearly, ASD is a diagnosis faced by many and needs additional awareness and support.

As a first step, Justice Dougherty led a series of virtual listening tours through one State Roundtable and five Regional Roundtables. The Roundtables included panel discussions, allowing regional representatives to express their unique thoughts and experiences regarding the intersection of Autism and the Courts.

Regional Roundtable Panelists included:

- Social/Human Service Professionals
- Court and Justice System Professionals
- Family Members
- Self-advocates and Individuals on the Autism Spectrum
- Community Members

The Roundtables were open to the public and included an opportunity for dialogue between panelists and public attendees. A total of 1,241 individuals attended the listening tours. The overarching goal of each Roundtable was to understand better ASD and how it impacts a person's life experiences, particularly in the courtroom. The listening tours provided a forum to educate as well as collect input. The audience and panelists identified possible next steps to help improve the judicial system for individuals diagnosed with ASD or Mental Health.

These included:

- Early Disclosure
- Awareness
- Education
- Further Actions



Additional information regarding the State and Regional Roundtables can be found at the following link: <https://www.pacourts.us/learn/autism-and-the-courts>

In July 2021, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) conducted a Pennsylvania Dependency Court Judges survey. The survey gathered information regarding whether children or parents with ASD attended dependency proceedings. **Eighty-two percent (82%) of responding judges indicated having hearings in which a person with ASD. One hundred percent (100%) of respondents reported that the individual diagnosed was a child. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of respondents indicated that the individual diagnosed as a parent.** Clearly, individuals with ASD are represented in the Dependency Court System.

With this additional information, several planning sessions occurred. From these planning sessions, the decision was made to continue the work by focusing on Pennsylvania's most vulnerable children and families. As such, the focus turned to the child dependency system. This system, already successful in many reform efforts, seemed the logical next step for several reasons. First, the structure existed through the Children's Roundtable and the Office of Children and Families in the Courts to manage

a large-scale reform effort. Second, and more importantly, there was consensus that helping children and families at their earliest contact with the justice system would likely reap the best outcomes.

As a result, on September 23, 2021, the Pennsylvania State Roundtable commissioned the Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce. The Taskforce was asked to examine how the dependency court system could become more aware and responsive to the needs of children and parents diagnosed with ASD. Supreme Court Justice Dougherty, now leading all of Pennsylvania's Dependency Court Improvement activities, continued to lead the Autism work, including the newly created Taskforce.

The Taskforce includes a variety of respected Pennsylvania Dependency Judges, Juvenile Court Hearing Officers, Attorneys, Children and Youth Administrators, and State partners. Several Taskforce members also brought the perspective of lived experience having raised children diagnosed with Autism.

In an effort to have representation reflective of Pennsylvania's diversity, members were selected from rural and urban communities, all regions of the Commonwealth, and all Leadership Roundtables. Members had varying degrees of knowledge regarding Autism and a significant interest in the topic. In addition, all selected members had an exceptional understanding of the Child Dependency and Child Welfare Systems and a sincere desire to support policy and practice reform.

**The Taskforce identified its primary goal as follows:**

- To provide a positive dependency court experience for children and parents with ASD by increasing professional awareness and responsiveness.

**The overall vision of the Taskforce includes the following:**

- Bringing awareness and education to our justice system,
- Being able to identify a child or parent with a diagnosis of Autism,
- Creating a "Road Map" resource that any county can use to begin their ASD system analysis and reform, and
- Implementing practice and policy reforms that support positive experiences for all children and parents diagnosed with ASD within the Pennsylvania dependency system.

During its first year, the Taskforce met virtually every month. In addition, Taskforce members participated in an in-person Autism Summit. Each virtual meeting consisted of a short ASD educational presentation followed by rich discussions amongst Taskforce members on the presented topic. The topics included Autism 101; Reconceptualizing Autism; Evaluations, Services and Support Available through the Education System; and An Overview of Diagnostic Evaluations, Interventions, and Resources.

On March 29 – 31, 2022, the Taskforce attended an in-person Autism Summit. The Summit provided invaluable insight from several presenters. Presentations at the Autism Summit included Neurodiversity, Lived Experience: A Parent Panel, and Autism Service Cliff Panel.

In addition, Taskforce members prioritized three overarching strategies. Taskforce members were assigned to one of three Autism Summit working sessions to develop action steps for each strategy. Each group analyzed the assigned topic and developed resources and recommendations for the 2022 State Roundtable. The resources and recommendations were then shared with and approved by all Taskforce members. The strategies and action steps are outlined below.

- **Autism and the Dependency Court’s Educational Plan would include,**
  - I. A web-based overview of ASD for all professionals in the child welfare and dependency court system;
  - II. Advanced in-person education for Judges, Juvenile Court Hearing Officers, and Child Welfare Administrators;
  - III. A web-based advanced session for attorneys practicing cases in dependency; and
  - IV. An educational video.
- **Local County Roadmap** - A step-by-step guide to assist Local Children’s Roundtables in assessing local needs and implementing strategies to enhance the experience of children and parents diagnosed with ASD as they engage with the Child Dependency and Child Welfare Systems.
- **Environmental Analysis Tool** - A tool to help identify opportunities for potential environmental and practice change at county courthouses and child welfare agencies with the goal of creating a more Autism-friendly experience for dependent children and their parents.

The Environmental Analysis Tool mentions a document entitled *ASSIST: Autism Sensory Strategies, Information, and Toolkit*. This document provides an overview of possible sensory system issues which persons with ASD may experience. Understanding these sensory issues can help systems design enhancements that foster a more helpful experience for children and adults with ASD.



## **Data:**

The Taskforce spent considerable time examining the need for data specific to Autism and Dependency Courts. After extensive research and discussion, it became clear that Pennsylvania-specific dependency court data of this kind did not exist. After much discussion, it was determined that the only place to capture this level of data would be the Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS). As such, staff met with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Court's Information Technology (IT) Director. After conferring with IT staff, it became clear that collecting dependency court Autism data was possible.

Data collection was discussed during the 2022 Spring Leadership Roundtable (LRT) meetings. LRT members gave numerous examples of how they might use the Autism data regarding individuals within the dependency system. Some of these ideas included rearranging dockets to accommodate any special needs, creating sensory spaces in courthouses and agencies, making adjustments inside the courtroom (lighting, sounds, etc.), alerting courthouse and agency security staff, and ensuring comfort dogs are available. Others stated that the data would inform their local system reform conversations.

The LRT members questioned how the data would be entered and collected. LRT members expressed the need to ensure dependency data on individual parties was restricted to those professionals legally permitted to access such data.

## **2022 Approved Recommendations**

On June 6, 2022, the PA State Roundtable unanimously approved the following recommendations:

1. Approval and implementation of the Autism and the Dependency Courts Education Plan as outlined in the report;
2. Approval and distribution of the Environmental Analysis Tool to Leadership Roundtable Judges and Child Welfare Administrators;
3. Approval and distribution of the Local County Roadmap to Leadership Roundtable Judges and Administrators; and
4. Continued analysis and development of strategies to improve the court and child welfare experience of children and families diagnosed with ASD.

## **Progress and Update on Approved 2022 State Roundtable Recommendations**

“The world needs all kinds of minds.”

Dr. Temple Grandin

In March 2023, the CDC published new findings regarding the prevalence of ASD, estimating that **one in thirty-six (1:36) children are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This is an increase in the prevalence from the previous estimate of one in forty-four children (1:44).** Additional ASD statistics and information can be found at the following link: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/new-data.html>.

Over the past year, the Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce met monthly to implement the approved SRT 2022 recommendations and develop additional strategies. The Taskforce conducted final tests of the tools approved by the 2022 State Roundtable (the Local Roadmap and the Environmental Analysis) and disseminated both.

The Taskforce also rolled out the SRT-approved education plan. Finally, the Taskforce worked closely with the AOPC’s Information Technology department to create an Autism data collection process.

### **County Roadmap (Appendix A)**

The Local County Roadmap tool was presented to the State Roundtable in June 2022. The tool guides counties interested in creating a local Autism Taskforce. The Roadmap tool was tested in Lycoming County under the supervision of the Honorable Ryan Tira, a Taskforce member.

Using the Roadmap, Judge Tira formed the Lycoming County Autism Taskforce (LCAT). The LCAT meets monthly and includes many community members and professional practitioners. The LCAT is implementing practice changes to dependency court. The LCAT is also organizing ongoing staff training for court, child welfare, and other child-serving entities.

The Roadmap was tested in Lycoming County for over six months. This testing led to several helpful but non-substantive adjustments to the final tool.

## **Environmental Analysis Tool (Appendix B with ASSIST attachment)**

The Environmental Analysis tool was presented at the State Roundtable in June 2022. Upon approval of the SRT, the tool was next tested in a Taskforce county. Taskforce member and Administrative Judge of Philadelphia County Family Court, Honorable Margaret Murphy, led the testing process. Dr. Wendy Ross, a national expert on Autism from Thomas Jefferson University, and her team of medical professionals conducted a weeklong assessment of different spaces throughout the Philadelphia courthouse. Dr. Ross and her team observed dependency court hearings in all courtrooms and with all judicial officers. They utilized the Environmental Analysis tool to assess the following spaces:

- Each courtroom
- Family waiting areas
- Entrance and exit space
- Security area
- Elevators
- Hallways
- Stairways and escalators

Upon completion, Dr. Ross provided the entire Philadelphia Dependency Bench with an educational session to review the analysis findings and provide a better understanding of how environmental factors impact behaviors and sensory issues for those with Autism. Dr. Ross also made recommendations to create a more autism-friendly space in the courthouse. She provided additional guidance and suggestions to enhance the final revisions to the Environmental Analysis tool, which is included in Appendix B.

