

Information sheet:

Sensitive story time resource for librarians

This resource will help you:

- Plan a sensitive story session
- Create a welcoming environment in your library for Autistic children and their parents/carers
- Run a sensitive story session

What is sensitive story time?

Sensitive story time is a story time session that has been made accessible for Autistic children. It's still fun and appropriate for other children. Sensitive story time can also be more accessible than regular story time for children with a developmental delay, intellectual disability, or sensory processing difficulties.

This resource will tell you what you need to know to start a sensory story time session at your library.

You may choose to make some changes to your regular children's story time sessions or to run sensitive story time sessions separately.

How is sensitive story time different from regular story time?

Sensitive story time is different in several ways. There are differences both in how to plan a sensitive story time session, and in what happens during the session. Whether you're running sensitive story time or a regular story time, the aim is for children and their parents/carers to enjoy a fun and relaxed session at your library.

Let's look at the differences in planning a sensitive story time session.

Planning sensitive story time

- Reduce noise, for example, by scheduling the story time for a time when the library is less busy.
- If it's difficult to reduce noise, consider running story time in a separate room.
- Define the seating area, for example using cushions or mats.
- Provide a separate space where parents can take their children if they become overwhelmed.
- Be aware that children might be noisy in this quiet space until they're able to calm down. If possible, choose a space that's away from the public areas of the library.
- Reduce the use of fluorescent lighting.
- Plan short simple sessions, for example, one story and some songs or rhymes.
- Choose books that have less text and bright, easily recognisable pictures.
- Use props such as bubbles, scarves, or puppets to keep the children's attention.

During sensitive story time

- Use simple language, short sentences and a quieter voice.
- Use a **visual schedule** (pictures of the activities e.g., welcome song, story, bubbles) to help children follow what's happening in the session.
- Change the activity or extend it depending on the children's responses.
- Encourage children to respond to the story with their body or voice as you read.
- Be prepared for children moving or making noises while listening to the story.
- Consider having regular welcoming and farewell songs or activities that are the same each time. For example, a goodbye song using the children's names.

Should I have a separate session or make the regular story time sensitive?

Every library is different, and every community is different. Deciding on the best option will depend on many factors. Here are some things to consider.

If your current story sessions are very full and busy, it may be easier for Autistic children to focus in a smaller, quieter session.

You may find it is best to try out sensitive story time in a separate session and build your skills with a small group at first. You could choose to run a separate session and also to make changes to your regular story times to make them more inclusive.

It may be helpful to ask parents and community members what would work best for them. Your decision will need to work for your community and your library.

What resources do I need?

Very few resources are needed.

If you're using a large or undefined space for the story time, it's helpful to define the space where story time is happening. You can do this with a stocking snake (stuff some old stockings with newspaper or rags and tie them together to make a very long "snake" and use this to make a circle on the floor). You might have other creative ideas for ways to define the space, such as using cushions or mats.

The most important resources are the visual schedule and the quiet space.

Quiet space

Where possible, it's helpful to have a quiet space organised. This could be a meeting room or other breakout space within the library. A quiet space is simply a place where people can retreat if they are feeling overwhelmed. Ideally it would have low lighting and as little furniture as possible. If you have beanbags or cushions in the library, you could put a few in the space. Put a sign on the door so that other library users know it's a reserved space.

Visual schedules

Visual schedules are a way of using pictures to show what will happen, in what order. To be helpful, the schedule should be talked about and “used”.

Here’s an example of what a visual schedule can look like.



How to use a visual schedule

After greeting everyone, point to the visual schedule and say something like “this is what we’re going to do today.”

Point to each item in order and say what it is.

For example, “First we will read a story, then we will sing a song, then we will read the book again, then we will play with the bubbles, then it will be goodbye time.”

After you finish each activity in the schedule, bring attention back to the schedule. Explain that this part is finished and take the picture away. You can put the picture in your pocket, or in a bag or box. Then point to the next item and say, “now it’s time for...” and begin the next part of the session.



