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Engaging Children with Autism at Historic Sites: Developing an Audience-appropriate Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

While historic house museums have traditionally employed verbal-based programming, children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often feel most comfortable engaged in sensory learning. Historic house museums, due to their tangibility, have the potential to tap into sensory experiences that can teach history to this audience. Despite this advantage, few house museums offer such programming. With an estimated one in 68 students in America diagnosed with ASD [Autism Speaks. 2012. "What is Autism?" Autism Speaks. May 31. Accessed February 4, 2016. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism>] and the need to welcome new audiences to historic houses, this is a key area of work to be explored. The Historic House Trust of New York City is working to become more accessible to children, ages 2–18, with ASD. The author describes the evidence-based curriculum that the Trust is formulating, which can be used as a model of best practices for historic houses to engage such students.

KEYWORDS

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD); curriculum; historic house museum; handicap accessibility; New York City; children

Welcoming new audiences

The issue of accessibility has become a pressing issue for museums, and it is predicted that the importance of this issue will only grow in the coming years.¹ Historic sites can be powerful settings for visitors of all abilities to encounter the past. However, it is often difficult to engage children on the autism spectrum at these sites. While historic houses have traditionally employed verbal-based tours and programming, children with autism often feel most comfortable when engaged in sensory or non-verbal learning activities. There are few house museums that offer such programming. With an estimated one out of every 68 students in American diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD),² this is a key area of work to be explored. In addition to the increasing prevalence of autism, another reason for enhancing accessibility for children on the autism spectrum is the need to welcome new audiences to historic houses. In "The Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums," University of North Carolina at Charlotte Professor of Architecture Deborah Ryan and former Executive Director of the Historic House Trust (HHT) of New York City Franklin Vagnone argue that:

Because the traditional Historic House museum is aging, attendance is shrinking, budgets are tightening, competition from both nonprofits and commercial offerings is increasing, and new types of communication methods are growing we believe that House museums need to take bold steps and expand their overall purpose ... to engage communities surrounding them.³

Engaging new communities in an effort to expand the institution's overall purpose includes families with children with autism. Instead of the traditional, dry historic tours of historic houses where visitors cannot touch any objects, families of children with autism need engaging and interactive experiences that involve all family members.

History is often quite dependent on facts and the written record, and for many children with autism, especially those who are non-verbal, this can seem to be an insurmountable challenge. However, the tangibility of historic house museums can offer some advantages. In general, historic houses are small, contained sites, where individualized attention is the norm, programs can be easily adapted, and children can explore without getting lost. Small sites also mean that there is less danger of overstimulation. For non-verbal children and children who learn best in nontraditional ways, historic sites offer a chance to interact and learn about history in a way that does not involve complex language, as they can absorb the atmosphere of tangible things.

The HHT of New York City is a public-private partnership that works with the New York City Parks Department and the nonprofit boards of each house to restore, interpret, and promote the 23 historic house sites, which span 350 years of New York City life. From modest farmers' cottages to grand mansions, the sites in the Trust's collection are located in all five boroughs and chronicle a wide range of cultural, historical, and architectural aspects of New York City. The HHT of New York City is working to become more accessible and welcoming to children, ages 2–18, with physical and cognitive disabilities, especially those with ASD. Through the Jeanette and Paul Wagner Educational Program for Children with Disabilities, the HHT of New York City is formulating an evidence-based curriculum, which can be used as a model of best practices for historic house museums to engage students with special needs. This curriculum, developed through consultation with Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health and Dr Wendy Ross, will be used to pilot Autism-Friendly Family Day programs at five of HHT's sites.

