

CONSIDERATIONS IN PROVIDING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Information provided for sharing purposes only

- 1) People with autism spectrum disorders generally do not automatically have judgment about dangers such as height, traffic, fire, falling, stairs, sharp objects, etc. Continuous supervision is necessary to prevent injury. Goals and teaching methods should focus on the development of safety skills.

- 2) People with autism spectrum disorders may not be able to easily identify an internal state and find the words to use to describe it to another person. They may be sick or in pain and give NO typical indication, such as groaning, flinching or holding a sore part of the body. Behavioral changes may be a signal of internal distress, pain or illness.

- 3) People with autism spectrum disorders may not have a good feel for their own bodily temperature. They may want to wear heavy coats in the summer or try to go outside without shoes or socks in the winter. Close supervision is necessary. IEP goals and teaching methods should focus on charts, lists, rules and other visual aides to help the individual learn what clothes to wear in each weather condition.

- 4) Children and adults with autism spectrum disorders may not be aware or able to describe physical comfort levels. Shoes may be several sizes too small and the person may not indicate any discomfort. Wristbands, neckbands and waistbands may be dangerously tight and the individual with an autism spectrum disorder may not indicate discomfort or ask for help. Family/staff must look carefully at the bodies of people with autism spectrum disorders, checking for marks or redness that indicates that shoes or clothing may be too binding or uncomfortable.

- 5) People with autism spectrum disorders may not be able to tell the difference between food that is ready to eat and food that is dangerously hot. NEVER serve food to children or adults with autism spectrum disorders until it has cooled sufficiently and will not burn them. Keep hot foods and drinks away from people with autism spectrum disorders until they have safely cooled. Teach individuals how to check the temperature of food before putting it in their mouths.

- 6) People with autism spectrum disorders may complain that food is too hot when it is barely warm from your point of view. They may complain that something is too freezing cold to drink, when it seems fine to you. Try to learn about the individual preferences and respect them. If the person thinks that the warm food is too hot, allow them sufficient time to eat so that the food can cool to the temperature the person prefers.
- 7) NEVER think that because a child or adult with autism spectrum disorders has not ever done a particular dangerous thing that you are safe and that the person never will do it. If the child normally stays in the yard and does not go near the street, for example, you cannot be sure that the next time the child will not run into traffic. Provide intense supervision near traffic, even if the child has never stepped off the curb before. Provide intense supervision when using tools and implements like scissors even if the child or adult has never poked anyone with the implement. Select goals to teach stopping before the curb, handling implements carefully and other safety skills.
- 8) Children and adults with autism spectrum disorders may not be able to read and anticipate the non-verbal signals of other people who intend to do them harm. They may fail to respond appropriately to a raised fist or an angry tone of voice. Staff and families must provide adequate supervision when people with autism are in a group situation or in contact with people who can become aggressive or dangerous. Ask peers to help protect the individual.
9. Children and adults with autism may not recognize items that are edible from items that are inedible. Provide careful supervision. Provide systematic training to enable the individual to learn what can and cannot be put in the mouth or consumed. Provide constant vigilance in the presence of an individual who eats or mouths inedible items. Provide edible snacks that the person can have in environments in which s/he may try to eat something inedible. Write social stories about what to eat and what cannot be eaten in various environments.
10. Children and adults with autism spectrum disorders can become the target of bullying and may be unable to cope or respond appropriately. Children and adults with autism can be victimized by others who encourage the naive person with autism to do something wrong in order to gain the “friendship” of others. It is very important for people with autism spectrum disorders to be properly supervised by adults whenever they are with groups of children or adults, particularly in places like the gym, the lunchroom and on the playground. Creating a “Buddy System” of support for people with autism spectrum disorders in these situations can be very helpful but does not replace the need for attending adults.