A finished box can be a handy place to put the activity pictures (pictured above).

Social script

Social scripts can be a helpful way for Autistic children to prepare for a new setting and experience. A social script is a document that uses storytelling techniques to explain new experiences and environments to Autistic children through plain language and images. A social script will usually include very specific and illustrated information about what expect when visiting a place or event – such as what the place will look like, who will engage with them, what activities will occur, and what they can do if they feel overwhelmed.

This [link to a social story](#) is a particular kind of social script that was developed by Yarra Libraries with assistance from Amaze. It is important that Autistic people are consulted in the development of social scripts.

Other helpful resources

You may choose to provide a basket of toys for children to play with but remember that this is optional. Children may bring their own toys to the library.

You may choose to have extra visual supports. For example, you may use a choosing board so that children can choose a rhyme/song or even choose which animal to sing about next on Old MacDonald's farm. However, it is important to remember that these extra visual supports are a bonus. It may be best to start with the basics and work up to the extras as you gain confidence.

Creating a welcoming library environment

It is very helpful to have signs posted in the library which will help people to find their way to the story telling area and the quiet space. It can also be helpful to let parents and carers know about the quiet space before your Sensitive Story time begins.

Minimise distractions

Here are some tips for minimising sensory distractions:

- Avoid sitting with your back to windows. Doing so would make children look towards the light to look at you. If a child is sensitive to light, they may prefer to sit with their back to window.
- If you can, consider turning off, or reducing, fluorescent lighting in the library and toilets. Make use of natural light where possible.
- Reduce chemical smells – make sure that non-essential cleaning products aren't used before, or during the session.
- Cover the bookshelves in the story time area with a sheet to reduce visual distractions.
- Switch off noisy air hand dryers in the toilets (these make sudden large noises).
- Remove, or avoid hanging decorations above the story time area as these can be a visual distraction.
- Avoid using strong-smelling deodorant. Try to avoid using perfume or aftershave on sensitive story time days.
- Reduce sound spill from other areas of the library (consider noise from computers, and areas where large or noisy groups are meeting).

Remember that very few public spaces are “perfect” sensory spaces. Do what you can with what you have. It's better to run a session in a space that has some sensory distractions rather than not do sensitive story time at all.

Running sensitive story time

Keep the session simple. If you usually have a loud voice, consider using a softer voice.

Start by saying hello and welcoming the group. You may like to remind parents there's a quiet space available if their child needs a break.

After saying hello, start by telling the group what's going to happen. For example, “First we are going to read a story and then we are going to sing some songs.” As you mention each activity, point to the related picture on your visual schedule.

Running a session

In terms of running order, it's up to you how you want to plan the session. It's good to keep it simple. One story is plenty. If the children are very engaged you can always go back through the book and look at the pictures or extend the rhyming activity.

Before beginning the story, you can give a very quick book orientation, to help the children "get ready for reading". It's best to keep this short and to the point. For example, "today we're going to read a book with lots of animals in it. It's about someone who tried out lots of different pets."

Book choices – choosing an appropriate book

Choose a book that has simple language and has only one or two sentences on each page. A repetitive format or lift-the-flap books can be helpful for planning interactions during the story. Good examples of appropriate books are *Dear Zoo* by Rob Campbell and *Hide and Seek Pig* by Julia Donaldson. The language is simple and there is usually one sentence on each page.

These books are a good opportunity for planned interactions with the children. For example, you may ask a simple question each time such as "What's this?" as you lift each flap to reveal an animal.

When choosing a book, consider how you might ask children to respond to the books, remembering that some children may be non-speaking (non-verbal). It may be appropriate to have children use gestures such as peekaboo, nodding and shaking their heads, or making a quacking duck with their hands.

Choose a rhyme or two that may be somehow related to the story, the connection doesn't have to be strong. For example, "There were lots of animals in that story. I know a song with lots of animals." Or "When I go to the zoo, I ride on the bus. I know a song about wheels on the bus".