Learning from other museum programming

Creating autism-friendly programs at historic house museums is a novel endeavor, but there are several programs at museums in the New York City area that serve as models. The Intrepid Sea, Air, and Space Museum, for example, has an early opening program for families with children with autism once a month. The early opening means that there are fewer crowds, which can be overwhelming for those with autism. In addition to special activities, lighting and sound is lowered, and wait times are shortened (attendees register in advance). Rules, such as not touching the objects, are also relaxed. While attendees learn about the ship, the program also focuses on social skills, which are often lacking for those on the autism spectrum. The Intrepid was once a working aircraft carrier and at one session, a helicopter mechanic described his experience working on the ship. To adapt the program for children who had trouble asking questions, there were cue cards, allowing those who might need some prompting, feel nervous, or have limited expressive language practice their social skills.⁴

Building on the fascination that many children with ASD have with trains,⁵ the New York City Transit Museum offers a number of programs for children on the autism spectrum including an after-school program "Subway Sleuths," early openings, and travel training for school groups.⁶ Since the Transit Museum is in a former subway

station, the travel training program gives children with ASD the chance to experience all the aspects of riding the subway, a sometimes chaotic experience, in a stress free and safe environment.

The New York-based Museum Access Consortium (MAC) has also been invaluable. MAC offers a network of mutual support to help museum and disability professionals engage with each other, disability advocates, and people who have disabilities to learn about, implement, and strengthen best practices for access and inclusion in museums and related cultural facilities throughout the New York metro area and beyond.⁷ Nationally, the Kennedy Center's Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability, offers similar support, and regional access consortiums exist throughout the country. One example of a program that MAC held that was influential in planning the HHT program for children with ASD was an Autism-Friendly Cultural Programs fair at the Metropolitan Museum of Art held in the spring of 2014. The fair was a way for HHT staff members to become familiar with programs at museums around the city, in one central space. These rich examples of programming for ASD audiences helped inform the development of new offerings that combined sensory experiences in historic settings with research-based recommendations from other museums.

Assessing site readiness

For the HHT, an organization dealing with multiple sites, the first step to developing a program that serves children with special needs was researching which houses were most amenable to hosting new sessions for this audience. For five months in 2013, HHT staff assessed its house museums for handicap accessibility, especially as it applied to educational programs for children on the autism spectrum. After preliminary phone and email conversations with the directors, education directors, or both, at all of the HHT sites, school groups were shadowed at the sites with active educational programming. Lastly, a survey about handicap accessibility was designed and sent to the education and executive directors of the sites, focusing on the access of educational programming for children on the autism spectrum. The survey was designed based on the National Endowment for the Arts' "Arts and Humanities Accessibility Checklist"⁸ and Art Beyond Sight's "Self-Assessment Accessibility Survey."⁹

The survey structure and priorities were agreed upon by HHT site executive directors and educators. The survey focused on General Access, Disability Awareness, Outreach, and Educational Programming. Access for different communities of the disabled, including for those with ASD were also scored. Sites were ranked on their scores in all these different categories, as well as their overall scores. In addition to the quantitative data, each site was asked to describe their accessibility. Criteria that were used to measure site readiness included awareness of autism issues and access, record of hosting programs for disabled individuals in the past, and outreach to special needs schools and organizations. Existing programs for children on the autism spectrum or those that could easily be adapted were also identified, including policies in place for special requests, pre-visit materials such as Social Stories™, parental input, and training of staff for special programming.

Based on the survey and report findings, five sites were identified as being the most ready and welcoming to hold a pilot program, representing the breadth of the HHT's

holdings, both geographically and topically. These sites are Historic Richmond Town on Staten Island, Queens County Farm Museum, Morris-Jumel Mansion in Upper Manhattan, and Old Stone House and Lefferts Historic House in Brooklyn. The survey and report also provided an idea of what concerns and obstacles the other houses had about creating a program for children with disabilities and their interest in such a program. There were levels of trepidation by some of the house staff who were worried about how they could adapt their programming for children on the autism spectrum, or concerned that creating “special” programming tailored to a specific audience is not the best approach.

