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## **Museums and Visitors with Autism: An Overview of Programs**

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The Rochester Institute of Technology  
College of Liberal Arts

**Museums and Visitors with Autism:  
An Overview of Programs**

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE IN  
MUSEUM STUDIES  
HISTORY DEPARTMENT

BY

Rachel Varner

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Rachel Varner submitted on Thursday,  
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**Abstract:**

Across the world, several museums are committed to accessibility and accommodations for the general public, such as closed captions for the D/HH (deaf and hard-of-hearing) visitors and ramps for wheelchair users. However, not all disabilities and disorders are visible. When it comes to working with people who have a specific disability or disorder, it is critical that museum professionals be aware of what should be done to ensure that visitors with disabilities or disorders have a pleasant experience in the museum. Numerous museums have already created programs for people with specific disabilities or disorders. Workshops about disabilities and disorders should be presented by professionals or guest speakers to spread awareness. How can individuals with Autism benefit from museums? What additional features can museums provide as services to the Autism community?

In order to examine the benefits that might be offered by museums to individuals with Autism, it is necessary to examine Autism as well as the museum environment. First, an explanation about autism is necessary. Autism is a disorder that affects the individual's brain before the age of three years, making communication and social skills difficult. It can also influence the individual's behavior. Boys are more likely to have autism than girls. Autism is one of the 5 brain disorders that are classified under the Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The other 4 brain disorders are: Asperger Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Persuasive Developmental Delay-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Rett Syndrome (WebMD).

Research implies that there are two critical factors which might cause autism. The first factor is genetic while the second factor is environmental. "Researchers are starting to identify particular genes that may increase the risk for ASD. Still, scientists have only had some success in finding exactly which genes are involved. Most people who develop ASD have no reported

family history of autism, suggesting that random, rare, and possibly many gene mutations are likely to affect a person's risk. Having increased genetic risk does not mean a child will definitely develop ASD. Many researchers are focusing on how various genes interact with each other and environmental factors to better understand how they increase the risk of this disorder. As with genes, it's likely that more than one environmental factor is involved in increasing risk for ASD. And, like genes, any one of these risk factors raises the risk by only a small amount. Most people who have been exposed to environmental risk factors do not develop ASD" (NIH). While there is no cure for ASD, treatment options are available. Fortunately, abundant resources are available for families with ASD children. Autism is different from Down's Syndrome for particular reasons. "Down's kids tend to be very friendly, happy go-lucky. Autism kids tend to have a bit of anxiety, not knowing what is coming next. They may not appear as friendly or outgoing. The anxiety level overtakes them" (Smith).

**Environment:**

Generally speaking, museum environments can be agonizing for Autism individuals. It's not just the noises. Flashing lights emitted from a screen, children throwing temper tantrums, and the roars of the machined dinosaurs can be heard from nearby. Lights, heavy crowds, and other contributing factors can be overwhelming for individuals with autism during regular hours. "For those youngsters, if a place doesn't have appropriate accommodations, museum-going is a no-go for much of their childhood. That's because so often, what seems like a fun diversion ends up causing feelings of anxiety and sometimes panic" (Naudiziunas). However, there are some museums that have not yet taken this step to make the museum environment much more comfortable for autism individuals. Some museums participated in several research studies

which have been conducted across the nation. In addition, some museums do arrange partnerships with specific organizations.

### **Research:**

A research study was conducted through a partnership between a local school in Maryland (that has ASD pupils), University of Maryland, and Smithsonian Institution [Smithsonian Institution Accessibility Program (SIAP) and Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies (SCEMS)] on how to address motivations and needs for families (with ASD children) to visit museums and how technologies can be made more accessible to them. “Unlike previous studies, this study incorporates the voices of the persons with ASDs by collecting data from children, as well as their parents and teachers. It makes a unique and significant contribution to the field by examining the families’ motivations and needs when visiting museums” (Langa, 325). The research study was conducted in 2 phases.

The study focuses on a group of children, ages 7 to 11, with ASDs—the group also consisted of young individuals with low, middle, and high-functioning abilities (low being low verbal skills and high being Asperger syndrome). The first phase contained a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The questionnaire asked families to rate multiple motivational factors (most important to least important) and select visual aids and photos that would be helpful for children during the follow-up interviews. The follow-up interviews were designed in mind to create a comfortable, albeit brief, routine, making concentration easy for the child.

The questionnaire is relevant as it is a part of the research study and provided interesting results. “...results revealed that the most important factors for all families to visit museums were: to be pleasantly occupied together as a group, to enjoy ourselves, to be mentally stimulated and

to be better informed. Other very important motivations included spending quality family time together and spurring connections between museum exhibits and their child's interests...least important motivations for visiting were time spent relaxing or leisurely, and to develop close friends while at the museum" (Langa, 326). However, parents did have a primary motivation. When it comes to visiting museums, it is not only a family visit but something that happens to be an interest for the child as well. "The child's interests primarily drove a family to visit with their ASDs child, and where convenient, to exhibits or objects in which both parents and children had interest. For example, a child's interest in airplanes could motivate a family to visit the National Air and Space Museum, or a child's interest in astronomy and science could induce families to visit a science museum. In framing motivation to visit museums, families always wove an interest in a specific topic with doing something meaningful and enjoyable. According to parents, qualities of a meaningful experience would have been to foster the child's curiosity or to allow the child to be independent in exploring and experiencing" (Langa, 326). So, the results of the first phrase were to get the child to be prepared and be familiar with the museum environment so they could gain relevant experience.

