



Plain Language Edition

Inclusive Meetings: **The Autistic Self Advocacy** **Network's Community Living** **Summit**

What is this toolkit?

This toolkit can help you make meetings better for autistic people.

Meetings are a great tool for getting people together. At meetings, you can share ideas, talk about important things, work on a project, or make plans for action.

Sometimes, meetings can be hard for autistic people because people might run meetings in ways that don't work for us. We will talk about some problems autistic people have in meetings, and how you can solve these problems in your own meetings.

There are 3 parts to this toolkit. They focus on what to do before the meeting, during the meeting, and after meeting. You can start by reading the whole toolkit, and then you can look back at each part while you plan your meeting.

Before the meeting

Invite autistic people

Invite autistic people to your meeting! Especially if your meeting is about autism, at least half the people at your meeting should be autistic.

Invite all kinds of autistic people, such as autistic people with different races, genders, and amounts of money. Invite autistic people who need different kinds of help. This makes sure all kinds of autistic people can share our ideas, and that makes the meeting better.

Nothing about us, without us!

Set up accommodations

The next step is setting up **accommodations** for people at the meeting. Accommodations are help people might need for their disability, that let everyone take part in ways that work for them.

You set up accommodations before the meeting so people can come. Autistic people may need many different kinds of accommodations.

Some kinds of accommodations are:

- ASL interpreters (people who talk in American Sign Language)
- CART (speech-to-text while people in the meeting talk)
- Having a note-taker
- Braille or large print for writing

These are just some examples - there are lots of kinds of accommodations!

You need to ask people about their accommodations before the meeting because it can take time to set up accommodations. Asking people a week or two before is a good idea, but for bigger meetings, asking a month or two before is better. You should also ask people about what foods they eat if you will have food at the meeting.

Some accommodations cost money, so you should set aside money for accommodations when you plan your meeting. Some disability groups or colleges can help with accommodations by giving you things like CART or ASL for free. Try looking up groups near you that could help.

The basics

There are some basic things you should do before your meeting, even if nobody asks for them, because more people can come to your meeting if you do these things.

- Make sure wheelchair users can get to your meeting. Check your meeting building and room to make sure that anyone using a wheelchair can get in.
- Make sure the meeting room is in a quiet place, and the meeting room lights are not too bright. This helps autistic people who are hurt by loud noise or bright light.
- Do not have flashing lights at your meeting, since they can really hurt people who have seizures. If people might take pictures, tell them not to use flash, and also tell them to ask before they take pictures of people.
- Ask people not to use anything with a strong smell, like cologne or perfume.
- These things can make a whole room smell, and autistic people can be hurt by strong smells.
- Make a name tag for each person at the meeting, since this helps autistic people who can't remember faces or names. You can also make [color communication badges](#), which help people choose how much they want to talk to others.
- Send people a schedule, where you list what you will talk about at the meeting, and how long you plan to talk about each thing. This lets people plan ahead for the meeting, and helps people know what is going on during the meeting.
- Send a list of questions you might ask in the meeting. It can be hard for autistic people to answer questions on the spot, so give us time to think of our answers before the meeting.
- Things you write for your meeting should be in [plain language](#) to make sure everyone can understand what is going on.

During the meeting

Icebreakers

A lot of meetings start with **icebreakers** so people can get to know each other, but a lot of icebreakers are hard for autistic people to join in.

For example, “tell your life story to the person next to you.”

These icebreakers make people think of what to say on the spot, and some autistic people can’t think of what to say that fast.

There are better ways to do icebreakers., such as giving people a list of questions before the meeting.

These questions can be ones like:

- What is your name?
- Where are you from?
- What do you hope to get out of this meeting?
- What is your favorite food?

These questions help people learn about each other, and make sure that people who need to think about their answer can still join in.

Relationship-building games

Some meetings have “mindfulness” or “relationship-building” games. These are games to get people to feel closer to each other, that usually happen at the start or end of a meeting.

Many of these games make people say how they are feeling, touch each other, look each other in the eye, or move their bodies around.

These games can hurt autistic people, since it can hurt us to make eye contact or be touched. We might not have the words to talk about our feelings. You shouldn't do these games as part of your meeting.

Sharing ideas

You should share ideas in many ways at your meeting. Share your ideas in other ways besides just talking out loud.

Let's say you want to share an idea. You could use:

- A PowerPoint
- Notes on a whiteboard
- Pictures (in your Powerpoint or drawn on the whiteboard)
- CART

at the same time as you talk about your idea.

This lets every person learn in the way that works for them, and shows that everyone is welcome at your meeting. If people feel welcome, they will want to share more, which makes the meeting better!

Stimming

Many autistic people **stim** - we might rock, flap, play with a toy, or move around the room. This helps us focus. Don't try to get us to stop stimming. You should let everyone at the meeting know that stimming is okay by saying at the start of the meeting that it is okay to stim and move around. This helps autistic people feel welcome at the meeting.

