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Project PALS

Ensuring Success in Libraries for Patrons with Autism

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With 1 in 68 children in the United States currently being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Baio, 2014), the potential for school librarians to interact with individuals with ASD is certain.

Some accounts suggest that libraries are one place where individuals with autism feel comfortable (Disability.gov, 2014; Prince-Hughes, 2002). Though the library can be a welcoming environment for students with autism, librarians are typically not specifically educated to serve this growing and largely overlooked population. Project PALS (Pan-handle Autism Library Services), funded by an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant, aims to address this issue with a series of evidence-based, online training modules for librarians to increase their understanding of—and to better serve—their library patrons with autism.

Autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder, causes difficulties in information processing. This can affect an individual's social behaviors and communication development, as well as his or her response to sensory stimuli (Janzen & Zenko, 2012). A student with autism might fidget or show repetitive behaviors during story time, or he or she might not look you in the eye while communicating. Autism is a wide spectrum, with individuals diagnosed at many different levels, and behaviors will vary greatly. By having a better understanding of the difficulties faced by children with autism, as well as their unique talents and skills, librarians will be better prepared to reach them where they are and provide the best services and materials.

An informal discussion conducted with nearly thirty school librarians in the summer of 2013 at a Syracuse University Project ENABLE (Expanding Nondiscriminatory Access by Librarians Everywhere) workshop implied that there is a general need for proper training in this area. In considering options for training opportunities, school librarians cited the need for information on the basics of autism, how libraries can increase such individuals' participation in the workforce, and how librarians can better support their communication styles. Though many responded positively about training, there was also an underlying theme of lack of access to training opportunities. Half of those in the discussion received



no training or resorted to self-teaching via videos or reading.

Project PALS' online training materials respond to a clear need and are supported with evidence-based data. Through site visits, research syntheses, focus groups, original programming, surveys, and interviews, the Project PALS team is collecting established, recommended practices for librarians to implement at their own sites. Adding immeasurable value to the project are the contributions from our partners, lending their expertise to ensure the information being provided is the best of what is available.

TRAINING MODULES

Working with the Florida Center for Interactive Media, Project PALS will offer four online training modules specifically designed to fit librarians' needs. Content provided will fall into four modules: About Autism, Arranging the Library Environment, Social Networking and Interacting with Technology, and Communicating with Individuals with Autism.

These online training modules provide content culled from Project PALS' data collection and are formatted for librarians

to learn at their own pace. Each module is asynchronous, and librarians can pause and resume a lesson at any point. Materials are interactive, with modifiable, downloadable content and templates for use in any library. Each module has a knowledge check at the end of the lesson, and earning at least a 70 percent correct allows the learner to print a certificate of completion for professional development credit.

ABOUT AUTISM OFFERS

- a broad overview of the core diagnostics features of individuals with autism
- statistics on the prevalence and potential causes of autism
- information on the importance of library supports and services for individuals with autism
- descriptions of challenging behaviors and how to handle them effectively
- a better understanding of some of the characteristics of autism that might be observable in a library setting
- resources to trust for current autism information

Arranging the Library Environment addresses

- arranging the library environment according to recommended practices in supporting students with autism
- strategies to provide access to library spaces
- using visual supports to enhance communication and independent library use by individuals with autism
- environmental adaptations incorporating the principles of universal design
- the importance of such services as self-checkout or book return drops to provide independent library access

Social Networking and Interacting with Technology explains

- how the library can assist with instruction to further support twenty-first-century skills
- how librarians can help foster technology skills, life skills, community involvement, and participation in the workforce

- the mutual benefits of hiring, mentoring, and supporting workers and student volunteers with autism
- the importance of providing students with a greater sense of competence and independence upon their transition from high school
- how to train students to access online resources independently
- apps to support communication and independence
- safety strategies for social media

Communicating with Individuals with Autism covers

- strategies for librarians to understand and support all communication styles
- common communication issues, such as echolalia and lack of eye contact
- alternate forms of communication
- the value of assistive technologies
- opportunities to foster social interaction within the library
- strategies to decrease challenging behavior arising from communication difficulties

Project PALS' online training modules are currently in the final stages of development and were recently presented at the American Library Association 2014 Annual Conference in Las Vegas as a program sponsored by the American Association of School Librarians. The message received from conferences and conversations is clear: autism is widespread, but librarians are not receiving the necessary training to best assist this population. Project PALS hopes to fill that void with high-quality, evidence-based online trainings and tools.

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Nancy Everhart is a professor at the Florida State University School of Information and the Co-PI on Project PALS. She has extensive experience in the school library field, having served as a school librarian, library educator, president of the American Association of School Librarians, and cochair of the Revised Standards Writing Committee in Library Media for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Her research focuses on school librarian leadership. This is her fourth grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services.