The second phrase was an exploration on the possibility of using IT to improve museum accessibility for families with ASD children. A program called Morning at the Museum was constructed for families with ASD children where early admissions were made available in a Smithsonian museum; this program occurs once per month. Pre-visit resources were developed by SIAP. Those resources contained "a tip sheet, a sensory map and sensory guide, social stories and a picture schedule" (Langa, 326). The use and preparation of those resources were used by the parents in various ways.

A case study was conducted at the Museum of Science in Boston. The case study focused on the BEST (Buddies Exploring Science Together) program which is aimed at students with autism from two public schools. In the program, students learned about science while building up their social skills. The duration was approximately 6 weeks. The BEST program was quite successful as it was praised by teachers. “A strategic partnership between the Museum, Boston Public, and the Boston University graduate program for Occupational Therapy is responsible for this great programming. All parties benefit: the museum by filling a community need, the schools by providing children with an experience they could not enjoy in the classroom setting, and the university by providing their graduate students with unparalleled experience in the occupational therapy field. Each of the three institutions is able to serve their own constituencies while providing for the shared common goal of helping these children to learn and socialize” (Noahblev).

### **Programs:**

Museums are modifying their programs so individuals with autism are able to experience the museum environment. That is the main reason why several museums have created programs during quieter hours so it is not as overwhelming for them. “Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia recently hosted a free hour of museum specifically for kids with special needs through their Play without Boundaries initiative. During the hour, among other accommodations, the lights were dimmed, volume was lowered and a quiet space was designated. Families in the autism community were able to feel comfortable and welcome and enjoy their museum experience like never before” (Autism Speaks).

“Museum programs are not usually good options for kids who are nonverbal or unable to sit still, focus, or follow instruction” (Rudy, 119). However, each child has their own personality



and parents need to be aware on how to make a comfortable environment work for them. “Of course, you’ll also want to prepare your child for the experience—which may mean an advance visit to the program space, along with a chance for your child to ask any questions she may have about the experience” (Rudy, 119).

The program, “Rainbow Artists”, has been successful for six years so far at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville, FL. “The therapeutic objectives of the program are to improve social skills; to encourage emotional regulation and motor skills; to decrease anxiety and increase focus, self-confidence, self-esteem, and creative self-expression; to increase abstract thinking skills and imagination; and to improve visual-spatial skills” (Stringer, 38-39). The “Rainbow Artists” program is a community-based instruction, not a field trip experience because those two terms are distinct. When it comes to field trips, they are connected to a school’s curriculum. A community-based instruction “relates to goals in the school, ongoing instruction, and continuing reinforcement and can translate to the real world instead of only the classroom. Students work on skills throughout the sessions, and parents are involved ahead of time and have a follow-up afterward” (Stringer, 39). Community need was the reason why “Rainbow Artists” program was established; parents and museum staff worked together to launch the program.

There are several art museums that offer programs for individuals with autism. But those programs aren’t just for individuals with autism—they include their families as well. Leah Booth, a speech and language pathologist at Yale University and an advisor at Yale Center for British Art (YCBA), stress that art museums are much more difficult for children with autism: “A child who is not on the spectrum would notice that they need to be quiet, to not run their fingers on the paintings, to not run around. That is a socially intuitive piece of information. Kids on the

spectrum explicitly need to be taught these rules. It's not because they're behavioral. They truly don't know how to read social nuances and apply them for themselves" (Dunne).

For instance, the Sensory Morning Program at Walters Art Museum is a specifically morning-only program established for individuals with Sensory Processing Disorders (autism individuals do encounter sensory processing challenges) made available before the museum is open to the public. It is comfortable for those individuals because it is quieter in the museum environment before opening hours to the public. The Sensory Morning Program is an excellent program because it inspires each individual to play, discover, and explore. "Through developmentally appropriate opportunities for hands-on learning in the galleries and art studios, children and adults of all levels and abilities are welcome to learn in the museum. Each Sensory Morning program centers on a theme that relates to the Walters collection or a special exhibition and include tours and hands-on activities" (AAMD). This program is offered four times per year.

Dallas Museum of Art, one of the best art museums with accessible programs designed for individuals with disabilities and disorders, celebrated its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Autism Awareness Family Celebrations program recently. Several other museums have used DMA's approach for new programs in development. The Autism Awareness Family Celebrations is hosted four times per year, along with a summer camp. "These Autism Awareness Family Celebrations provide a creative and communal environment for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their siblings, parents, grandparents, and peers" (Press Release). While the Autism Awareness Family Celebrations is a free program, it is mandatory to make reservations in advance. As for the summer camp, it's not a typical, standard summer camp—it's an art camp designed for children with autism, from ages 7-12. The art camp will provide them a chance for hands-on experience with art. "On the final day of camp, a special guest music therapist will lead

interactive musical activities to spark our imagination and get our toes tapping! Autism specialists from local schools and occupational therapy students will assist with the camp, providing one-on-one guidance. Visual practice schedules and social stories will be used to integrate art, music, social interaction, sensory exploration and movement” (Dallas Museum of Art).

The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has a unique art program called Beyond the Spectrum. “Upon arrival children will be divided into groups by age and/or needs...meets one Saturday per month from 10:30 am-12 pm. Each class lasts an hour and half and combines gallery exploration with an art-making activity” (Museum of Fine Arts). Often, autistic children are fascinated with things and they do have excellent memory skills.