If you can't think of a way to connect the rhyme to the story, don't worry, the children will enjoy the song just the same.

Choosing a song

When choosing songs for your session it's a good idea to keep it simple. Choosing songs that are familiar to the children and their parents will make it easier for them to join in the singing. You may like to choose a common nursery rhyme or a "modern classic" that is likely to be familiar to the children.

Nursery rhymes with actions:

- Row, Row, Row Your Boat
- Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes
- Open, Shut Them

Some good "modern classics" are:

- Rock-a-Bye Your Bear – by The Wiggles
- Dingle Dangle Scarecrow
- Der Glumph (Went the Little Green Frog) – by Playschool

Sing a nursery rhyme with the children, then ask them to sing it again in a "whisper voice" with you, then ask them to sing it silently, mouthing the words along with you and doing the actions.

Planning a session – extras

If you are feeling confident and would like to add something extra to your session, go for it. If there's a resource you'd like to use on an activity you'd like to try, give it a go.

You may like to use props such as felt boards or puppets, or introduce some elements of play to the session.

If your local council has a toy library, you could partner with them to provide a selection of toys for the children to play with each week.

You may even like to make “mystery boxes.” These are boxes filled with shredded paper which contain a couple of toys. They are taped up, with a hole cut out for children to put their hand through to feel the object inside.

The only limit is your imagination and the children’s interest level. If you try a new element in your session and it doesn’t go well, that’s okay. Simply use a quick fix strategy and move on to something else. Remember that these extra props or activities, while fun, are not necessary.

Story time is about sharing a book together. Do what works for you and your group.

Troubleshooting

What if something goes wrong?

Just like your regular story times, parents remain responsible for their children and are there to take action if needed.

The sorts of things that might “go wrong” are not different than in a regular story time session. The difference may be in the age of the child or the way that they communicate their needs. If a child becomes very disruptive to the session, you can try using quick fix strategies such as stopping the story and going to an activity.

When working with any group of children sometimes a session doesn’t go well. This happens for very experienced early childhood teachers and special education teachers too.

If you feel that a session is “going off the rails”, be flexible and change what you are doing. If this works well, you can try going back to the book you were reading, or you can move on to the next activities.

It is fine to depart from the plan- just extend the “quick fix” activities until the end of the session. Even very experienced teachers find they must do this sometimes. If you are changing the activity don't forget to update the picture on the visual schedule.

Unfortunately, parents of Autistic children sometimes feel that they must apologise for their children's' behaviour in public. Some parents may worry that they should not come back to the library if their child has a difficult time. There are many ways to communicate that you are not upset and that all children are welcome. It can mean a lot if you make a simple comment such as “bye, see you next time” or even just smile.

Quick fix strategies

Sometimes, Autistic children will make lots of noise or move around even when they are enjoying an activity. This is okay. Sometimes though, children use their behaviour to show that they are upset or tired of a story.

There are many “tricks of the trade” used by special education and early childhood teachers to support children when they are upset. The first thing to think about is whether a child is upset or feeling “hyper” because of something in the environment that can be changed.

For example, are they excited by a ceiling fan spinning or upset by a noise that you are making during the story? It may be easy to change or stop something that is upsetting a child. Otherwise, distracting children with something new and fun is a great strategy.

You can stop what you are doing and try:

- Blowing bubbles
- A clapping game (this gives children something positive to do with their hands)
- Start a rhyme or song that involves using hands, such as “five little ducks”
- Bringing out a puppet or toy and using this as a prop
- If you do not have a puppet or toy, using your hand to make a quacking duck or a woofing dog can work just as well.

- Holding up your fingers and pretending they are candles on a cake and blowing out the candles (this is a way of prompting young children to take some deep breaths)
- Give the child (or their parent) a toy
- Offering choice with a choosing visual
- If you are giving instructions, try softly singing them

Try combining strategies. Remember that it is okay to divert from the planned session and stick with one of their activities if that's what works. If a child is quite upset, it helps them when you stay calm. You can role model for the children how to stay calm when things aren't going to plan.

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