Following the completed test of both tools, the Taskforce disseminated the tools to counties across the state. The Local County Roadmap and Environmental Analysis tools were provided and explained using the Leadership Roundtable structure to all attendees in March 2023.

## **Additional tools: Sensory Bags & Court Social Stories**

Two additional resources were developed and made available to all counties. This included Sensory Bags and Court Social Stories. Both were created by OCFC staff with Taskforce input and guidance from Dr. Ross.

To date, all counties represented on the Autism Taskforce have a dependency court social story created for their county. The bags and court social stories were highlighted during the 2023 Spring Leadership Roundtable meetings.

### Sensory Bags:

Recognizing that attending a dependency court hearing can have sensory triggers, the Taskforce created Sensory Bags. Each bag included various items to help a child have a positive experience at the courthouse. The sensory bags created by the Taskforce include:

- Noise-reduction headphones
- Sunglasses for those with light sensitivity
- Sanitizing hand wipes
- A variety of fidget toys and spinners with varying textures
- Weighed cloth squares
- Small bubble tubes

The items in the bags are quiet and can be used throughout a hearing without causing a distraction to others. The toys are in a drawstring bag and can be kept in the courtroom or waiting areas, easily accessible to children and parents. Access to the items in the bags can help children focus during hearings and help them cope with sensory triggers.

All hearing officers, judges, and child welfare administrators that attended one of the autism educational sessions received a Sensory Bag. Additionally, several Taskforce counties (Allegheny, Beaver, Cumberland, Fayette, Forest, Lackawanna, Lancaster, Luzerne, Lycoming, Philadelphia, Potter, Snyder, Union, and Warren) requested and were provided Sensory Bags for their courtrooms.

### Court Social Stories:

Children or parents with Autism often have difficulty changing their daily routines or facing new situations. To help eliminate the stress that may be caused by attending a court hearing, "A Trip to the Courthouse" Social Story template was created. The Honorable John Cherry, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Dauphin County, allowed the Taskforce to use pictures of the Dauphin County Courthouse for the social story template.

The stories are created specifically to support children diagnosed with Autism; however, they could benefit any child who attends dependency court hearings. The language used in the social story is written using simple, easy-to-understand words.

All counties were encouraged to create Court Social Stories. Counties were also provided with an OCFC contact person who can assist them in creating a social story specific to their county if they do not already have one.

To create a county-specific court social story, the following photos are needed:

- The front of the courthouse
- Entrance door to the courthouse

- Comfort dogs (if applicable)
- One to two images of the metal detectors and security upon entering the building
- Hallways walking toward the courtroom, elevators, and/ or stairs
- Waiting areas for the dependency court hearings
- The courtroom
- Picture of the street leaving the courthouse

Counties that currently have Court Social Stories include Allegheny, Beaver, Clinton, Cumberland, Dauphin, Fayette, Forest, Franklin/Fulton, Lackawanna, Lancaster, Luzern, Philadelphia, Potter, Snyder/Union, Warren, and Washington. Requests for Court Social Stories from other counties continue to be received.

## **Autism Education Plan**

The SRT-approved Autism Education Plan provided a robust roll-out of various education sessions. These sessions aimed to raise awareness and give a basic overview of ASD to dependency system professionals and related stakeholders.

In July 2022, a Statewide Virtual Autism Education Session was held for all dependency system professionals. The session was offered on **July 14, 2022**, and repeated on **July 20, 2022**, with approximately 792 participants.

The presentation included the following:

- **Opening Remarks:** Honorable Kevin M. Dougherty, Justice, Pennsylvania Supreme Court
- **Autism 101:** *Kathy Hooven, Justice Project Coordinator, Autism Services Education Resources and Training*
- **Lived Experience: A Glimpse into the Life of Autism,** *Honorable Stephen Minor, President Judge, Court of Common Pleas of Potter County, Kim Bathgate, Assistant Director of Communications, AOPC, Morgan Bathgate, Student, and David Fine, Esq. K&L Gates, LLP, Harrisburg*

On **July 28, 2022**, the Taskforce was fortunate to have Dr. Wendy Ross, Thomas Jefferson University, present at the Pennsylvania State Conference of Trial Judges' Dependency Luncheon. The Honorable Kevin M. Dougherty, PA Supreme Court, leading the court's work in Autism, opened the session. Dr. Ross's presented, *Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving from Knowledge to Action - Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder*.

The luncheon was well attended. Every participant was given the Court Social Story template and an example sensory bag. All attendees were also provided a list of websites where the sensory bag items can be purchased.

On **October 6, 2022**, Dr. Wendy Ross presented in the morning to the Juvenile Court Hearing Officers and the Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators in the afternoon. Both groups received the Court Social Story template and the example sensory bag.

On **October 24, 2022**, Kate Hooven, *Justice System Project Coordinator*, ASERT (Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training), presented Autism 101 Webinar to Child Welfare Professionals. The Child Welfare Resource Center/School of Social Work/University of Pittsburgh Training Center offered this training. Michael Byers is the Director of the training center and an Autism Taskforce member. The session was attended by 100 casework professionals and had a very positive response. The training remains available online at:

[http://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/Webinars/Webinars\\_AutismSpectrumDisorder.htm](http://www.pacwrc.pitt.edu/Webinars/Webinars_AutismSpectrumDisorder.htm).

On **December 2, 2022**, Dr. Ross, Heath Brosius, Esq. and Cathy Volponi, Esq. presented an advanced education session for two hundred sixty-eight (268) attorneys titled *Autism and Dependency Courts*. This virtual session was open to Child Welfare Solicitors, Parent Attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, and Child Counsel. The session included the following topics:

- Communicating with individuals with autism
- Advocating for individuals with autism
- Requesting special accommodations for individuals with autism

On **December 8, 2022**, Dr. Wendy Ross presented an Individualized Autism Support Session for Philadelphia Dependency Court Judges and Hearing Officers following the completion of the Environmental Analysis, as described earlier in this report.

“Philadelphia Family Court has fully embraced the Autism and the Dependency Court’s initiative as a means to identify and better serve children and parents with ASD in all aspects of their Family Court experience. By participating in the Environmental Analysis, we aim to create a friendlier environment for individuals with autism upon their entrance to the courthouse and continuing throughout the entire court process so that they are provided with meaningful access to the courts.”

*Honorable Margaret T. Murphy, Administrative Judge  
Family Court of Philadelphia County*

### **Autism and the Dependency Courts Regional Summits**

Finally, various counties have sponsored Regional Summits. A five-county committee planned and implemented the first two Regional Summits.

The planning committee included the following:

- Honorable Jennifer Rogers, Court of Common Pleas of **Luzerne County**
- Honorable Michael Sholley, Court of Common Pleas of **Snyder and Union Counties**
- Honorable Ryan Tira, Court of Common Pleas of **Lycoming County**
- Kerry Browning, Deputy Director of **Lackawanna County** Office of Youth and Family Services
- Matthew Salvatori, Administrator, **Lycoming County** Children and Youth Services
- Jennifer Napp-Evans, Administrator, **Snyder County** Children and Youth Services
- Matt Ernst, Administrator, **Union County** Children and Youth Services

The first Regional Autism & Dependency Court Summit occurred on **December 5, 2022**, in the Northeast Region and was sponsored by Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties.

Presentations included:

- **Opening Remarks:** *Honorable Jennifer Rogers, Court of Common Pleas of Luzerne County*
- **Autism 101**, *Kaitlin Koffer Miller, Regional Director of the Autism Services, Education, Resources, & Training Collaborative (ASERT) Eastern Region and the co-director of the Policy Impact Project at the AJ Drexel Autism Institute*
- **Autism Spectrum Disorder: Diagnosis and Interventions**, *Dr. Bernadine Suppa, psychologist and founding member of Autism Diagnostic Evaluation Resources and Services (ADERS)*

The second Regional Autism & Dependency Court Summit occurred on **December 8, 2022**, in the Central Region and was sponsored by Lycoming, Snyder, and Union Counties.

Presentations included:

- **Opening Remarks:** *Honorable Kevin M. Dougherty, Justice, Pennsylvania Supreme Court*
- **Autism 101**, *Lindy Mishler, MS, Clinical Consultant for the Bureau of Supports for Autism and Special Populations, Office of Developmental Programs*

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder: Diagnosis and Interventions**, *Dr. Bernadine Suppa, psychologist and founding member of Autism Diagnostic Evaluation Resources and Services (ADERS)*

Participants at the combined Summits represented 26 different counties and 60 different organizations, with approximately 500 participants. The participants were from various community organizations, including courthouse personnel, child welfare, juvenile probation, law enforcement, education, and other community partners, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and various service providers. The template court social story and sensory bags were provided to the community organizations in attendance.

**On April 20, 2023**, the first of two Western Regional Autism & Dependency Court Summits were held. This session was held in Pittsburgh and sponsored by the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County, Family Division, Juvenile Section. This Regional Summit was planned and implemented with support from two of Allegheny County's Dependency Judges and Taskforce members, Honorable Jennifer McCrady and Honorable Hugh McGough.