During summer 2013, the Swope Art Museum in Terre Haute, IN, held a summer youth art program consisting of different courses. A visual exploration course was designed for children with autism, from ages 5-18. The course lasted for 4 days in June. “This course presents fun and different art experiences every day, offering mini lessons on aspects of various cultures. Students will have an opportunity to explore and experiment with media including drawing materials, paint, yarn, papier-mâché and paper. Guardian is welcome to attend classes with student” (Swope Art Museum).

The program, “Exploring Artism” was established by Linda Friedlander, the curator of education at Yale, in 2013. Since it was a new program at that time, sessions were held on a Saturday per month. The sessions are free and last for 90 minutes. Autistic children between the ages of 5 to 10 and families are welcome to attend the sessions. Friedlander stated a few significant goals of the program: “to promote inclusiveness and improve visual literacy...to make both children and parents feel welcome and appreciated in an art museum” (Dunne). The

children learned about appropriate museum behavior which was emphasized by Booth. “From the beginning, we set clear expectations and clear routines, making things predictable, making sure any activities kids are doing are illustrated in a step-by-step process. It’s very important to go in a well-documented sequence, but it can be made simple, by using pictures and straightforward language to explain in advance what to expect when you enter a museum” (Dunne). In addition, security guards and docents have received special behavioral training so they can be aware if an autistic child is acting out.

A program in Orlando Museum of Art was established with the assistance of an Advisory Council. The program, Creative Connections, have two separate sessions that are categorized for children and adults. “Creative Connections will spark imagination and foster creative expression” (Orlando Museum of Art). Registration for this program is mandatory at no cost. “These workshops welcome children and adults with a range of abilities and learning styles together with family members. All can enjoy these workshops which include exploring art in the galleries and then making your own in the studio classroom” (Orlando Museum of Art).

The Andy Warhol Museum collaborated with a local Pittsburgh school and an educator named Lynda Abraham-Braff. Together, they formed a program that would assist autism individuals with the recognition of facial expressions and emotions. “The critique is designed as yet another means of reinforcing ways to recognize and interpret facial expressions, a skill most people take for granted but this group of 10 middle and high school students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) struggle with on a daily basis. They don’t instinctively recognize a friend’s scowl or a teacher’s stern stare as cues to tread lightly. When they do identify such an expression, it’s challenging for them to understand what the other person is feeling and how they should respond. Now in its second year, the focus of the program is helping

students interpret, as well as mirror, five simple emotions: happy, sad, angry, surprised, and scared” (Hannon).

The programs designed for autism individuals are not just limited to art museums only. A program called The Discovery Squad was established at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The program is designed for ASD children from ages 5-14; they must be with an adult all the time and the program includes a tour that lasts for 40 minutes. In addition, the program is available on specific Saturday mornings. “Children ages 5-9 will discover the dioramas in the Bernard Family Hall of North American Mammals, which offers a snapshot of the plants and animals native to North America. They will then plunge into the ocean to explore the dioramas in the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life. Children ages 10-14 will join our guides on a paleontological adventure through the Koch Dinosaur Wing” (AMNH).

The main reason why individuals with autism have difficulties with facial expressions comes from a region in the brain. The name of this region is *fusiform gyrus*. Through an autistic individual’s eyes, a person’s face is “...just another object” (Hannon) while people with normal developed brains can distinguish between faces and objects. A secondary reason is the lack of eye contact which is associated with ASD. When it comes to socializing with people, we maintain eye contact and detect facial expressions; both reasons could clarify the main point that social interaction is also difficult for autism individuals as a matter of fact. At University of Victoria in British Columbia, a face researcher named Jim Tanaka worked with the Yale Child Study Center to launch a computer program called “Let’s Face It!” and the goal was to assist autism individuals in recognizing facial expressions. “This series of computer games tasks kids with distinguishing faces from everyday objects, attaching labels to facial expressions, and interpreting the meaning of facial cues in a social context” (Hannon).

The Dupage Children’s Museum did a collaborative program with the Illinois Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project on providing a system that was visual for autism children. The visual system contained visual guidebooks which would be used as a prep tool by families and children prior to visiting the museum. It was not the only concept developed for the program. The program also included parent-training programs. “We developed a monthly event called Third Thursday. From 5-7 pm, we invite families with autistic kids to visit the museum and keep the museum open to all families. We put together some additional supports to make the families more comfortable and at ease; our staff took an in-service on autism to learn about hallmark behaviors, so that the staff felt more prepared. Also, every month we invite professionals from the communities to cohost the evenings. We set up a resource table for parents to say hello and get information about books, workshops, seminars, and articles. My cohost brings agencies’ information, too. It’s been hugely popular; not that we get score of families, but about five to ten families come in for a couple of Third Thursdays. All it took was an invitation. Sometimes they join, sometimes they don’t—but this becomes a comfortable place for them” (Rudy, 115).

The Children’s Museum of Houston in Texas makes a special exception when it comes to young ASD individuals. While it is closed to the general public on Mondays, the CMH hosts events that are exclusive to ASD youngsters. Although the event, Sensory Friendly Day, isn’t offered every Monday, it provides an environment that is appropriate and soothing so the kids can have a good learning experience. Registration is mandatory and admission is \$5. “The Museum can often be crowded, loud and have bright lights. Our Sensory Friendly Days offer a wonderful relief from extra stimuli. Staff goes through the Museum ahead of time to turn down lights, limit extra sounds and stop distracting motions. Extra signage is added to help visitors

determine things not to climb on, and entrances between exhibits where it is good to stop and wait for your adult before continuing. As for the rest of the year outside of our Sensory Friendly days, we offer other suggestions. If you are looking for a quieter time to visit, consider visiting Tuesday through Friday after 1:30 pm during the school year. Visiting first thing in the morning during the summer and on weekends tends to be slightly quieter too. If your child has trouble with transitions, consider visiting towards the end of the day. Several announcements are made prior to our 6:00 p.m. closing encouraging visitors to make their way to the front of the Museum for departure. If sound in the galleries become too much, ear defenders are available for check out at the Information Booth. If you need a quiet place to take a break, consider visiting the Parent Resource Library, the Brown Auditorium or ask a staff member if a Discovery Room is available to use. If your child has light sensitivities, we suggest bringing along a pair of sunglasses for them to wear” (Children’s Museum of Houston). Ear defenders are acoustic earmuffs in which the cups are filled with sound-deadening materials for hearing protection.