Talking during the meeting

Autistic people may use AAC (**Augmentative and Alternative Communication**) to talk.

AAC means using something other than speaking to share ideas, like a letter board or typing on an iPad. Some autistic people who can speak, speak in a different way. We may not use complete sentences, and it may take us a long time to finish a thought.

Let people know that how they communicate is okay. Make sure that people who use AAC get time to talk, and that autistic people have enough time to say what they want. Don't move on to someone else even if it takes a long time.

Don't call on anyone at the meeting who doesn't want to talk. Autistic people need time to think about a question before answering, so we may not be able to answer if you call on us on the spot. Instead of calling on people, you could do a "round robin", which is when you go around the room and everyone gets a turn to share. Anyone who doesn't want to share can "pass" their turn, so this can help when talking in a big group.

Working in groups

Sometimes a big group in a meeting can be too big, so it may help to split up into small groups. Each group can talk on their own, and then the groups can come back and share what they talked about.

Autistic people can have a hard time with lots of noise, so when lots of people talk at once, we can't tell what is going on. Make sure each small group has their own quiet space so that everyone knows what is going on.

Autistic people need time to work through change, like moving from one thing to the next.

If you split into small groups, leave a few minutes for everyone to move into their groups at the beginning, along with a few minutes for everyone to come back to the large group at the end.

Plan breaks

Taking breaks is an important part of meetings. Breaks let people rest and get ready to do more stuff. Without breaks, we would not get as much done.

Any long meeting should have at least a 10-minute break for every hour of the meeting.

Eating lunch while meeting doesn't count as a "break", because being part of a meeting is work, even if there is food. Make sure that people have enough breaks.

Breaks on our own

Sometimes, autistic people get overwhelmed, and we might need a quiet place to take a break during the meeting. You should have a break room set aside for this. Let people know where the break room is when the meeting starts, and that it is okay to take breaks whenever they need. Also let people know that the break room is a quiet place, so people shouldn't use the break room to make phone calls or listen to music.

Talking about hard things

Hard things sometimes come up in meetings. Many autistic people have gone through bad things in life, so we may be hurt or "**triggered**" when talking about something. Being triggered makes us remember when something bad happened, and can make us feel like the bad thing is still going on. Make sure people have a way to tell you if they get triggered in the meeting.

Don't ignore someone who gets triggered in your meeting, or make them feel like their feelings aren't a big deal. Quietly ask them what they need. You can give them space to talk it out, move on to the next meeting topic, or let the person know that they can leave the room if they need to.

After the meeting, you should check in with the person again. Say you're sorry that they felt hurt in the meeting, and ask how you can help them feel safe for the next meeting.

After the meeting

It is good to have someone take notes during the meeting. They can email the notes to everyone who came to the meeting, to help people remember what happened. Make sure the notes are in plain language.

Ask people how the meeting went. You can make a list of questions to give to people before the meeting so that people have time to come up with answers.

Some good questions may be:

- What was your favorite part of the meeting?
- What could have been better about the meeting?
- What is one thing you learned in this meeting?
- What are you going to do next because of this meeting?

Autistic people may take more time to think about how the meeting went, so it may be easier for us to write about it instead of talk. Give people your email address so they can send their thoughts later, or follow up if they have questions or ideas.

The Big Idea

Meetings help us make new ideas, and let people work together to make changes. Autistic people need to be part of meetings, especially when the meetings are about autism. Getting to come to the meeting isn't enough - we need meetings that work for and welcome autistic people

Making meetings better for autistic people takes work. Every person has different needs, and you will run into new problems at every meeting. That is a good thing, since it means you can help more people be part of your meetings. You will learn from each meeting you have, then you can use what you learned to plan better meetings.

Using this toolkit is a good place to start. Take what you learned from this toolkit and use it in your meetings. That shows autistic people that you care about our voices, and that is the best way to help us make the changes we want!

Words to Know

accommodations

Help people might need for their disability.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Using something other than speaking to share ideas. Some kinds of AAC are typing, sign language, or a letter board.

color communication badges

Something people can wear to choose how much they want to talk to others.

icebreakers

Games or talks people have to get to know each other at the start of a meeting.

Plain Language

Writing that is easy for people with disabilities to understand.

stimming

When someone moves their body to help them focus. They may rock, flap, or play with a toy.

trigger

When something makes us remember a bad thing that happened in our life. It can make us feel like the bad thing is still happening.

To Learn More

For more about writing in plain language, visit

<http://www.sabeusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/GuideToCreatingAccessibleLanguage.pdf>

For more about color communication badges, visit

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ColorCommunicationBadges.pdf>

For more papers about making events better for disabled people, go to

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Accessible-Event-Planning.pdf>

And

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/White-Paper-Planning-Accessible-and-Inclusive-Organizing-Trainings.pdf>

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