Content for the Summit included:

- **Autism and the Dependency Courts and Pennsylvania's Autism Initiative**
  - *Honorable Kevin M. Dougherty, Justice, Pennsylvania Supreme Court*
  - *Honorable Jennifer McCrady, Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County*
- **Autism 101**, *Lindy Mishler, MS, Clinical Consultant for the Bureau of Supports for Autism and Special Populations, Office of Developmental Programs*
- **Diagnosing Autism and Community Services**, *Dr. Tammy Hughes, Licensed School Psychologist and Autism Expert, Duquesne University*
- **Allegheny County Autism Workgroup: Panel Presentation**, *Honorable Hugh McGough, Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County*

There were approximately 100 attendees from the local dependency court system, the Department of Human Services, local school districts, and other community groups. Template social stories and sensory bags were provided to organizations in attendance.

**On June 2, 2023**, the second Western Regional Summit was held in Southpointe as part of a collaboration between Beaver and Fayette Counties with support from Dependency Judges and Taskforce members Honorable Mitchell Shahan (Beaver) and Honorable Linda Cordaro (Fayette). There were approximately 70 attendees.



Content for the Summit included:

- **Autism and the Dependency Courts and Pennsylvania’s Autism Initiative**
  - *Honorable Mitchell Shahan, Court of Common Pleas of Beaver County*
  - *Honorable Linda Cordaro, Court of Common Pleas of Fayette County*
  
- **Autism 101**, *Kate Hooven, Justice Project Coordinator, Autism Services Education Resources and Training*
  
- **Diagnosing Autism and Community Services**, *Dr. Tammy Hughes, Licensed School Psychologist and Autism Expert, Duquesne University*
  
- **The Intersect of Law Enforcement and Autism**, *Scott E. Bailey, Police Officer, Fox Chapel School District, Parent with Lived Experience*

Over the past year, educational sessions have been offered to dependency judges, hearing officers, children and youth administrators, dependency attorneys, and various community partners (see chart below). These sessions have reached approximately 2035 participants increasing Autism awareness.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Autism Educational Session</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
07/14/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: A Virtual Overview	795
07/20/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: A Virtual Overview	
07/28/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving Knowledge to Action-Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder	90
10/06/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving Knowledge to Action-Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (morning and afternoon sessions)	100
10/24/2022	Autism 101 Webinar for Child Welfare Professionals	100
12/02/2022	Virtual Advanced Session for Attorneys on Autism and Dependency Courts	268
12/05/2022	Philadelphia Environmental Analysis Findings Support Session	12
12/05/2022	Regional Autism Summit- Northeast Region	500
12/08/2022	Regional Autism Summit- Central Region	
04/20/2023	Regional Autism Summit- Western Region-Pittsburgh	100
06/02/2023	Regional Autism Summit- Western Region	70
<b>Totals</b>	<b>11 Sessions</b>	<b>2035</b>

*\*Number of participants is estimate*

## **Data**

After much discussion with Leadership Roundtable members in the Spring of 2022, it was clear that having the ability to have a data point regarding children and parents with ASD who are attending dependency hearings was needed. The only place consistently used by all Pennsylvania Dependency Courts to capture this level of data was determined to be the Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS). CPCMS has the necessary level of security to maintain this information safely and is used daily by the dependency court system. Taskforce members worked collaboratively with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Court's Information Technology Director, Russel Montchal, to create this requested data point.

This data point is captured when an individual self-discloses that they are either diagnosed with Autism or self-reported to have Autism. This data, found under the CPCMS special considerations category, help alert judges and hearing officers when special accommodations are needed to support individuals with Autism who appear on the court docket. The special considerations report (1058) and the daily list report (3905) will show this information.

The data point will also enable dependency courts to understand better the number of individuals with Autism in their hearings. This can help support system changes, such as creating sensory rooms and purchasing specialized sensory items.

<b>Totals by County</b>						
<b>County</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Count 11/7/2022</b>	<b>Count 12/28/2022</b>	<b>Count 2/13/2023</b>	<b>Count 4/3/2023</b>	<b>Count 5/25/2023</b>
Beaver	Autism	3	5	5	5	5
Bradford	Autism	0	0	0	0	2
Bucks	Autism	0	0	0	0	13
Chester	Autism	0	0	1	2	2
Clarion	Autism	1	1	1	1	1
Clinton	Autism	2	4	4	4	5
Cumberland	Autism	6	9	12	13	15
Delaware	Autism	7	13	16	21	22
Fayette	Autism	0	0	0	0	7
Fulton	Autism	0	0	0	0	1
Huntingdon	Autism	0	1	1	1	2
Jefferson	Autism	0	1	2	2	4
Juniata	Autism	0	1	1	1	1
Lackawanna	Autism	2	2	3	3	3
Lehigh	Autism	0	0	0	0	1
Luzerne	Autism	0	4	4	4	11
Lycoming	Autism	0	0	0	3	3
Montour	Autism	0	0	0	0	1

County	Category	Count 11/7/2022	Count 12/28/22	Count 2/13/2023	Count 4/3/2023	Count 5/25/2023
Perry	Autism	0	0	0	0	1
Philadelphia	Autism	1	1	12	39	59
Schuylkill	Autism	0	0	1	1	1
Somerset	Autism	0	0	0	1	2
Tioga	Autism	0	0	0	1	1
Washington	Autism	0	0	0	1	1
York	Autism	1	7	8	11	15
<b>Total</b>		<b>23</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>179</b>

As noted in the chart above, the number of counties utilizing the CPCMS Autism data point continues to increase. Counties using the CPCMS drop-down, as of May 25, 2023, are listed in the table above with their current number of individuals diagnosed or self-reported to have Autism.

**“We must do everything we can  
to be the positive change that  
children and families need.”**  
**Justice Kevin M. Dougherty**

### **Conclusion**

Since the 2022 State Roundtable meeting, the Taskforce has completed extensive work. At the report’s writing, no other judiciary in the country focuses on improving the experience of those with Autism in the Dependency System. No other court system is collecting data to guide and support improvements.

Additionally, OCFC Judicial Analysts have conducted a statewide outreach to help track Autism efforts. The table below notes the number of counties that report making efforts to improve the experience of children and parents with Autism in their counties (as of June 2, 2023).

Statewide Autism work	Number of Counties
Prioritizing Autism at Local Children's Roundtable	14
CPCMS Data Collection	18
Local Roadmap Tool	4
Environmental Analysis Tool	6
Court Social Stories	18
Sensory Bags	14

Finally, several counties have embraced the tools and educational sessions; some are only beginning to make changes. Given the increase in incidents of Autism noted in the CDC's latest report and the desire of the counties to implement changes, Taskforce members believe their work should continue.

### **2023 Recommendations**

**The Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce respectfully submits to the Pennsylvania State Roundtable the following recommendations:**

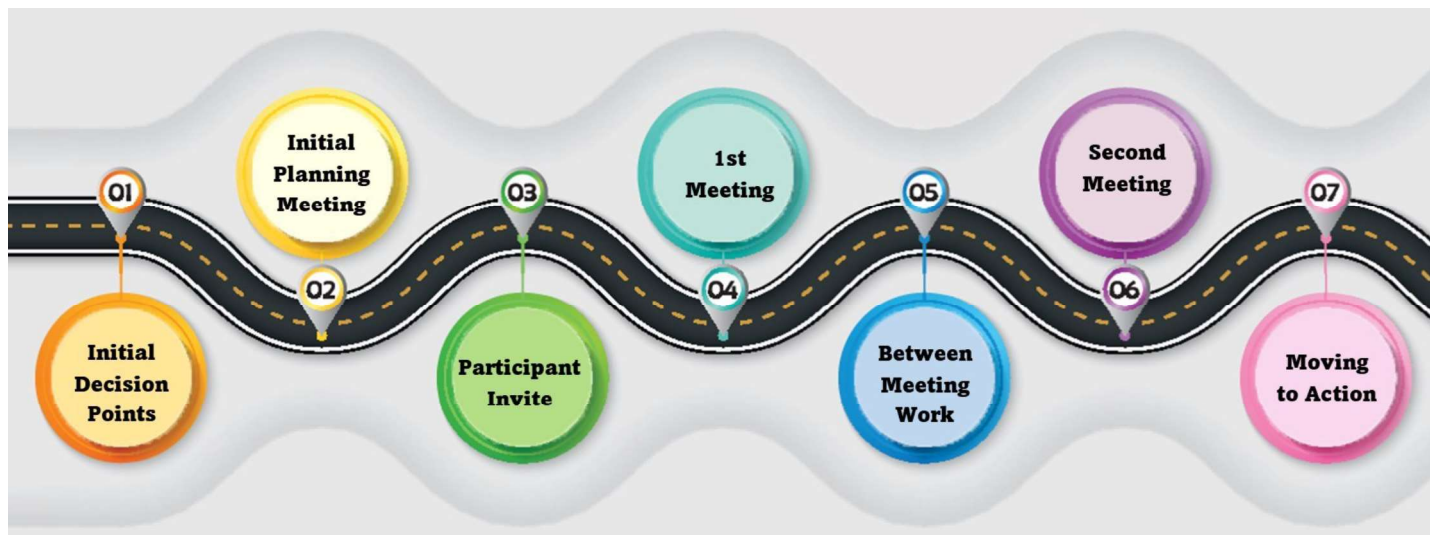
1. Approval to strongly encourage and support county implementation of the Local County Roadmap and the Environmental Analysis tools; and
2. Continued analysis and development of strategies to improve the court and child welfare experience of children and families diagnosed with ASD.

"It takes a village to raise a child. It takes a child with autism to raise the consciousness of the village."