In May 2014, the Children’s Museum in New Hampshire received a grant in the amount of \$10,000 from the Liberty Mutual Foundation. By receiving the grant, it is to show support for innovation programs toward families who have children with autism. “This new grant from the Liberty Mutual Foundation will help underwrite free admission for families as well as expand promotion to maximize the program’s reach and impact” (Children’s Museum of NH). CMHM has been running a program called “Exploring Our Way” for five years now. The program is hosted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday from 10 am to noon each month. Vice President of Development and Community Engagement, Paula Rais, gave an explanation about the creation of the program: “...to provide a supportive, accessible entry point for children with autism to practice and master the experience of Museum visitation. Families are pressed to find appropriate real-life

opportunities for their children with autism to learn, practice, and master social skills. Exploring Our Way serves as a safe and gradual way to learn and practice these skills at the Museum, which will ultimately translate into other settings. We greatly appreciate the generosity of the Liberty Mutual Foundation in helping us continue and expand this important program” (Children’s Museum of NH).

The Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, TN, has a unique summer camp where it utilizes the buddy system—an University of Tennessee Chattanooga (UTC) graduate student with an autistic child and non-autistic child. Those students are from “the psychology department who have spent a semester preparing for the camp and learning especially how to facilitate the engagement of the campers, keeping all children safe, and handling any behavior issues in a positive and supportive way” (Creative Discovery Museum). According to the Director of Education, Jayne Griffin, it is a win-win situation-“The campers have a great time participating in activities designed to be safe and to provide over the top fun for all children while they learn to make friends with children they might not get to know in other settings. The UTC students also gain insight as they become facilitators working to engage campers with each other and with their environment. This is a great camp for any child who wants to have a wonderful time this summer and make new friends” (Creative Discovery Museum).

In 2013, the Explore & More Children’s Museum of Aurora, NY opened a new program called “Au-Some Evenings”. It is also “the first program of its kind in Western New York” (Explore & More Children’s Museum). The free program happens to be both autism-focused and autism-friendly which is excellent for children with autism. The program is collaborated “with an autism center at Women & Children’s Hospital in Buffalo and the Center for Autism Support and Education” (Vogel). Not only that, but the program includes activities that are sensory-



friendly for children with autism, producing a calm environment as a result. “The evenings are not restricted only to autistic kids. Their siblings are also welcome, as are other family members and friends. But the evenings are planned and geared to the needs of the autistic kids. The concept of the program is simple: It’s designed to offer an evening activity open to all families in Western New York with autistic children, providing a safe and autism-friendly environment where children can play in a setting where their behavior will not be judged or misunderstood” (Vogel). This program also includes trained staff members, which is helpful for the parents. Au-Some Evenings is hosted by Explore & More once per month and also supported by the Hodgson Russ law firm.

The Children’s Museum of Atlanta has a program called “Explore The Museum: Early Hours” for children with ASD and their families. It is hosted once on Saturdays per month at 9 am, which lets visitors take the opportunity to gain knowledge about the museum. Tickets costs \$3 and reservations are mandatory. Furthermore, the museum provided a social guide in PDF format called “My Visit to The Children’s Museum of Atlanta” which is available on the website. “Binders will also be available at the front desk as well as in each learning zone. Those tools were developed to help make the Museum visit more comfortable and enjoyable, and to create a comprehensive welcoming structure” (The Children’s Museum of Atlanta).

Children’s Museum of the Arts in NYC has a program, “Inclusive Saturdays (Stripes)” that are held on Saturday mornings. “These 75-minute structured workshops are specifically designed to help children with autism develop social interaction and communication skills, manual dexterity, and the ability to express themselves through art. The program’s supportive environment also helps strengthen family ties and builds a sense of community for families affected by autism” (Children’s Museum of the Arts). The workshops have two classes that are

based on the age of the child. For children who are 7 years old or under, the workshop highlights the following: “By exploring different art mediums, this class focuses on tactile experiences while building creativity and communication skills. Families also participate in therapeutic music, movement, and yoga exercises” (Children’s Museum of the Arts). However, for children who are 8 years old or above have a different class which “uses art to build social skills and peer-to-peer relationships. Families will work on a series of collaborative projects incorporating a variety of art mediums in CMA’s Media Lab and Sound Booth” (Children’s Museum of the Arts).

Cheshire Children’s Museum in Keene, NH, established a program in 2014. “Sensory Saturdays”, the program, is aimed at children with autism; their families are also invited to join in as well. The program is held on the first Saturday each month and the museum opens at 8:30 am. “Museum lights are dimmed, the music and radios turned down, and exhibits that can be loud are covered. Admission is reduced to \$3 per person. And the smaller number of children and families playing means it’s an all-around friendlier, quieter and more gentle environment. The program at the museum is part of a growing movement to accommodate kids with autism. In part, it’s because there’s a growing number of kids to accommodate...with all the technology and screen kids use in their daily lives, it’s important to have time to play with physical objects” (Nilsen).

