

Pilot Program Starting at Library for Children on the Spectrum (ASD or Asperger's)

A new pilot program-the Sensory Club (SC)- was launched this week at the Mary Vinson Memorial Library (MVML) to enrich the lives of children on the Autism Spectrum and those with Asperger Syndrome.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) children with Asperger's and those on the Autism Spectrum have difficulties with social interaction and nonverbal communication, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests.

MVML Youth Service Coordinator Sarah Hamil said that several parents of autistic children have approached her expressing the desire for programs tailored to their children's needs.

"Parents with children on the Spectrum tell me there are very few resources in our community for them to access," said Hamil. "As a public library, I felt like we should do something to help fill that gap."

Children on the Spectrum usually have problems functioning in large crowds and groups. On average, the MVML can host dozens of children at once for activities such as the puppet theatre or the summer reading program.

The SC will limit its group number to an average of six per program and will meet in the library's theatre room.

Parents will need to register their child prior to the day of the program to ensure the number is limited. Any special needs should be conveyed to staff so accommodations can be made.

Hamil stresses that this is an experimental pilot program and it will take time to figure out what activities the children enjoy. The club is based on sensory responses-smell, touch, hear, and see.

According to the Autism Research Institute, children and adults with autism, as well as other developmental disabilities, may have a dysfunctional sensory system. This dysfunction can result in one or more senses being either over-or-under-reactive to stimulation.

When developing the program, Hamil took special notice to the sensory needs of the Spectrum child but she also wanted to include games that any children would find fun.

“The games we will employ are specifically to target the senses but really they are enjoyable to any child and most adults for that matter,” said Hamil.

The first meeting of the club focused on magnets of all colors and sizes to support the tactile sensory. Some were puzzles that needed to be put together, while others encouraged free thinking and creativity.

Hamil said that future SC programs could include work with water beads, aromatherapy, and something most children love-slime making. She stated she can decide what will work after she gets to know each child and their specific needs.

In addition to providing a program for Spectrum children, Hamil would like the club to benefit the parents as well.

“It is my hope that the parents will be able to have some downtime to themselves and be able to socialize with other parents of Spectrum children,” she said.

According to the NIH, caregivers that participate in support groups report feeling a sense of empowerment, improvement in their coping skills, a reduction in depression or anxiety and develop a clearer understanding of what to expect with their situation.

“As a public library, we want to serve the entire family,” said Hamil. “I want to be able to provide a safe and nurturing place for both children and their parent(s) when attending the Sensory Club. I think we will be successful in doing that.”