

## Adaptations for Autism

When working with groups or individuals with autism and or challenging behaviour you may need to make some appropriate adaptations to the session programme. However, these adaptations need to be made in line with the essential aspects of the programme and be an appropriate adaptation for that person. Therefore the adaptations should be used as a tool to move the individual towards our programme, i.e. it may be an extra stepping stone before that individual is ready to explore a particular aspect of the session.

For those with autism we have found they need routine so it is important each session is safely the same in terms of content. It is sometimes helpful to have clear flash cards of each section you will be going through so the guests know what is coming next and can follow that routine. Also, directions for the guests should be short and concise, e.g. "Let's dance!"

When working with these individuals particularly on a one to one it is essential that you have the ability to be intuitive and respond and adapt quickly to best suit their needs. Therefore at times you may need to move further away from your partner and wait to be invited closer. If you are invited closer you must be aware that you may need to move out again and give your partner more space. Be intuitive and take the lead from your partner.

In a group setting be aware that you may need more staff to support you. Depending on the level of autism in the group you may find it difficult to 'hold' a session without one-to-one support. Encourage the staff (or 'partners') to help settle their guest whilst you focus on 'the group'. The energy can easily become focused on an individual being 'disruptive' which will take the session along a difficult path. If there is an individual like this – you could consider they are not ready for a group session and may enjoy a one-to-one session and build up awareness of the programme. An intense or loud welcome is not often appropriate in this adaptation. Be sensitive and soft while being joyful. It is important to feel privileged that you have been accepted and invited to be with them and not the other way round.

***Below are some adaptations you may like to consider if you feel that they are appropriate to your session.***

### **Before The Guests Arrive and the Session Starts**

- If you are feeling overly anxious, this may be 'felt' by the guests on entering. Be sure to take a moment for you and *breathe*; feel confident and positive in anticipation of the session.
- Prepare the music and the space. Do not make a centre piece of instruments or sensory equipment as this can be distracting.
- Communicate your focus points to any support you have with you.
- Have a relaxing Mozart piece playing on repeat to create a calm and peaceful environment for the guest(s) when they arrive.
- As the guest(s) arrive you can be breathing (while doing the exercise) and smiling and then gentle clapping for each guest.

### **Welcome and Bells**

- As soon as the guest(s) arrive you need to be clapping them. If they do not settle quickly then continue breathing in the centre and giving verbal welcomes and praise. Encourage staff that are settled earlier to breathe with you to create a peaceful atmosphere.
- When everyone is settled have almost a second start and clap all again and then move on to bells.

### **Breathing**

- Staff to breathe and guests to become very much involved in this breathing with their partner.



## Adaptations for Autism

### Energy Stroking and Massage

- Encourage carers to be aware of their guest choosing to be close and accepting touch and or choosing to be further away in their own space.
- Staff may need to move around the room stroking their partner's energy as they move past them.
- Massage is only appropriate if the guest is ready for it. Energy stroking can continue.

### Percussion

- Use music with more of a gentle beat like some jazz, the North American music can often be too free and unstructured.
- Be prepared to share in a free way, praising individuals as they choose to make their sounds or not.

### Lively

- With some groups it can take a while to build up to lively movement and dance. Initially it may be enough just to have the lively music on and to tap the rhythm over your partner (use quiet jazz music)
- You may find it useful to give staff and guests lots of choice, suggest that people may relax and feel the beat through touch, or they may dance and make sounds and that either choice is fine. (This reassures staff)
- Be aware that one lively song may be enough before you need to bring the energy back down. Again this will depend on the group.

### Authentic Movement

*We have tried a few different ideas with different groups which you may find useful;*

1. Invite guests to sit in a circle on cushions - Group exercise following my lead, and then taking movements from guests and all moving together (this is good if there is not 1-1 support in the session).
2. Putting music on like the sea and using the sea as a theme for movement again giving the choice to just listen and relax
3. If 1-1 support and group are ready then the focussed movement we usually do with PMLD groups is fine
4. If the group are not ready for focussed movements put some gentle music on and use the parachute singing the 'Well Done Song' to each of them.

### Relaxation

- Mozart and other classical pieces can sometimes be too stimulating so either build up gradually if this is the case, or use other less stimulating music

### Bells and Close

- Depending on the group, it is important to 'close' the session by making a sound.
- Choice is maybe not so prominent here.

### Important Points

- Approval, acceptance, building up self-esteem
- Connection, attention, commitment
- Praise constantly using all senses
- Reinforce any positive behaviour in all ways possible and repeatedly

**The less they respond, the more they need it!**