This particular museum doesn’t have an official program set in stone yet, but it does hosts events for children with ASD or sensory processing disorders. World of Wonder (WOW!) Children’s Museum in Lafayette, CO, hosts Sensory Friendly Time events, which takes place on a Sunday every other two months and is free to families. However, reservations are mandatory. “WOW! will limit admission to 20 families, turn down sounds and lights, and provide adaptive

equipment to provide a safe and fun experience for all” (WOW! Children’s Museum). Those adaptive equipment were headphones, lap pads, and vests. “The weighted items give the children, whose bodies are sensitive to all the extra stimulation, a calming feeling. The vests are made to look like police, fire, or EMT vests, and others have flowers and pastel colors to appeal to all kids, and are hung up with the other dress-up clothes in that area of the museum” (Turner).

The Special Night of Play program is a sensory-friendly event aimed for children with autism as well as children with special needs and their families. Scotty Jones, the educator of Hands On Children’s Museum, is in charge of the program. Special Night of Play “provide a private, less stimulating time to experience the Museum with other families who may share the same life experience” (Hands On Children’s Museum). In addition, the program also involves resources made available to the community. The three resources are: “Basics NW, Pediatric Therapy Association, South Sound Parent to Parent” (Hands On Children’s Museum). In addition, a sensory guide and interactive map has been provided on the website, making it convenient for families and children with autism. “Written from a child’s perspective, the guides can be helpful in planning which exhibits to visit and in which order” (Hands On Children’s Museum).

The KidsQuest Children’s Museum in Bellevue, WA, hosted an event called Low Sensory Evening—the event itself is free but pre-registration is mandatory. “We’re limiting attendance and turning down the ambient noise and light to provide an even more inviting place to explore, play and learn. These evenings are especially appropriate for children with autism and/or Sensory Processing Disorder, but Low Sensory Evenings are open to children with any type of special need and their families” (KidsQuest Children’s Museum).

In April 2015, an event called “Play Your Way” was hosted at Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose. The cost of the event was \$20 per family-up to 8 people. Pre-registration is mandatory and there is a limited number of attendance-400, to be specific. “Have fun exploring interactive exhibits in an outing that is enjoyable for the whole family. Play Your Way provides a judgment-free zone environment where children on the autism spectrum, along with their siblings, parents, and caregivers, play and learn together. Play Your Way events support your family through pre-visit resources; welcoming gallery spaces; and trained, supportive staff” (Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose).

The Children’s Museum in Easton, MA, hosted the Family Autism Night in April 2015. “The Museum will be open exclusively to families with children 10 and under on the Autism Spectrum giving them an opportunity to explore the Museum’s hands-on exhibits in a less overwhelming atmosphere” (The Children’s Museum in Easton). While pre-registration is mandatory, the program itself is free.

In 2011, the Discovery Museums in Acton, MA, presented an event for children with autism and families. It was outstanding since it had interactive exhibits that educated children about science. “A few in particular were an unparalleled success, including the Mist Tornado – in which a child or sometimes two children would stand, marveling at plumes of mist surging through a floor vent – all in the name of demonstrating the effects of tornados and storm clouds. The museum started offering the event in 2010” (Smith). Director of Early Childhood Education and Parents Resources Amy Spencer stated that staff received training for the event. They received the training from an organization called Natick-based Autism Alliance of MetroWest. Basically, the training is about how to deal with individuals with autism. “Spencer said the training mainly helps staff understand behavioral hallmarks of autism, such as so-called ‘parallel play.’ Many

autistic children find it hard to interact with others, but it's not unusual to see two or more children side by side, enjoying the same activity. An accepting environment can allow some to overcome inhibitions and fear; Spencer said she observed a few spontaneous exchanges of surprise and giggles" (Smith).

Sensory Saturdays are held on Saturdays at the Miami Children's Museum in FL. "The Miami Children's Museum galleries normally feature visual displays with bright, colorful lights, up-beat music and even sirens to attract the children's attention. Affected children may experience sensory overload in places normally considered to be kid-friendly, such as an ice cream parlor. For the Sensory Saturdays program, all of these displays are toned down, and activities featuring dimmed lighting and 'soothing' classical music are incorporated. Another difference is the minimal crowds. The museum receives five to six hundred visitors on typical Saturdays, but only 50 to 75 during Sensory Saturday's two-hour event. The reduced crowds also make the program more accessible for children with physical disabilities and ensure that each family is granted one-on-one attention from the educators and instructors." (Cruz). What's interesting is that not only the staff went through the training, but also did a stimulation of specific disabilities as well. "They wore earplugs, glasses with impaired visibility, crutches and wheelchairs while moving through the galleries" (Cruz).

Accessibility is powerful and well enforced at the Glazer Children's Museum. This museum has formed a partnership with the Center for Autism & Related Disabilities, which is part of University of South Florida. The reason for the partnership is "to provide support and optimize the museum experience for children with autism and families. As a certified Autism

Friendly business, we strive to create a unique and fun learning experience for all children to enjoy” (Glazer Children’s Museum).