For HHT’s sites to be better prepared for visits by people with autism, and to allay fears of what these visits might entail, several training sessions were held for the education staff of all the sites. The first training session provided a general overview of ASDs, discussed ways that sites can take advantage of the adaptability of working at a small historic site, and explored avenues for attracting and engaging with visitors to their sites with ASD. A second, more interactive training session was held in the summer of 2015 at Lefferts Historic House, one of the pilot sites, focusing on sensory experiences, adapted for different historical periods, which could lead to more fulfilling and enriching experience for those with autism. One experience was reaching into a paper bag with a mystery item inside and figuring out what the object was, forming language around touch. Touch objects also allow participants to experience objects in a non-verbal way. Another activity involved smelling herbs and spices that are grown at Lefferts – a great sensory experience for many of HHT’s sites that have historically accurate gardens. These workshops set the stage for the design of a general curriculum that could be used across the Trust to develop programming for children with ASD.

Designing a general curriculum

To support the five historic house museums in their ability to conduct programs for autism spectrum youths, we developed general curriculum guidelines that could be adapted and customized by each site. An external firm, Devereux, helped in the development of the curriculum, providing an expertise in the audience group that museum educators lacked. The curriculum designed includes both pre-visit materials and an outline of the on-site programming. It was important to incorporate existing tools that were proven to meet the needs of these learners, along with the unique opportunities that historic sites can provide.

The bulk of the pre-visit materials are Social Stories™. Those with ASD have impaired social cognition and do not read and understand social situations and the appropriate responses.¹⁰ Social Stories™ describe, in simple language, situations in terms of relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses. Photographs are provided that illustrate the situation. The goal of a Social Story™ is to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner to someone with an ASD. The Social Stories created for our curriculum spell out what appropriate responses are to the circumstances that they may find themselves in when at the historic site. Social Stories™ are given out to visitors with ASD and their families prior to their visit so that they know what to expect (Figure 1). Surprises and changes in schedule for those on the autism spectrum can often be unsettling and stressful, leading to tantrums and other disruptive behavior. This includes how participants will arrive at and leave the museum, the part of the visit that often



Figure 1. A photo in a Social Story™ of a volunteer at the Lefferts Historic House demonstrating how to properly behave when carousel is too loud.

poses the greatest barriers to a successful family outing. For example, at Old Richmond Town, the story begins with taking a public bus to the site, supplemented by a picture of a family waving from a bus window. The story continues with arrival at the visitor's center at the Third County Courthouse (along with a picture of the building), and the rest of the visit to the museum, ending with the ride back home.

One important guideline to strengthen the curriculum is the inclusion of a "Quiet Room" or "Sensory Room" for children and their families. A model "Sensory Room" is located at the Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM). Developed in collaboration with professionals, such as physical and occupational therapists, and parents, the BCM's "Sensory Room" offers children the chance to relax, explore, and engage all their senses. The hands-on space includes a swing that can hold both a parent and child at the same time, tunnels to hide in, multiple textures, and opportunities for rocking and rolling. The room is designed to be all-inclusive and can be either be calming or stimulating, depending on the individual.¹¹ These spaces should be separate from where the main program is being held and be a soothing experience with low lighting and soft objects like beanbag chairs. In an historic house a "Sensory Room" can be created by draping curtains over a small area.

The general curriculum includes an example of a schedule of an "Autism-Friendly Day." To allow for the individual attention needed for such a program a small site should cap the attendance at about 20, including adults and children, and require pre-registration to ensure there is enough trained staff at the event. To attract the families of children with ASD, in addition to word of mouth, which many parents still rely on, museums should set up web pages dedicated to Special Needs families and reach out to

local support groups. In addition to sensory rooms, it is advised to hold these programs at a special time, when the museum is closed to the public. This makes the experience less overwhelming for the participants and guarantees that other people (staff and visitors) will understand how to interact with families of children with ASD. It can also be easier to adjust light and sound to avoid sensory overload without affecting the general population.