*Coach Elaine Hall*

# Autism & the Dependency System

## County Roadmap



### What is the County Roadmap?

The Autism & the Dependency System County Roadmap is a step-by-step process that counties can use to understand, identify, assess, and enhance services for persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). While focused on abused & neglected children and their families, this Roadmap can be adapted for a broader population.

### How should the Roadmap be used?

The Roadmap is a guide for discussion, learning, and planning. The Roadmap is best used in a multi-disciplinary team planning process that includes a variety of perspectives. The Roadmap was designed following the process used by the State Roundtable's Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce.

### Who should be included in the Local Autism Taskforce?

Because ASD covers such a large span of possible challenges and strengths, counties are encouraged to be inclusive in their Multi-disciplinary Team membership. Additionally, because the Roadmap's focus is on improving the experience of individuals in the child welfare and child dependency system, the team's leadership should come from the highest possible person in both the Court and Child Welfare systems. To the extent possible, team members should be decision-makers in the county. When possible, these leaders and multi-disciplinary team members should hold this issue as one of their priorities and volunteer for this work.

**It is highly recommended that all the following perspectives be included in local teams:**

- ⇒ Court Leadership: Judge (with authority to make system/policy changes)
- ⇒ Child Welfare Leadership: CYS Director
- ⇒ Legal Professionals: Guardians ad Litem, Parent Advocates, Solicitors, Hearing Officers, Court Administrators, Bailiffs/Sheriff Deputy (court security staff), Tip Staff
- ⇒ Child Welfare Professionals: Caseworkers, Supervisors, Managers

Team members suggestions might include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Leadership, knowledge experts & persons with lived autism experience:**

- ⇒ Child Welfare Independent Living staff
- ⇒ Autism Services
- ⇒ Mental Health
- ⇒ Intellectual Disabilities
- ⇒ Education (Special Ed, Alternative Schools)
- ⇒ Persons with ASD
- ⇒ Parents of children with ASD
- ⇒ Police (Pennsylvania State Police, Municipal Police)
- ⇒ Juvenile Probation

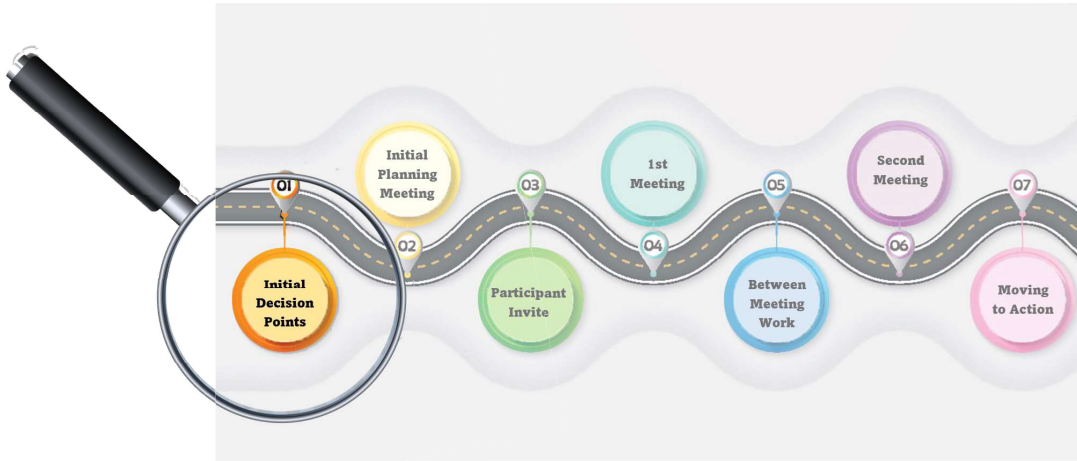
**Other possible perspectives:** The list below identifies views that would be helpful in the work. These individuals can be but do not have to be members of the multi-disciplinary team, but their perspectives should be shared with the team.

- ⇒ Commissioners/County Executive
- ⇒ Substance Use Experts
- ⇒ Pediatricians/Medical Societies
- ⇒ Domestic Relations
- ⇒ Court Administration
- ⇒ Transportation Representatives



# Step-By-Step

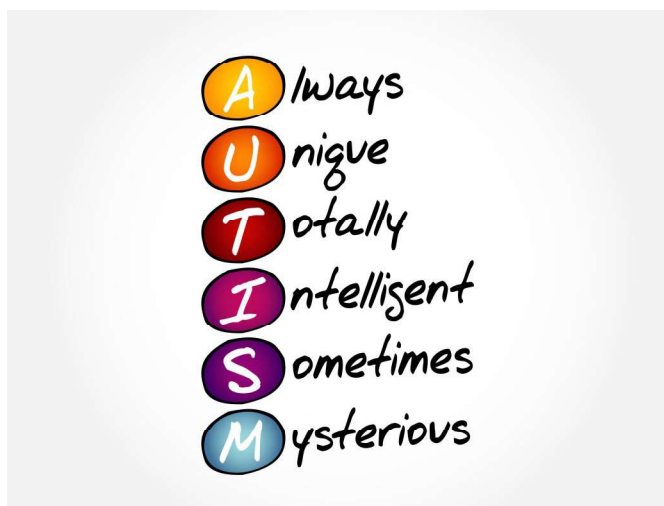
## Step #1 – Initial Decision Points



These initial decisions will likely be made by the Judge and Child Welfare Administrator

- Do we know what Autism is?
- Do we know how many children or parents involved in the child welfare and/or dependency system are diagnosed with ASD?
- We know this is a statewide issue, but is it a priority for our county?

Once the decision is made to prioritize this issue in the county, proceed to step #2.



## Step #2 – Initial Planning Meeting



This initial planning meeting is for the Team Leaders, and a select number of persons identified help initiate the process. At a minimum, this group should include the judge, child welfare administrator, an autism expert, and staff person(s) identified to facilitate the work.

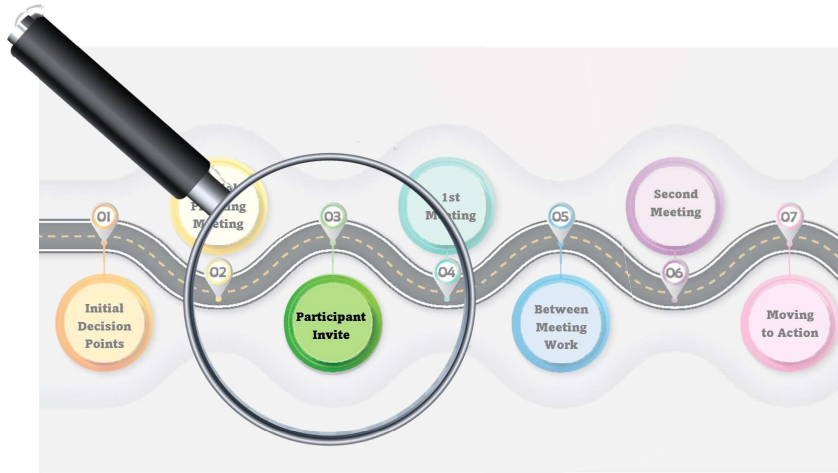
Initial decision points for this group:

- Do we know what Autism is?
- What available autism data do we have specific to children and families in our county, our child welfare agency, our dependency courts, and our schools?
- Will this group be a sub-group of our Local Children's Roundtable?
- Using the list on page two of this guide, do we want to identify specific individuals for this work, or do we want to do an open invitation and see who expresses interest? (see example email)
- What is our vision and mission Statement?
- What are our initial goals/outcomes that support our vision and mission?
- When do we want to hold our first meeting?
- How often should we meet?
- How long should each meeting be?
- Do we want to hold virtual or in-person meetings?
- If virtual, who will set up the meetings?
- If in-person, who will host the meeting space?
- Will our work focus on child welfare and dependency court or be more expansive?



Once the group has at least initial answers to the above items, move on to Step #3.

### **Step #3 – Invitation to Participate**



- Invite participants to a meeting (see example email/letter). This invitation is best coming from the judge and child welfare administrator if possible.
- Create an agenda for the first meeting. Please keep it simple. (see example 1<sup>st</sup> meeting agenda)
- Decide who will lead the meeting or specific agenda discussion items.



## Step #4 – First Meeting



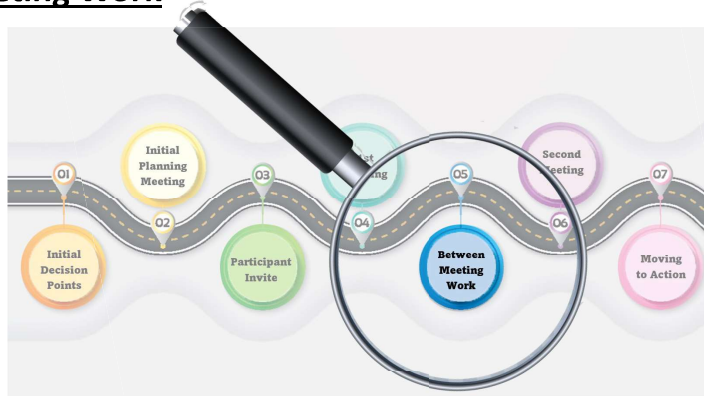
- Hold the meeting.
- Explain the focus of the group: vision, mission, and initial goals. (see examples)
- Explain why team members were selected: their interest, their influence, their knowledge, their ability to get things done, etc.
- Explain the expectations of team members. Two of the most significant include being open to learning and different perspectives; and mandatory attendance of members. Your work will build from one meeting to the next. Missing meetings will slow your progress.
- First, seek to understand. There is a tendency to jump to solutions before being clear on the issue. Resist doing that. First, seek to understand.
- Gain a sense of team members' Autism understanding (encourage the safe space concept/rule in the meeting. No question is off-limits. We are all learning together.) Many will not fully understand Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and that's okay.