A unique event was held at the Grand Rapids Children’s Museum. “There are so many reasons to love Grand Rapids. One of those reasons is the fantastic cultural and family activities available...” (Cook). The event was held in November 2012. “The event is called Connor’s Friends in honor of a West Michigan boy named Connor who is affected by autism. Funding was provided by a grant from a local foundation and private gifts, making it possible for the GRCM to offer free admission to all families who will attend” (Cook). In addition, the museum made appropriate accommodations for the event. Such accommodations were as following: “Specially installed visual barriers will hang out throughout the Museum to reduce noise and visual stimulation. Lighting is augmented to reduce the negative effects of florescent bulbs. The paint color scheme of the Museum has been chosen specifically to create a calming atmosphere to those affected by autism. A music therapist will perform calming music and interact with children. Special sensory activities will be added to the Museum’s current exhibits. Themed activity tents will be set out for children” (Cook). According to an article dating in 2010, this is the 6<sup>th</sup> year for the event. Program Manager and Coordinator Megan Sierz at GRCM said the following: “All children deserve to have a voice. Through events such as Connor’s Friends: a night for children and families affected by autism, we here at the Grand Rapids Children’s Museum Children’s Museum strive to be advocates and give a voice to all children in our community” (Gonzalez).

“Accessibility is a high priority at the Pacific Science Center. A quick glance at the science and technology museum’s website and you’ll find a swath of helpful services it offers its visitors: complimentary wheelchairs, free admission for aides accompanying guests with

disabilities, a friendly welcome to service animals and more” (Mang). In January 2015, the Pacific Science Center in Seattle WA, commenced the Exploration For All program, which is available from 8-10 am on one Saturday per month. In addition, the program itself is free to visitors. The Pacific Science Center was able to commence the program due to a partnership with Safeco Institute and a grant. “During Exploration For All, the Pacific Science Center’s three buildings are open and attractions such as the typically, loud roaring Dinosaur Exhibit are quiet. It’s not as dark inside the Planetarium and families have the opportunity to explore and learn about constellations with a trained educator. To help navigate the center, visitors receive a printed Sensory Guide upon entry, which contains color-coded alerts to the different sight, sound, touch and smell levels that are present at each exhibit, giving parents the option to decide whether or not their child will be comfortable. The center also worked with disability professionals in conjunction with Safeco Institute to lead two different trainings for staff members on the basics of inclusion and how to support kids of all disability levels” (Mang). So far, the program seems to be quite successful. “For families with kids with autism, maintaining the requisite quiet and calm can be limiting, and lead to feeling a little isolated. The Pacific Science Center’s Renee Gervais says the whole point of opening up early on these Saturdays is to offer more access” (Wing).

In April 2015, the Pacific Science Center displayed an art exhibition “Through the Eyes of Autism” by an organization called Pacific Northwest Artists with Autism. “Through the eyes of individuals with autism we celebrate these beautiful artistic works that are created from a unique perspective of the world. The use of color and purposeful design in these pieces transcends all limitations of autism through the freedom of self-expression in the visual arts. Northwest Special Artist’s mission is to create opportunities in our community where the arts are

accessible to all individuals with disabilities. NSWA is a community outreach program developed to support access of the arts to artists with disabilities by developing art programs, art exhibits, and art shows that promote disability awareness and inclusion in the community” (Pacific Science Center).

At the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum (Intrepid Museum), there are programs designed for children with autism and their families. “Educators lead short, interactive tours designed for the whole family as well as drop-in art activities and structured play opportunities” (Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum). The programs have limited space but they are free as they open one hour early. Registration is encouraged. The programs have a specific theme which is held once per month. For instance, “Life at Sea” was held on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015 and the point of the theme was to “discover how sailors lived and worked aboard USS Intrepid, which was like a ‘city at sea’. Families will find out how a sailor’s life on the ship was similar to, yet different from the home and community he was protecting” (Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum).

On February 8, 2015, an event was held at the North Carolina Aquarium. “The North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher presents Autism Friendly Day featuring programs and activities specially designed for the comfort of children and adults with autism, and their families” (WhatsOnWilmington.com).

### **All Populations and Abilities:**

It is critical that museums and other cultural institutions provide appropriate accessibilities and accommodations to all disabilities and disorders, even those that are imperceptible. A first-time event called Disability Access Day was hosted on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015 (Disabled Access Day). The purpose of this event was to inform visitors with disabilities and



disorders that they can go visit museums and other cultural institutions with confidence. In addition, visitors can have opportunities for “...trying out that new experience and more importantly sharing what works and what doesn’t. It is very easy to demand better access but without helping and guiding museums and galleries to the right solutions it isn’t really going to work” (tinctureofmuseum). Disability Access Day was organized by the Royal Air Force (RAF) Museum in the UK. Last July, the RAF Museum won an Autism Access Award and it was the first cultural venue in the UK to succeed. It is “a mark of recognition that shows people with autism and their families and carers that a venue is autism-friendly. The museum was recognized for the improvements it has made to ensure it is more accessible to visitors with autism” (Atkinson).

Even though the museum environment can be agonizing for some individuals, museum environments have excellent experience providing the correct educational approach. “Unlike schools, museums have always operated on the assumption that visitors learn through all their senses. As a result, they have always designed their exhibits, programs, workshops, and classes to be interactive, multisensory, and open-ended. So, unlike school, museums are already set up to support your child’s learning style—whatever that may be. Visual, aural, kinesthetic, musical, mathematical, observational, or other approaches to communication aren’t provided for your child because he’s ‘special’: they’re provided to everyone because that’s just how museum education is done” (Rudy, 111). Parents should be aware about museums and other cultural institutions during the 4 seasons—such as certain times of the day when there are not massive crowds. “Museums should use spaces that are quiet and contain few visual distractions to decrease external stimuli when speaking with a group. Ensuring that students feel as if they are

in a safe, comfortable environment will also help create a better learning experience” (Stringer, 43).

