

It takes a community to raise a reader: Autism friendly libraries

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Abstract:

The public library should be a place where children feel welcomed and inspired. But for children and young people with autism and their families, a visit to a busy, noisy public library can be a challenging and even a distressing experience. However with a few adjustments, improved staff awareness and sensitivity, we can make libraries much more welcoming. In 2016 The national Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) worked with Dimensions, a not-for-profit support provider for people with autism and learning disabilities, to create a short autism friendly libraries film (funded by Arts Council England). The aim of the film was to stimulate libraries build local partnerships, reach into communities, engage with families and make sustainable improvements to services. Since the film launched in June 2016, libraries across the UK have been developing their autism friendly library offer- examples include targeted autism friendly activities, staff development and fund raising to buy sensory equipment. This paper will outline the development of a programme that for just a small national investment is supporting public libraries to make the changes that will break down barriers and encourage a reading and library culture among a group of vulnerable and often isolated children and young people.

Keywords: public libraries, disability access, autism.

Introduction

The inspirational documentary *A Life Animated* (2017) tells the story of Owen Suskind, a young boy with autism whose ability to communicate was transformed when his parents discovered that by engaging with him through Disney characters, they could communicate, understand his needs and give him a means to express himself. This film is a compelling testimony to the life-changing power of art and culture.

Autism is a developmental spectrum condition that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. People with Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may have:

- Over or under sensitivity to sensory stimulation
- Obsessive repetitive routines and anxiety when there are changes
- Difficulties with organising, sequencing and prioritizing
- Intense responses to overwhelming situations
- Difficulties in communication and social interaction

Around 700,000 people in the UK are on the autism spectrum. That is more than 1 in every 100 (NAS, 2017)

Books are vital to all children. They help them to communicate, to make sense of their lives and are a source of security and reassurance. They entertain, they support learning and above all they help children to develop empathy. For children with ASD, books can open doors to the wider world acting as a navigational guide to complex and confusing social situations. By reading about characters and having a window into their lives, children can gain a better understanding that other people have different viewpoints from them. They may be able to use this understanding in their daily lives, as Gwen Greenwood, a young person with Asperger's Syndrome (writing about Jo Abercrombie's series *The First Law* (Greenwood, 2015)) explains: "Abercrombie includes point of view characters from both sides of the war meaning there is no clear cut good or evil. Many of his characters make bad decisions, are cruel to others and have personal questionable motives. However as a reader I was able to empathise with them because I learned about the life events that made them that way. This is a skill I gradually managed to transfer to the real world". She goes on to say "my understanding of empathy has greatly improved through immersing myself in literature".

Children with autism may struggle to recognise people's emotions and clear illustrations of facial expressions in books can also help them to decipher the appropriate clues. David Leah a young man with autism working for Essex County Council writing a blog about his life for World Autism Awareness Week highlighted this "Animals and cartoons were more identifiable to me than real human expressions. An exaggerated expression of a frightened cartoon cat is easier to identify than human features, which are more subtle and complex (Essex County Council, 2017).

New and unfamiliar situations can be very challenging for children with ASD and reading relevant stories can help to prepare them for new experiences and also provide coping strategies. Books can support children in other ways too – picture books with lots of repetition of phrases and rhythms can encourage children to build and practice language skills and sharing books can be a good way for a parent to connect with a child. Non-fiction can feed children's very specific but intense interests. Our public libraries, treasure houses of books and custodians of the world's stories are therefore vital for children and adults on the autistic spectrum. And crucially they should feel welcomed, safe and valued in these community spaces.

But from the perspective of a child or adult with ASD, a public library can be a challenging space. David Mitchell in the preface to 'The reason why I jump' – written by a 13 year old Japanese boy with autism offers a visceral account of the impact of autism on the senses (Higashida, 2014). "Suddenly sensory input from your environment is flooding in, unfiltered in quality and overwhelming in quantity. Colours and patterns swim and clamour for your attention. The fabric conditioner in your sweater smells as strong as air-freshener fired up your nostrils. Your comfy jeans are now as scratchy as steel wool. Your vestibular and proprioceptive senses are out of kilter, so the floor keeps tilting like a ferry in heavy seas and you're no longer sure where your hands and feet are in relations to the rest of you".

Imagine then how a visit to a library could feel, for a child with autism as they are confronted with unfamiliar people, a confusing layout, often very bright lights and a cacophony of competing noises – people talking, children singing rhymes and the beeps of barcode readers. Public library staff are renowned for great customer service and a passionate desire to meet

the needs of their customers but a lack of understanding of the needs of children and adults with autism can unwittingly make our customers experience more difficult and stressful, even painful.

In 2015 ASCEL UK (The Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians) built a partnership with Dimensions – a not-for-profit support provider for people with autism and learning disabilities. Together we created a 10 minute film to highlight some of the basic changes and developments libraries could make to become “autism friendly”.

The film (ASCEL, 2017) funded by Arts Council England, tells the story of four young people with ASD and their relationship with libraries. It is accompanied by case studies and guidance notes. Top tips in the film include: providing clear signage; ensuring clear uncluttered layouts; providing quiet spaces; encouraging staff not to make judgements but to recognise when the situation may be getting stressful for someone and responding accordingly- for example allowing someone to queue jump. It also advised having autism-friendly lighting -that can dimmed, and sensory support. It was launched in June 2016 and has been seen across the UK by library staff and volunteers, library partners such as Children's Centres, and has been promoted to colleagues in school libraries, public library design companies, publishers and those in local authorities who work with people with ASD across the country.