- Encourage open discussion regarding how persons with ASD experience agencies and courts (or other entities, depending on the scope of your team's work).
- Share the ideas generated in Step 2 (2). Make any changes needed with the larger group's input.
- Encourage the concept of this being a shared learning/growing experience. Gather ideas for future education of team members.
- Assign a task for team members – Ask each team member to identify autism services available in the county or used by children/families even if the service is in another county. Ask team members to provide this information to an identified staff person before the next meeting.
- This assignment has two purposes. It gets team members vested in the work immediately with a request that isn't overly time-consuming or burdensome. It provides valuable information regarding what services, supports, and gaps may exist.

Provide the next meeting date, time, and location.



## Step #5 – Between Meeting Work



### **Begin the development of a County Specific Resource Catalogue**

- The assigned staff person creates a list of services identified by team members to be shared at the next meeting.

**Add additional members**, if needed, based on meeting #1 discussions

**Identify education topics and speakers** - Keep this short, no more than 15 minutes of your meeting time. This limited presentation time is essential. You want to enhance your team's knowledge, but you do not want your meetings to become education sessions solely. This group is about understanding and implementing strategies to help children and parents with ASD. Example meeting educational topics might include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Autism 101 – What is it?
- Autism and our Schools
- How is Autism Diagnosed?
- What happens when children turn 18 or 21?
- What do parents of children with Autism have to tell us?

**Create the next meeting agenda**

**Send meeting reminder and agenda (do this about one week before the next meeting)**

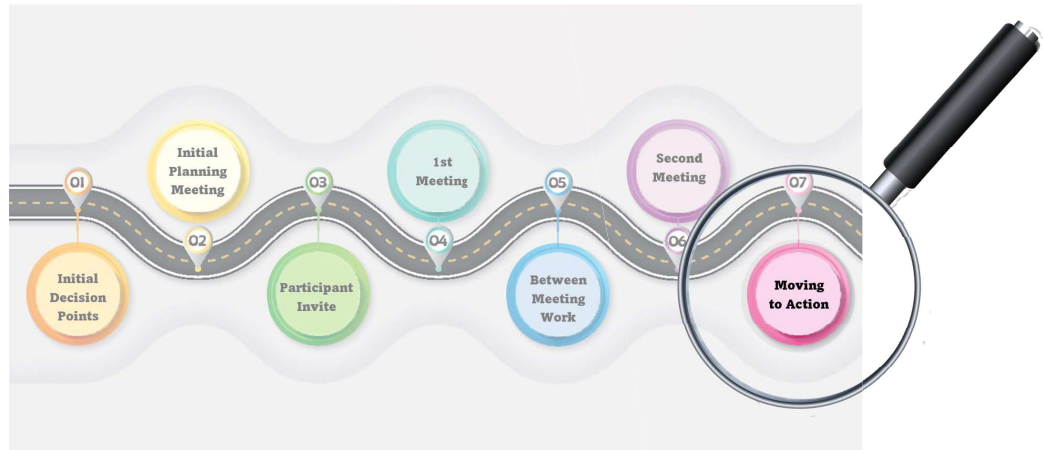
## Step #6 – Second Meeting



The agenda for your second and subsequent meetings will likely come naturally from your first meeting. The process, topics, and priorities should be based on the information you gather locally. Caution: Do not move on to solutions or strategies until the team fully understands the challenges. (see example second meeting agenda)



## Step #7 – Moving to Action



Once you have a good idea regarding services, supports, gaps, and challenges for individuals with ASD in your county systems, it's time to determine what you can do to enhance the experience of individuals with ASD.

Your team must move to action beyond simply learning or discussing the issues.

Goals and action that are doable, measurable, and successful motivates team members.

Depending on the size of your team, select one or two (no more than that) actions that can be easily accomplished and will have a significantly positive impact on individuals with ASD and their experience with the child welfare agency and court.

Examples of Action might include:

- Education for child welfare and dependency system professionals
- Education for community members
- A forum to hear from persons with ASD
- Conducting an Environmental Analysis of your child welfare agency and court
- Developing a comfort dog program
- Developing a peer support program
- Implementing a process to collect data

Monitor and measure the impact of the actions you implement.

# 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

<p>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?</p>		<p>Check the CPCMS dropdown for possible indications of Autism.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Be sure a greeter is ready and willing to meet the child/parent.</p> <p>Create a checklist to be discussed with the child's caregivers to include questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes you feel calm/safe?</li> <li>• What makes you feel uncomfortable or triggers you?</li> <li>• What are some of your favorite things?</li> <li>• What can we do to help you if you are upset? (Contingency plan of support)</li> <li>• What time of the day is the best time to be at the courthouse?</li> </ul>
<p>Can the court adjust the time of the hearing to accommodate the child's or the parent's best time of day?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider having children or parents diagnosed with Autism as the first hearing of the day to prevent long wait times or delays.</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>
		<p>Ways to help prepare:</p>



# Environmental Analysis Tool

<p>Do you prepare children or parents with Autism to visit the courthouse or agency?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow a tour of the courthouse/agency before the hearing or appointment             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Meet the Judge and other courthouse staff or agency staff</li> <li>➤ Consider having a designated person as a greeter to assist the child/parent through the courthouse</li> <li>➤ Arrange the tour for a time of day the courthouse is not busy or crowded</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Create County-Specific Social Stories             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Video tour of the courthouse/agency                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Post on the county website</li> <li>▪ Provide a link to the video</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ Social story of the specific courthouse/agency                 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide a paper copy (laminated)</li> <li>▪ Provide on the county website for viewing and/or printing</li> </ul> </li> <li>➤ Posters showing the different areas of the courthouse/agency</li> </ul> </li> <li>• 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)             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Get a good night's sleep</li> <li>➤ Eat a healthy meal</li> <li>➤ Follow schedules or routines as much as possible (including medication schedules)</li> <li>➤ Review the Social Story or Video</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Do you allow a child's or parent's designated support person into the courtroom/appointment with them?</p>		<p>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.</p>

# 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?			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practice the trip to the courthouse or CYS agency before a court or appointment times</li> <li>Consider the weather that is occurring that day- is it thundering, and is that a trigger</li> </ul>
Does your courthouse have a noisy or busy lobby?			<p>Consider planning for the child or parent with Autism by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offering an alternative entrance to the courthouse that is less busy and quiet                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensure <i>alternative entrances do not have active alarms when in use</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>Adding signs and directional arrows to the walls and floors to help someone navigate their way through a busy area</li> </ul>
Does your courthouse have a metal detector at the entrance?			<p>Consider planning for individuals with Autism by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using an alternative entrance                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensure <i>alternative entrances do not have active alarms when in use</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>Silencing the machines</li> <li>Allowing fidgets and other comfort toys past the security point</li> <li>Allowing assistive technology beyond the security point</li> </ul>
Do you need to use an elevator to access the courtrooms and waiting areas?			<p>Consider planning for children and parents with Autism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offering stairs</li> </ul>

# Environmental Analysis Tool

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Change the location of the hearing or meeting</li> </ul>
Waiting Areas		
Questions		
Yes	No	Options/Guidelines
<p>Does a child/parent have to sit in a waiting area or lobby before their scheduled court hearing or meeting?</p>		<p>Consider offering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensory toy kits (<b>ASERT Handout</b>)</li> <li>Alternative quiet room</li> <li>Noise-canceling headphones</li> <li>Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats)</li> <li>A tent for a child to use</li> </ul>
<p>Does your waiting area or lobby have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ability to adjust the lighting (bright lights/dimmer switch)</li> <li>Variety of seating options to support someone with sensory challenges</li> <li>Sensory toy box (fidgets, etc.)</li> <li>Quiet area or ability to have music</li> <li>Place to charge assistive technology</li> <li>Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)</li> <li>Noise-reducing headset or disposable earplugs</li> <li>Snacks</li> <li>Comfort dogs/service animals</li> </ul>		<p>Consider offering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sensory toy kits (ASERT Handout) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disinfecting wipes</li> <li>Disinfection spray</li> <li>Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>Alternative quiet room</li> <li>Noise-canceling headphones <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disinfecting wipes</li> <li>Disinfection spray</li> <li>Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats, swing)</li> <li>A tent</li> </ul>

# Environmental Analysis Tool

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfort dog/service animals</li> </ul>
<b>Hearing and Meeting Rooms</b>			
<b>Questions</b>			
<p>Does your courtroom have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to adjust the lighting (bright lights/dimmer switch)</li> <li>• Variety of seating options to support someone with sensory challenges</li> <li>• Sensory toy box (fidgets, etc.)</li> <li>• Quiet area or ability to have music</li> <li>• Place to charge assistive technology</li> <li>• Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)</li> <li>• Noise-reducing headset or disposable earplugs</li> </ul>			<p>Consider offering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensory toy kits (ASERT Handout) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Disinfecting wipes</li> <li>▪ Disinfection spray</li> <li>▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• Alternative quiet room</li> <li>• Noise-canceling headphones <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Disinfecting wipes</li> <li>▪ Disinfection spray</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