The Smithsonian Museum has hosted autism-friendly events for families with ASD youngsters. A program is provided to them an hour and half before opening hours and there are a few logical reasons on why the Smithsonian Museum does this. The first reason is the elimination of distractions which would occur if a family had gone to a museum where it was hectic at a different time. The second reason has to do with the museum environment. “The staff lowers the light level for the children and starts with only one exhibit at a time to create a more soothing environment” (Stringer, 47).

“To be patient, kind and accepting. That’s the desire of parents and specialists who work with autistic children” (Jay). Recently, a new children’s museum in Billings, Montana hosted an event with an organization called Easter Seals-Goodwill. It was the 2<sup>nd</sup> event hosted at the Wise Wonders Children’s Museum. The reason they hosted the event is to raise awareness about autism. Easter Seals-Goodwill autism specialist said that people with autism “perceive and process the world in a very different way than we do. It’s important to let people in our community know about maybe dealing with somebody on the spectrum to be a little more patient and try to understand how they might be thinking and feeling in certain situations” (Jay).

### **Advocacy:**

Suppose a local museum does not have a program for individuals with autism; parents can still take steps to achieve the goal of taking their youngster to a museum. A meeting can be arranged with the museum director, “hands-on gallery director” (Rudy, 118), or “the director of education or visitor services” (Rudy, 118). In addition, parents can explain that there are 3

requirements to keep in mind if a museum is interested in establishing an autism-friendly program. The first requirement is to arrange a specific time slot available where it is not hectic. The second requirement is to provide a quiet room so that an autistic child can go there if they're overwhelmed in any way, and the third requirement is to offer "a photo book and/or video that previews the museum experience" (Rudy, 118). Local museums can follow the footsteps of other museums or cultural institutions to grasp the big picture of autism-friendly programs. A grant is an excellent method for the ball to start rolling in the progress of establishing an autism-friendly program. "Explain that many of the services you're requesting for your families will be equally useful for many school groups and for families whose kids have related development differences (ADHD, Tourettes, etc). In short, make it clear to your local museum that inviting families like yours to become paying customers isn't just the right thing to do—it's good for business, and it's good for fundraising" (Rudy, 119).

Interestingly, science museums are attractive to individuals with Asperger's Syndrome, which is common. Asperger's Syndrome is a high-functioning autism category under the ASD umbrella. Asperger's Syndrome was named after Hans Asperger, a pediatrician in Austria. Hans took notice of 4 young children (they were patients) in the year of 1944 and discovered that "...their intelligence appeared normal, the children lacked nonverbal communication skills and failed to demonstrate empathy with their peers. Their manner of speech was either disjointed or overly formal, and their all-absorbing interests in narrow topics dominated their conversations. The children also shared a tendency to be clumsy" (Autism Speaks). However, individuals with Asperger's Syndrome have no language difficulties as well as delays. "Some even demonstrate precocious vocabulary—often in a highly specialized field of interest" (Autism Speaks). An individual with Asperger's Syndrome have the desire to interact with others, but does not know

how to do it, due to limited eye contact or being socially awkward. “Another distinction between Asperger’s Disorder and autism concerns cognitive ability” (Autism Society). Generally speaking, the IQ of an individual with Asperger’s Syndrome can range from normal to genius levels.

As mentioned earlier, there is a strong emphasis on the connection between science museums and individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome. “In fact, it may be fair to say that kids on the spectrum make up some of the most passionate members of science museums—and can become some of the most effective volunteers and docents available. Up until now, though, museums never really gave much thought to the support such kids might need as they deal with peers, new situations, or stress. Now, thanks to greater autism awareness, they’re making the effort—with positive results. There are a lot of great scientists and engineers on the autism spectrum, and this area is really high interest for the kids” (Rudy, 119-120). In Philadelphia, a museum has the combination of science research, programs, and exhibits, formally known as the Academy of Natural Sciences. “The academy has always opened its volunteer program to teens, and over the years (as they now realize), many teens on the autism spectrum have come through their doors” (Rudy, 121). But when it comes to science research, which happens to be behind the scenes, it doesn’t create a comfortable environment for ASD teens. “...kids on the autism spectrum have successfully gone through volunteer training and become great assets to the museum. While some have taken quickly to working with scientists on collections and databases, others have become dinosaur docents, live animal handlers, and ‘Camp In’ (overnight at the museum) staff” (Rudy, 121).

When it comes to the ASD community, training of staff members is quite significant. “Security and janitorial staff must know not to try to diagnose the children themselves and not to

judge the students in any way” (Stringer, 43). The Boston’s Children Museum indicates the following statement: “For instance, your group may not know a lot about autistic children and how to best serve them, so training with a specialist on autism could help develop that skill and knowledge” (Porter, 128). In April 2013, the Academy of Natural Sciences staff had an autism training day workshop; they learned about ASD and had several discussions on what to do with the exhibits and interactive areas. “They also brainstormed where and how to locate ‘quiet rooms’ – or at least less-chaotic spaces – where visitors having a rough time with sensory overload could be offered a calmer place to collect themselves with their families. Taking the idea a step further, one staff suggested creating a code phrase for ‘quiet room’ to use on their walkie-talkies, so any staff members needing assistance could page a helper to escort a family to a quiet place when needed. Quiet rooms were just one of the intervention strategies recommended during the day’s training. Other simple tips included using concrete, declarative language, or using a timer to help a child make a transition between activities instead of fixating on one. The museum is also leading a two-year, multi-institution grant-funded program that will provide not only staff development for employees at the Academy and other local museums, but also special family programs, educational materials, and museum mapping materials to help visitors on the autism spectrum and their families plan their visits and know what to expect” (Ewing).