The film has acted as a catalyst for development for those library services new to autism friendly libraries. For those libraries who were already offering excellent autism services, the film offers another means of raising staff awareness. The main impacts have been felt in the following areas:

- Awareness raising and changing attitudes
- Creating strategy and stimulating new partnerships
- New confidence to develop activities and events for families
- Awareness of the importance on incorporating autism –friendly design into library re-modelling
- Developing signposting and support materials –library maps and social stories
- Libraries celebrating World Autism Awareness Week
- New confidence to engage openly and honestly with families

Probably the most important impact of the film has been to raise awareness. Ian Anstice; editor of the UK's 'Public Libraries News' blog recently wrote “I remember the days when I thought that an autism friendly library meant having a book on the subject available for lending, Thankfully with the help of autism-friendly libraries those days have gone. Hopefully, all library staff will soon understand what those conditions mean and how best to service them (Anstice, 2017)”

Public library services have used the film as a stimulus to secure the support of local partners. These partners have offered training for library staff and helped them to connect with local families. They have helped to promote library services and have involved libraries in local projects.

Case Study: Wakefield Libraries in Yorkshire had already built a partnership with the local autism and learning disability partnership board a multi-agency forum consisting of health and social care professionals, service users and their carers. The film enabled them to move on to a second phase of their work. They worked through the resources starting with the

social story for the Summer Reading Challenge. All staff had viewed the video and top tips by October 2016 and they are creating social stories for all libraries. The film has encouraged libraries to experiment with autism-friendly versions of children's events, using learning from Dimensions and their relaxed cinema screenings.

Case study: Stockton on Tees Library: Harry Potter Book Night.

Stockton on Tees Library decided to have an Autism Friendly Hour as part of Harry Potter Book Night Celebrations on Thursday 2nd February 2017. They offered the Autism Friendly hour from 4pm-5pm and general admission from 5pm to 7pm. Librarian Lucy Carlton-Walker said "we decided to have this session as we felt that it was important that children and families with autism or other special education needs who would struggle with the noise and crowds in a general session had the opportunity to have a quieter session where we limited the numbers so that they could enjoy themselves with their families and friends."

The event included a chill room and visual signs for each of the activities.

Parents said "Autism Chill Room – Wonderful to have this space, it has been a life-saver, Thank you!", "Really great event, 1 hour Autism Friendly session great, meant all family could relax. Everyone present has understanding of kid's needs"

The film highlighted some simple adjustment libraries could make as well as more complex changes. Increasing numbers of libraries are introducing sensory areas, purchasing equipment such as sensory cushions and beanbags, pop-up tents for children to create quiet spaces away from the busy library spaces. Social Stories™ and maps of library layouts (NAS, 2017) are a useful way of preparing children and adults for library visits and many libraries have used the Social Story™ template prepared for us by Dimensions.

World Autism Awareness Week 27 March – 2 April 2017 gave libraries the opportunity to draw together the work they had been doing over the year and to launch autism initiatives. During the week there were events for children, partnership events and advice sessions in libraries and a chance to raise the awareness of other library customers. Many libraries used this week to promote curated booklists lists and book displays.

Case study: Newcastle Libraries are autism friendly

During World Autism Awareness Week, Newcastle Libraries launched 'Newcastle Libraries are Autism Friendly!' They have displayed posters, provided staff training, created and displayed autism friendly user guides on their website The service is in the process of creating Calm Zone areas in all libraries with autism friendly furniture and are also considering providing autism friendly activities for adults and children such as coding sessions, reading groups, story times and library tours in the future as well as encouraging group and class visits. The film has encouraged some library services to have open discussions and consultations with local families to ensure that changes genuinely reflect the needs of children.

Case study: Essex Libraries – parent feedback

Essex staff made contact with a parent who had experienced difficulties in her local library when she visited with her two children both of whom have ASD. We discussed the issues with her and shared the film. As a result the parent involved a local Facebook support group with 2,000 members and asked them for their views of the library service and what would make it better. Staff were encouraged that the results were generally very positive with particular libraries singled out as deserving particular praise. There were, however, a few

constructive criticisms - small, cramped libraries were highlighted as being particularly difficult for children with ASD. They suggested having quiet tents or using outdoor space more in the summer and having special versions of events. Essex Library staff have been able to make some simple adjustments to respond to some of this feedback.

One of the other positive impacts of the Autism Friendly libraries initiative has been the opportunity to connect with other national library initiatives, for example – Reading Well for young people, Shelf Help (Reading Well UK, 2016). This curated and clinically assessed collection of fiction and non-fiction books supporting good mental health for young adults has been developed by The Reading Agency and is available through public libraries. Young people with autism and Asperger’s syndrome are more likely than the general population to experience mental health difficulties and Reading Well Shelf Help offers support for the young person, for their friends and for their siblings. Shelf Help in libraries is promoted via schools, and young people’s mental health services.

Schools and families alone cannot provide all the books a child will need as he or she grows and starts to explore the world. Libraries offer children choice, range and support to find the books that are right for them at their developmental stage. This is as true for a child with ASD as for any other child. So it is essential that libraries are accessible and welcoming places where adults and children can feel calm and safe. The autism friendly libraries initiative with just a small national investment has raised awareness across the United Kingdom public library network and beyond. It has created new partnerships and sensitively targeted activity. At its heart is the desire to meet the needs of every child, to connect them to their community, to develop their love of books and to ensure that they are nurtured, valued and supported to grow and to thrive.

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