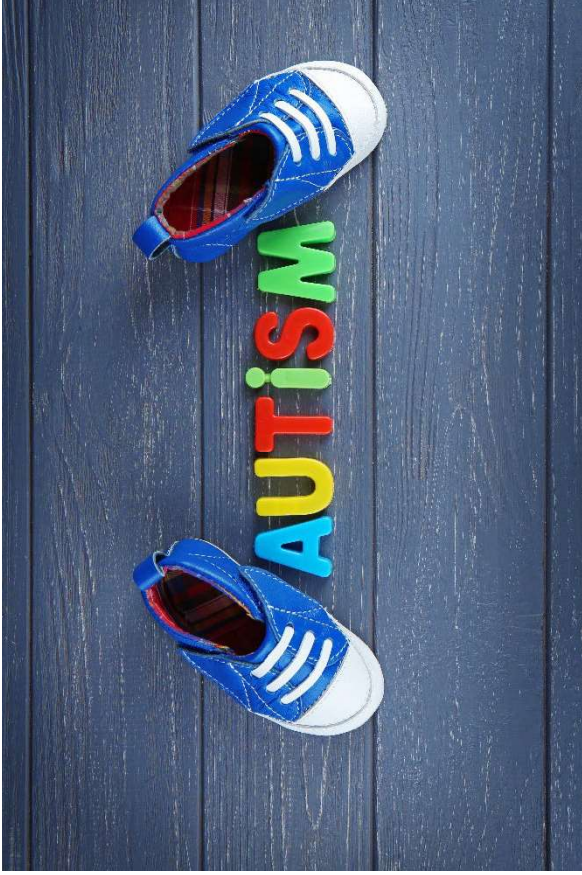
# Environmental Analysis Tool

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Snacks</li> <li>• Comfort dogs/service animals</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking</li> <li>• Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats)</li> <li>• Comfort dog/service animal - if the child/parent is comfortable with having a comfort dog/service animal</li> </ul>
<p>Do you know who in your courthouse can provide basic adjustments to the physical environment?</p>		<p>Who can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjust the blinds</li> <li>• Adjust the temperature</li> <li>• Adjust the lighting</li> <li>• Bring the Comfort dog/service animal</li> <li>• Provide alternative routes to the courtroom such as stairs or less used elevator</li> </ul>
<p>Do you have alternative ways to have the hearing or meeting?</p>		<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hybrid of virtual/in-person for witnesses to limit the number of people in the courtroom</li> <li>• In Chamber Hearings</li> <li>• Hearings at the school or other location the child is comfortable (in extraordinary situations only)</li> <li>• Use a quiet room</li> <li>• Judicial Officer questioning to minimize trauma and assist with the focus of the proceedings; "Tell me something good."</li> <li>• Judicial Officer sitting with the child or parent</li> </ul>

# 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?		<p>Consider having a safe spot within the courtroom, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternative seating (bean bag chair, egg chair, etc.)</li> <li>• The child sitting in the jury box, if available</li> <li>• The children walking around during the hearing</li> </ul>
<b>Monitoring Progress</b>		
<b>Questions</b>		
Does your courtroom/agency have a suggestion box for feedback?		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Yes   No   Options/ Strategies/Guidelines</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• QR code to access an electronic survey</li> <li>• Anonymous survey with a locked box for responses</li> <li>• Provides a built-in Continuous Quality Improvement/ Monitoring</li> </ul>

# *Environmental Analysis Tool*







# ASSIST:

Autism Sensory Strategies,  
Information, and Toolkit



# Introduction to ASSIST



Sensory features are a part of the diagnostic criteria for individuals on the autism spectrum.<sup>1,2</sup> Understanding these sensory features and how to support individuals on the autism spectrum who have a negative experience related to sensory features is important and can help guide interactions.

While there are several variations of terms to describe sensory features<sup>3,4</sup> and different patterns of sensory features<sup>5,6</sup>, in these handouts, we will discuss three types: hyper-reactive, hypo-reactive, and sensory integration. The first portion of ASSIST will define these terms and introduce the seven senses.

Next, a dedicated handout for each sense is provided to describe the potential sensory-related behaviors or responses commonly associated a hyper-reactive response, hypo-reactive response, or difficulty with sensory integration. **Keep in mind that every person has individual experiences so a responses may vary.**

- If an individual on the autism spectrum and/or their family identifies specific senses that are important to support, the handouts will be useful to guide your collaboration with them to identify strategies or adaptations that may be helpful.
- If you do not know of specific senses that need support, use these handouts as a proactive guide to best support individual on the autism spectrum should they need these sensory supports.

Further, each handout includes considerations that can be helpful in situations when the individual on the autism spectrum encounters a police car or an ambulance, and/or when in a crowded area, shelter, or home. These are a few environments that justice professionals may be interacting with individuals on the autism spectrum, so it is important to have access to strategies in adapting or preparing the environment to best support sensory needs.

The final portion of each sensory handout involves toolkit suggestions. These are items or strategies that justice professionals can have accessible.

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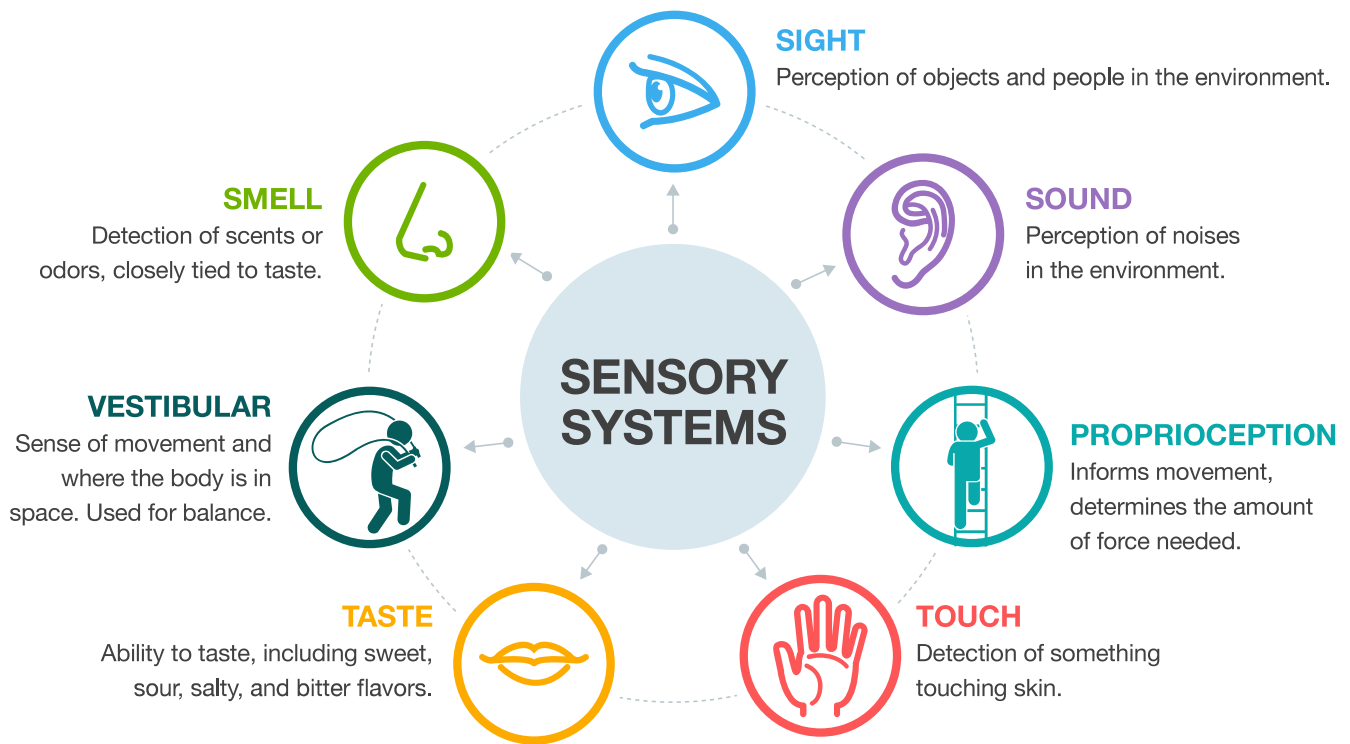
The ASERT Collaborative is funded by the Office of Developmental Programs, PA Department of Human Services.

# Sensory Features: Hypo/Hyper Reactivity to Sensation or Combining Sensations

**Hyper-reactive:** Reacts strongly to stimuli that other people would not notice

**Hypo-reactive:** Does not react, or barely reacts, to stimuli that would bother other people

**Poor Sensory Integration:** Difficulty integrating two or more senses simultaneously such as sound and sight (e.g.: Hearing something and looking at it), or touch and sight (e.g.: Feeling something and looking at it). Poor praxis or difficulty using the body to figure out how to perform tasks and actions is one result of poor sensory integration.



## SENSORY TOOL KIT:

A set of items and/or resources used to support people on the spectrum, their families, and providers in meeting sensory needs.



Pennsylvania's leading source of autism-related resources and information.

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The ASERT Collaborative is funded by the Office of Developmental Programs, PA Department of Human Services.



# Sight and Strategies

Hyper-reactive	Hypo-reactive	Sensory Integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May cover/close eyes to avoid bright lights and colors.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>■ May dislike flashing lights and bold colors.<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May seem unaware of the visual environment.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>■ May have difficulty finding things in a visually busy environment.<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Directions may require individuals to follow sight and sound can be a challenge.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>■ May experience dizziness trying to follow visual cues while moving.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>

## ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS

### Police Car/Ambulance:

- Strong, bold colors can be overwhelming (*color lights, clothing, walls*).<sup>2,3</sup>
- Patterns on walls, clothing, furniture can be distracting and disorienting.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Sudden changes in light can be alarming; provide a warning before turning on bright lighting (*patrol car and ambulance sirens*).<sup>2,7</sup>
- If using an unmarked car with a sunroof, keep shade closed.<sup>2</sup>
- For sunlight from windows, if available, can use window shades or covers.<sup>2</sup>
- Filling out paperwork can be a stressful task due to the small text; provide opportunities to or the option to fill out the paperwork with larger text or help to write the information for the individual.