The following summer, the Academy hosted an event called Access to Science. Approximately 180 guests were invited to the event. It wasn’t just any ordinary event—it was an event created specifically for ASD individuals, including their families. “These visitors arrived equipped with visual maps and museum schedules. The Academy designed these items to help guests on the spectrum have an educational and stress-free morning to gaze at dinosaur

skeletons, animals, and butterflies. This Access to Science event was part of an ongoing project called CATAAlysis (Changing Attitudes Towards Autism Access). The Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded a grant to the Academy of Natural Sciences, the New Jersey of Aquatic Sciences, and the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia to undertake CATAAlysis. The goal of this project is to improve access to museums, workshops, and volunteer opportunities for individuals on the autism spectrum. However, informal science learning centers don't need to be off limits—in fact, with careful planning by families and museum staff, museums can provide great experience for visitors on the spectrum. For individuals who are especially talented at remembering facts and who also enjoy reading books and watching movies about science, museums provide great opportunities for hands-on learning, bringing science to life. In addition to these Access events, Academy staff plans to start a program for teens on the spectrum. This fall, eight teenagers will learn about the work of paleontologists, from planning expeditions to preparing fossils, through eight interactive sessions. This program is a unique way to use science education to guide teens' development of social skills, which they can apply in school, volunteer service, and the workforce" (Burnor).

A workshop was created by the Museum Access Consortium (MAC) which includes a training module—the purpose of the training module is to provide institution professionals on how to make their institutions more autism-friendly for visitors. By making their institutions more autism-friendly, professionals will become aware about ASD, thus visitors with autism will be more likely to have a positive experience. Having an autism-friendly environment will benefit both parties. This workshop consists three sequenced sessions between facilitators and professionals. In addition, the sessions also include activities and discussions. The workshop also includes materials which will be used for activities. Those sessions are as followed:

“Introduction & Assessment of Prior Knowledge & Experiences; Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorder; Listen to Audio Clips and Share Reflections” (Museum Access Consortium). In the first session, after introductions have been made, the facilitator will survey their audience with 3 questions, and the audience is only to response by raising their hands. Those questions are: “Do you know someone who has autism? Do you have a personal relationship with someone who has autism? Have you interacted with people who have autism at work, either with colleagues and/or visitors?” (Museum Access Consortium). This is then followed up with an activity which is used to determine professionals’ knowledge about ASD. This is where materials (post-its, pens, flip chart papers) will be used by the professionals. A total of four flip chart papers will be arranged individually on a table—one flip chart paper per table. Each flip chart paper will have one question which can be answered by the participants using post-its. Each flip chart paper has a topic. The topics are experiences, rewards, questions, and challenges. “What kind of experiences have you had with people who have ASD, either personally or professionally? What has been rewarding about your experiences with people who have autism? If applicable, what has been challenging about your experiences with people who have autism? What questions do you have about autism that you hope are answered by today’s workshop?” (Museum Access Consortium). For the second session, participants will learn the definition and symptoms of ASD. The third session included audio clips and reflections and the final session is the application activity.

In 2003, an organization, The Autism Program of Illinois (TAP), was established. Originally a training and research program for the first four years, TAP became a statewide network, providing direct services and resources to children with ASD and families. In addition, TAP receives funds from the state. “The Autism Program of Illinois Service Network today

consists of 17 partners and 19 locations throughout the state, including four public universities and eight community agencies” (The Autism Program of Illinois). In 2011, the Yellow Dot Program was launched in a partnership between the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), Illinois Department on Aging, and Illinois Department of Public Health. The purpose behind the Yellow Dot Program is to assist “first responders (police, fire and ambulance personnel) identify vehicle occupants who might require extra assistance in the event of a roadside emergency. A yellow dot placed on the rear window of a vehicle alerts first responders to the presence of a medical data card stored in the vehicle’s glove department. The data card can contain personal information, emergency contact information, important medical data, a photo and other instructions to help emergency personnel respond appropriately in the event of an emergency” (The Autism Program of Illinois TAP). 2 years later, a partnership between TAP and IDOT was established in order to provide materials from the Yellow Dot Program in TAP centers.

In March 2015, Governor Bruce Rauner, of Illinois, created a proposal for the elimination of funds for TAP. It is a “part of \$17.8 million in total proposed cuts in grant programs not funded by Medicaid. This isn’t the first time The Autism Program faced a potential cutoff of state funds. Former Gov. Pat Quinn, a Democrat, proposed it for fiscal year 2011 but was unsuccessful” (Oslen). On April 2, 2015, also known as World Autism Day, Governor Rauner made the decision to cut the state funding for TAP, which means the rest of the fiscal year as well. “Advocates say for every dollar Illinois spends on its best-in-the-nation autism assistance programs, \$7 are either earned or saved. So they say cutting well-honed programs that are doing right by their clients is at best misguided - if not plain cruel” (Baichiwai). Furthermore, an emailed statement was received from Rauner’s office: “We preserved core programs to serve the



most vulnerable” as their reason for making the state maneuver onto a direct financial route (Baichiwai). A petition has been created at the following link: <http://www.save-tap.org/>.

Museum can be a positive experience for individuals with autism because there is a variety of learning styles museums can reach. The more museums can share knowledge about the autism community, the better chances for the autism community to get involved in an environment that is welcoming and accepting. If more people became aware about museums and autism community, the world would be a better place.

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