

# Chapter 9: Autism Awareness Training in the Community

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This section describes the need for autism awareness training for a wide range of people including professionals, paraprofessionals, college personnel and students, families and community members who support individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It includes the process of identifying stakeholders who need to be involved, areas that need to be addressed in training, and delineation of the multiple levels of training. Ongoing training is necessary to keep all stakeholders equipped with a rapidly changing knowledge base. With up-to-date information people will be able to collaborate more effectively and individuals with ASD will be able to access needed supports and services.

Types of training programs include pre-service training programs, in-service training programs, training for higher education faculty, and community and agency training. Identifying people who need training and what type of information they need should occur prior to their involvement with the individual with ASD. Training should focus on skill building as well as empowerment, problem solving, collaboration, and decision-making. Training should encompass the entire spectrum of ASD.

In planning any training program, it is strongly encouraged that trainers identify the needs of the audience and tailor training to meet the identified areas of concern. Educational and community systems as well as parents can often collaborate to offer comprehensive training opportunities. A variety of training approaches can be utilized. Given the individual characteristics involved with ASD, professionals and parents should have the opportunity to get hands-on, guided practice in order to best apply the information that they have been offered in a lecture format.

Effective approaches can include lectures, workshops, conferences (state, local, professional), group study/discussion, undergraduate and graduate coursework, mentoring, demonstrations, action research, dissemination of print and multimedia resources, interactive distance learning and internet access, hands-on experience, guided practice, observation, and consultations.

Subjects to be covered in training should include (but not be limited to):

- ◆ Characteristics of autism spectrum disorders.
- ◆ Best practices.
- ◆ Recognition and understanding of the implications of associated medical disorders, e.g., seizures, anxiety, attention disorder.
- ◆ Familiarity with a variety of assessment methods.
- ◆ The use of assessment to guide interventions.
- ◆ Self advocacy.
- ◆ ASD as it relates to individual's differences in learning and development.

- ◆ Adaptation of the curriculum.
- ◆ Motor planning.
- ◆ Writing and implementation of an effective behavior plan/behavior management.
- ◆ Enhancement of social interactions, cognition and perspective taking (Theory of Mind).
- ◆ Environmental supports to promote independence (Physical structure, individual schedules, etc.).
- ◆ Understanding of play, reciprocity and engagement.
- ◆ Available resources including relevant journals, films, books, articles, and videotapes as well as community resources like autism support groups, etc.

Everyone in the community who is part of the individual's team should identify training needs. This includes but is not limited to: direct service providers (teachers, instructional assistants, tutors), related service professionals (speech/language pathologists, psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, assistive technology specialist), administration staff (building principal, director of pupil personnel services), school community support staff (lunchroom personnel, recess monitor, bus drivers, volunteers, agency liaison), medical providers (physicians, nurses, dentists, hospital personnel, emergency and college campus health centers, therapists, etc.), first responders (law enforcement, firefighters, paramedics, emergency medical technicians), mental health service providers, parents and caregivers. Training and professional development plans are critical pieces of any effective program.

Washington State has training for law enforcement on an interactive CD entitled *Interacting with Persons with Developmental Disabilities and Mental Illness*. It is available to all law enforcement personnel on request from the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission at: [https://fortress.wa.gov/cjtc/www/training/dvd\\_training.html](https://fortress.wa.gov/cjtc/www/training/dvd_training.html).

The specific content for professional development should be determined on an individual basis. Training activities should be developed based on the designated needs of the professionals and community members and aligned with the needs of the individuals with ASD and their families.

Community persons should also participate in training regarding ASD. Included in this group are private and public providers, business owners, volunteer community service organizations (Kiwans, Jaycees, Lions, Eastern Star), community business/organizations, (churches, libraries, YMCA, YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Planned Parenthood, police and social work agencies, foster care providers, fire departments). Involve community workers who would typically touch the life of a person with ASD (grocery store workers, bus drivers, department stores, malls, pharmacies, restaurants, etc.).

Remember to also involve people/agencies who will be involved in providing adult services during and after transition to the community. Such groups as County Developmental Disabilities Human Services, DSHS Division of Developmental Disabilities case managers, Residential and Job Coaching vendors, Social Security, Medicaid etc., are examples of groups, as are local college administrators (Office of Disabilities) who deal with individuals with special needs in post-secondary settings.

Information in the field of ASD is constantly changing regarding both the nature of the disability and the methodologies and treatment practices. Best practice information continually evolves through research, so training should be an ongoing process.