### Crowds/Shelters

- Patterns on walls, clothing, furniture can be distracting and disorienting.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Individuals may need extra time to acclimate to changes in light intensity (*turning lights on/off, natural light to artificial light*).<sup>2,3</sup>
- Adjust room lighting to be darker or dim the lighting.<sup>3,6</sup>
- If available, use shades to dim overhead fluorescent lighting.<sup>6</sup>
- Be mindful of light glare reflecting off of flooring, TVs, computers, tablets, phones, and other reflective surfaces.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Filling out paperwork can be a stressful task due to the small font and dense text; provide movement breaks or the option to fill out the paperwork with larger and concise text.



**SENSORY TOOL KIT**



Use a phone to show pictures and create a sequence of steps for what the individual should expect to happen.<sup>3</sup>



Sunglasses to alleviate brightness.



Lava lamps and slow-moving videos or projections can reduce stress.<sup>6</sup>

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# Smell and Strategies

Hyper-reactive	Hypo-reactive	Sensory Integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May only eat certain foods, show discomfort or fear of foods due to the smell.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>■ May be aware of smells others do not notice.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>■ May experience physical discomfort or nausea from certain smells.<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May be unaffected by strong smells.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>■ May not notice unpleasant smells.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>■ May seek to smell items or fixate on objects with certain smells.<sup>6</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Closely related to taste system which can impact consumptions of meals.<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>

## ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS

### Police Car/Ambulance:

- Be aware of strong smells and take steps to limit them.<sup>4</sup>
  - Limit presence of strong-smelling food or drink, including gum or mints, in the car.<sup>4</sup>
  - Can cut side of air freshener bag instead of fully opening it, or choose air fresheners with a more neutral or mild scent.<sup>4</sup>
  - Be aware after getting gas for a vehicle that scent could be too strong.
  - Scent from alcohol wipes, disinfecting sprays, or hand sanitizer could be overwhelming.
- Avoid using strong smelling lotion, perfume, or cologne.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Time the consumption of food or coffee to avoid odor on clothes.<sup>3</sup>
- Social story of potential experiences prior to entering a car or ambulance.<sup>1</sup>
- Allow opportunities to open windows if scents are too strong inside, or to close windows if in traffic near areas with stronger scents (i.e. gas stations, other cars, food stops, cigarette smoke nearby, etc.)

### Crowds/Shelters

- Wear odor-neutral deodorant, avoid strong smelling lotion, perfume, or cologne.<sup>4</sup>
- Social story of potential experiences prior to entering shelter or crowded space.<sup>1</sup>
- Able to move into a room or area further away from eating spaces like cafeterias.
- If possible, offer a shelter room/space with a window that can be opened/closed as needed.
- Scent from alcohol wipes, disinfecting sprays, bleach, or hand sanitizer could be overwhelming - give a warning if possible prior to cleaning a room/space or post a sign on the door outside of the room to indicate when it was cleaned.
- Be mindful of trash areas with some scented garbage bags being overly scented/fragranced.



### SENSORY TOOL KIT

-  Essential oils or other pleasant smelling items (also have an item to put the scent on as appropriate including cotton ball, perfume strip, or other items).<sup>7</sup>
-  Calming music.<sup>3</sup>
-  Notepad and pen to ask and record the individual's preferred calming smells and any overwhelming scents/smells.
-  Have unscented soap options and unscented garbage/trash bags in car or center available.<sup>8,9</sup>
-  Offer a variety of scented hand sanitizers.<sup>9</sup>



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# Sound/Auditory and Strategies

Hyper-reactive	Hypo-reactive	Sensory Integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May be sensitive or respond negatively (cry, flee, etc.) towards loud or unexpected sounds.<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>■ May be bothered by sounds that others do not notice, such as buzzing lights or crinkling paper.</li> <li>■ May cover their ears or physically avoid the sound.<sup>1,2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May appear unaffected or unresponsive to sounds.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>■ May not respond to their name, or to other auditory cues.</li> <li>■ May enjoy making repetitive sounds.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>■ May create loud sounds through banging or clapping.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Closely related to vestibular system; loud sound can impact movement.<sup>12</sup></li> <li>■ Difficulty following directions requiring sound and sight.<sup>13</sup></li> <li>■ Individual may turn head away while listening.</li> <li>■ May have challenges listening to directions when being touched.<sup>11</sup></li> <li>■ May cover their eyes as a means of blocking out the sound due to sensory disintegration.</li> </ul>

## ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS



### Police Car/Ambulance

- Reduce loud or piercing sounds<sup>1</sup>:
  - Turn down radios/intercom and handheld radios to a minimal volume.
  - Turn cell phone alarms and ringtones to silent or vibrate.
- Provide warnings of potential loud noises, such as sirens or alarms, before they occur.
- If police or service animals are present, provide warning about potential noises such as barking and be aware it could be overwhelming for an individual.
- Provide fidget toys (*stress ball, putty, etc.*)<sup>8</sup> or have a preferred object for comfort available.<sup>1</sup>
- Play music that the individual or caretaker notes is calming for them.<sup>4,5,6</sup>
- Ask caregiver what words or visuals can help explain that sounds are “safe” or “okay”.<sup>5</sup>
- Be mindful that talking too much can be frustrating and overwhelming. If direction is needed, it should only be provided by one person at a time.<sup>7</sup>
- Use a gentle tone and use direct questions at a slow pace.<sup>8</sup>
- Ask individual or caregiver what is comforting for the individual and what would help them relax.<sup>8</sup>
- Have a notepad available so that individual can write responses instead of talking.<sup>8</sup>



### Crowds/Shelters

- Competing sounds can be an issue (*i.e., multiple radios/songs on, people talking, etc.*).<sup>6,7</sup>
- Low intensity or common sounds can be frustrating (*i.e., people crunching food, sniffing, whistling, computer sounds, fluorescent light buzzing*).<sup>5,6,7</sup>
- Give time to acclimate to sounds first by separating with distance or a door/another space first.<sup>5</sup>
- Provide fidget toys (*stress ball, putty, etc.*)<sup>8</sup> or have a preferred object for comfort.<sup>1</sup>
- Ask individual or caregiver what is comforting to him/her and what would help them relax.<sup>8</sup>
- Ask caregiver what words or visuals can help explain that sounds are “safe” or “okay”.<sup>5</sup>



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## SENSORY TOOL KIT



Noise-cancelling headphones (*short-term strategy, long-term use can increase sound sensitivity*).<sup>1,5</sup>



Fidget toys (*stress ball, putty, etc.*)<sup>8</sup> or have a preferred object for comfort.<sup>1</sup>



Visual supports or index cards with simple images to explain directions.<sup>1</sup>



Phone to play a preferred song or music on repeat for comfort.<sup>4,5,6,8</sup>



Social Story of potential experiences prior to entering police car/ambulance (<https://paautism.org/resource/what-are-social-stories/>) .<sup>9,10</sup>



Remember to speak slowly and give time for a response to questions. You may have to repeat yourself. No more than one person should be talking at a time.

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# Taste and Strategies

Hyper-reactive	Hypo-reactive	Sensory Integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May avoid certain foods.<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>■ May have restrictive diets that require accommodations.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May be less aware of bitter or sour tastes.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Taste system works closely with smell system.<sup>2</sup></li> <li>■ Texture of food can impact satisfaction and enjoyment of food.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>■ Individuals with known sensory challenges with smell, taste, and proprioception are more likely to refuse food.<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>

## ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS



### Police Car/Ambulance:

- Be aware that an individual may be lethargic if he/she avoids foods and has not eaten or had a drink recently.<sup>3</sup>
- Be mindful of the foods or drinks that you may have had in your car that could cause an aversive/upset response from an individual.<sup>3</sup>
- Speak with individual or parent/caregiver about normal meal/snack time and routine, food sensitivities, and food/drink preferences if individual will need food (*i.e., if individual had blood loss from injury, or will require blood drawn and will need nourishment*).<sup>1</sup>
- If someone has any health conditions (*e.g.: dietary restrictions, allergies, diabetes, etc.*), make sure to be aware of what foods an individual may need, or what foods to avoid.<sup>4</sup>
- Be mindful if an individual needs to eat and drink with medication and possible taste/flavor interactions with the medication and the food/drink.
- It may be challenging for an individual to have his/her meal time/snack routine or preferred brand of snacks changed or interrupted.<sup>1</sup>
- Allow for increased time during meal times or snack breaks as the individual adjusts to the new environment.<sup>1</sup>



### Crowds/Shelters

- Be mindful that areas with a variety of foods and scents could be overwhelming for an individual - consider offering a spot further away from strongly scented foods and drinks.<sup>2</sup>
- Identify when a person's typical meal times or snack times are, and be mindful that interruptions or changes to that routine can be challenging or upsetting for an individual.<sup>1</sup>
- Consider providing snacks that an individual can store in his/her room in case public eating areas are too overwhelming.<sup>2,3</sup>
- If in a shelter, consider the available foods and what an individual will be able to eat and drink on a daily basis due to sensitivities (ask individual or caregiver/parent about preferred and non-preferred foods and drinks).<sup>2,3</sup>
- Consider having options for toothpaste flavors as some of the mint-based flavors can be too overwhelming (*i.e., consider sweet-based flavors like vanilla or chocolate as options*).<sup>7</sup>
- Have a variety of cups and straws available for individuals who may have difficulties with drinking or with maintaining grips on cups.
- Allow for increased time during meal times or snack breaks as the individual adjusts to the new environment.<sup>1</sup>



### SENSORY TOOL KIT



Have some snacks available (*i.e., bread-based, starchy, or salty snacks*).<sup>7</sup>



Notepad and pencil to record individual's preferred/non-preferred foods and scents, and normal meal/snack time and routine.