The historic program begins with a time to be acquainted with the space. After check-in, there should be an icebreaker and an overview of the schedule, expectations, and logistics, including locations of the bathrooms, sensory rooms. Depending on the size of the museum, this should be followed by a short introduction or tour of the museum, followed by a structured break, possibly with a simple craft or activity. These activities may include playing with toys from the interpreted period such as walking on stilts and hoop spinning, dress up in historical costumes, puppetry, and gardening. The main part of the program should be a group activity related to the house that is sensory friendly and adapted for those on the autism spectrum. At Lefferts House this will be preparing laundry by hand, an activity that the original inhabitants of the house would have had to have done regularly. The families will have to transport water, clean the clothes in wash basins, and hang them out to dry. After the program, participants are encouraged to ask questions. These programs and activities are designed to give the children an immersive experience that portrays what it was like to be in the historical period without relying too heavily on concrete facts or dates.

Multi-sensory programming

The sites in the pilot program also plan to build on their unique qualities in their curriculum. For example, the Queens County Farm Museum will take advantage of opportunities to interact with livestock and touch, smell, and taste certain vegetables and plants. The Queens County Farm Museum is one of the only working farms left in the area, and these interactions will allow children on the autism spectrum to experience Queens' agricultural past in a non-verbal way.

One of the pilot program sites has already had the chance to hold an ASD Family Friendly Day, building on its recent history as a site for local theater. In May, and again in November of 2015, Spellbound Theatre and the Old Stone House presented "Before We Grew," a multi-sensory, non-narrative performance geared for families with children on the Autism spectrum, ages 2–5. The performance was tactile, participatory, and relied on visual storytelling and one-on-one connection between performers and audience. Spellbound artists worked with the education staff of the Old Stone House to create an interactive performance structure appropriate for children with ASD. Using puppetry, animation, and music, "Before We Grew" tells the story of Hendrick, a young boy who lived in Brooklyn "long ago." In comparison to the urban Brooklyn the children know today Hendrick explores the rural Brooklyn world around him and meets birds, bugs, a chipmunk and more. Throughout the performance, the two actors visited all the audience members and the children had the chance to touch and handle the props and puppet. At one of the performance, one young boy, quiet and unresponsive for most of the show, came up to the stage at the end of the show, interacted with some of the props and eventually gave the puppet a kiss, before running back to his seat. Parents who attended



Figure 2. Children interacting with the puppet Hendricks, at a performance of *Before We Grew*. Photo credit: Alexis Buatti Ramos.

remarked on how engaged the children were, laughing, noticing details, interacting with multiple props and just enjoying being themselves (Figure 2).¹²

It is expected that the play will be performed at additional HHT sites. This play is an example of how history can be made accessible to new audiences, meeting their needs as learners while still incorporating the history of the site in an engaging activity.

Conclusion: influencing other historic sites

To be sustainable past the pilot program, the data and outcomes of this and the other educational experiences will be used in the preparation of grants and other funding opportunities. Historic House museum visits can play an important role in the education and socialization of children with ASD and their families, especially when they are carefully thought out and well researched. The hope is that the pilot program will lead to educational activities for children on the autism spectrum at all of HHT's sites and beyond, illustrating that historic sites are well positioned to bring the past to life in ways that are compelling and relevant to audiences with special needs.

Notes

1. Langa, et al., "Improving the Museum Experiences of Children."
2. Autism Speaks, "What is Autism?"
3. Vagnone and Ryan, *The Anarchist's Guide*, 38–39.
4. Leist, Levinsky-Raskin and Stemler, "Visitor Voices."
5. Bennett, "Autism and Trains?!"

6. Metropolitan Transit Authority, "Programs."
7. Museum Access Consortium, "About."
8. National Endowment for the Arts, *Design for Accessibility*.
9. Art Beyond Sight, "Initial Accessibility Survey 2011."
10. Gray and Garand, "Social Stories: Improving Responses."
11. Art Beyond Sight, "Accessibility in Practice."
12. Spellbound Theatre, "Before we Grew."

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