

# Accessible Customer Service for Emergency Responders

## An Emergency Management Ontario E-Learning Utility

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### Tips for Interacting with a Person with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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#### Approach & Introduction

- A person with autism may not react well to changes in routine or the presence of strangers, even a uniformed stranger so try not to appear threatening.
- Approach the person in a calm manner.

#### Communication

- Talk calmly and softly – use direct phrases with no more than one or two steps, or write brief instructions on a pad if the person can read.
- Allow for delayed responses to your questions.
- Repeat or rephrase your questions.
- Consider use of pictures, written phrases and commands, and sign language.
- Use low gestures for attention; avoid rapid pointing or waving.
- The person may repeat what you have said, repeat the same phrase over and over, talk about topics unrelated to the situation, or have an unusual or monotone voice. This is their attempt to communicate, and is not meant to irritate you or be disrespectful.
- Do not interpret the person's failure to respond to questions as a lack of cooperation
- Avoid slang expressions or using phrases that have more than one meaning such as “knock it off” or “cut it out”.

#### Behaviour

- Model calming body language (such as slow breathing and keeping hands low).
- Avoid stopping repetitive behaviours unless there is risk of injury to yourself or others. If the individual is holding and appears to be fascinated with an object, consider allowing the person to hold the item for the calming effect.
- Be aware of the person's self-protective responses and sensitivities to lights, sounds, orders, touches, and animals.
- The person may not understand typical social rules, so may invade your space, not make eye contact, prefer to be farther away from you than typical, or be

dressed oddly. It's best not to try and point out or change these behaviours unless it's absolutely necessary.

- The person may look at you at an odd angle, giggle or laugh inappropriately, or not seem to take the situation seriously. Do not interpret these behaviours as deceit or disrespect.
- Because of the lack of social understanding, persons with autism may display behaviours that are misinterpreted as evidence of drug abuse or psychosis, defiance or belligerence. Don't assume.
- Be alert to the possibility of outbursts or impulsive, unexplained behaviour. If the person is not harming themselves or others, wait until these behaviours subside.
- The person may reach for your badge, insignia, other clothing, or anything shiny that you may have.
- Allow the person space and be patient.
- Be aware that the person may have seizures.

### **Physical Contact**

- Examine the person for presence of medical alert jewellery or tags or an autism handout card. Some children and adolescents have a Velcro shoe tag.
- Some people with autism don't show indications of pain: check for injuries.
- Avoid touching the person, and if necessary, gesture or slowly guide the person.

### **Environment/Surroundings**

- If possible, turn off sirens and flashing lights and remove canine partners, crowds, or other sensory stimulation from the scene.
- Make sure that the person is away from potential hazards or dangers (busy streets, etc) since they may not have a fear of danger.