Have cup and straw options available.

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# Touch and Strategies

Hyper-reactive	Hypo-reactive	Sensory Integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May be sensitive to touch, avoid certain clothing, avoids touching tactile substance (e.g. peanut butter).<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>■ May dislike crowded areas due to risk of being accidentally touched.<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>■ May have an intense reaction to light touch.<sup>1,2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May not seem to notice touch, pain, or temperature.<sup>1,2</sup></li> <li>■ May enjoy rough deep pressure on the skin (hugs, pressure).<sup>1,2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May not be aware or notice light touch; sense of sight helps notice touch sensation.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>■ May have difficulty holding and grasping items; challenges related to integrating touch and proprioception.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>■ May have difficulty concentrating and listening to instructions when being touched due to discomfort.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>■ The touch system works closely with vision and movement to help guide and direct the body.</li> </ul>

## ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS



### Police Car/Ambulance:

- Physical touch can feel painful and uncomfortable; provide a warning before initiating procedures requiring physical touch.<sup>1</sup>
- If physical touch is necessary, demonstrate that touch on a partner if possible.
- Various textures (clothing and bedding fabric, medical gloves, furniture) may cause discomfort/pain and lead to avoiding/pulling away from textures.<sup>1,3</sup>
- If police dogs are present, reassure the individual that the dog will not bite them.
- Individuals may react strongly to being touched on or near cuts, bruises, or injuries, or they may seem not to notice such injuries.
- Individuals may try to avoid or remove unfamiliar textures (face mask, gowns, gloves, bandages). Allow individuals to touch materials or instruments with their hands before using elsewhere on the body.<sup>3</sup>



### Crowds/Shelters

- Inadvertent physical touch in crowded spaces (bumping into, brushing up against people) can cause physical pain and distress.<sup>1</sup>
- Individuals may have different preferences for texture of foods and may express dissatisfaction with food that is unrelated to taste and due to texture.<sup>1</sup>
- Individuals may react strongly to being touched on or near cuts, bruises, or injuries, or they may seem not to notice such injuries.
- Various textures (clothing and bedding fabric, medical gloves, furniture) may cause discomfort/pain and lead to avoiding/pulling away from textures.<sup>1,3</sup>



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- Provide options for fidget toys with different textures such as rubbery, stretchy, smooth, plastic, beaded, etc.<sup>7</sup>
- Visual cues during dressing, such as a mirror, can help visualize touch sensation<sup>6</sup>
- Provide options and a variety of textures for blankets, gowns, masks.<sup>5</sup>
- Social story for putting on hospital attire and wearing a facemask; a social story provides information in simple language and pictures to inform the individual about different processes and what to expect (<https://paautism.org/resource/what-are-social-stories/>).<sup>4</sup>

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# Proprioception and Strategies

Hyper-reactive	Hypo-reactive	Sensory Integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally not observed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Movements may appear clumsy or awkward.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>May bump into objects while moving.<sup>1,5</sup></li> <li>May have difficulty holding small objects, or applying correct pressure when holding items like a pencil.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>May play or interact too roughly with peers<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May have poor postural control.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>

## ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS



### Police Car/Ambulance:

- May have difficulty with signing documents due to too much/too little force when holding the pen/pencil and when writing on the paper.<sup>3</sup>
- Before getting in the car, provide time to do wall push-ups or jumping activity.<sup>6</sup>
- Provide a weighted blanket or other weighted item to place on lap while seated.
- Make sure to keep space clear of any fall/trip hazards.
- If filling out paperwork, provide movement breaks or breaks to relax hands and posture.









### Crowds/Shelters

- Provide an arm's length distance of personal space.<sup>9</sup>
- Have heavy work options between activities or tasks (*options can include helping to set up chairs<sup>6</sup> or carrying a heavy item.<sup>4</sup>*)
- Provide a weighted blanket or other weighted item to place on lap while seated.<sup>7</sup>
- Make sure to keep space clear of any fall/trip hazards.
- Schedule movement breaks (*examples: wall push-ups, jumping activities, or yoga*) if doing a task that requires sitting for an extended period.<sup>3,10</sup>



### SENSORY TOOL KIT

-  Weighted blanket, lap pad, or wrist/ankle weights.<sup>7,8</sup>
-  Stretch bands (*i.e., can be used as fidgets to pull with hands in opposition or can be placed around chair legs to push against, can wrap around door handle for pulling/stretching, etc.*)<sup>6</sup>
-  Box with sand for increasing weight against hand muscles.<sup>6</sup>
-  Fidget toys or stress balls.<sup>3</sup>
-  Soft lead 2B pencils (*if individual is writing too hard and creating holes in paper*).<sup>3</sup>
  - <https://www.amazon.com/Tombow-Drawing-Pencil-Graphite-12-Pack/dp/B00AQENMQ4>
-  HB pencil (*if individual is writing too lightly and handwriting is illegible*).<sup>3</sup>
  - [https://www.amazon.com/AmazonBasics-Pre-sharpened-Wood-Cased-Pencils/dp/B071JM699P?ref\\_=fscpl\\_dp\\_3](https://www.amazon.com/AmazonBasics-Pre-sharpened-Wood-Cased-Pencils/dp/B071JM699P?ref_=fscpl_dp_3)

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# Vestibular and Strategies

Hyper-reactive	Hypo-reactive	Sensory Integration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May fear of leaving the ground easily susceptible to motion sickness<sup>1</sup></li> <li>■ May avoid actions requiring movement or appear clumsy<sup>1</sup> during movement.</li> <li>■ Difficulty changing directions while moving.<sup>1,2,3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ May not be aware of their own movement such as rocking.<sup>1,5</sup></li> <li>■ Enjoy intense movement such as rocking or spinning without getting dizzy.<sup>1,3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Vestibular system is closely related to the auditory system; loud noises may cause vestibular dysfunction such as dizziness.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>■ Vestibular system also related to visual system; can experience dizziness while tracking or scanning.<sup>7</sup></li> <li>■ The vestibular system works closely with the visual and proprioceptive (body sense) systems for balance. It is also important for keeping the body upright in sitting or standing.</li> </ul>

## ENVIRONMENT/CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS



### Police Car/Ambulance:

- Provide warning before starting to move the vehicle or initiating sudden turns.
- Avoid routes with road work or construction to avoid frequent stop and go movements or bumpy roads.<sup>1,3,4</sup>
- May not sustain eye contact during verbal directions or conversation.<sup>1,3,7</sup>
- Individual may lose balance or become dizzy while the vehicle is moving; take extra precaution when starting, stopping/braking, or turning the vehicle.<sup>3</sup>
- Provide extra time or be prepared for a delay in response with following directions requiring body movements.<sup>4</sup>
- Getting into and out of vehicles may cause loss of balance or clumsiness during movement.<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Allow the opportunity to sit in passenger seat instead of backseat; or to have access to a window for air.<sup>10</sup>
- Being placed on a stretcher and then moved backwards into an ambulance may be challenging.<sup>9,10</sup>
- Making sure the person has a seat belt on for more stability while seated.<sup>9,10</sup>
- Consideration of balance needs: if individual is handcuffed, perhaps an officer could provide walking support or have the individual's hands in front of his/her body instead of behind his/her back.<sup>2</sup>
- Consideration that clumsiness/stumbling or ability to follow finger-eye movements during tests may be due to vestibular difficulties, not drunkenness or due to concussion.<sup>2,6</sup>
- Communication may be impacted; individual may have difficulty concentrating or responding when experiencing motion sickness<sup>8</sup>



### Crowds/Shelters

- May need to provide space to allow movements such as jumping and spinning because a person may need movement to stay calm or to be alert.<sup>5</sup>
- Steps or uneven ground may be challenging to navigate and cause imbalance.<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Provide seating options that provide support/stability or opportunities for movement like a rocking chair or cushion.<sup>5</sup>
- If a shelter has bunk beds, consider the option of the bottom bunk to allow the person to be closer to ground if the person has a fear of gravity.<sup>1,3</sup>
- Make sure to have railings or have someone walk with them when going up/down stairs to assist with maintaining balance.<sup>1,3</sup>
- Ask the individual or caregiver (if needed) about preference for using stairs, elevator, or escalator.



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## SENSORY TOOL KIT



Chairs or large exercise balls that rock can be relaxing and calming for hyporeactivity to movement as long as an individual can maintain his or her balance on the chair or ball (some individuals also prefer chairs that spin).<sup>11</sup>



Provide stable four-legged seating with back support and limited movement for hypersensitivity.<sup>5</sup>



Provide a nausea bag in vehicles for motion sickness.



Provide a heavy blanket or bean bag chair to provide touch and pressure input to an individual's body to help calm an overreaction to movement.<sup>5</sup>



Provide opportunities to walk around or do light exercise to help support attention and focus.<sup>5</sup>



Play preferred music to help soothe and calm.<sup>9</sup>

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