



# Autism Friendly Spaces Guidebook for Youth workers





# Index

1. What is youth work?
2. What is autism?
3. Sensory Aspect
4. Creating an Autism Friendly Space
5. Toolkit - Examples of sessions

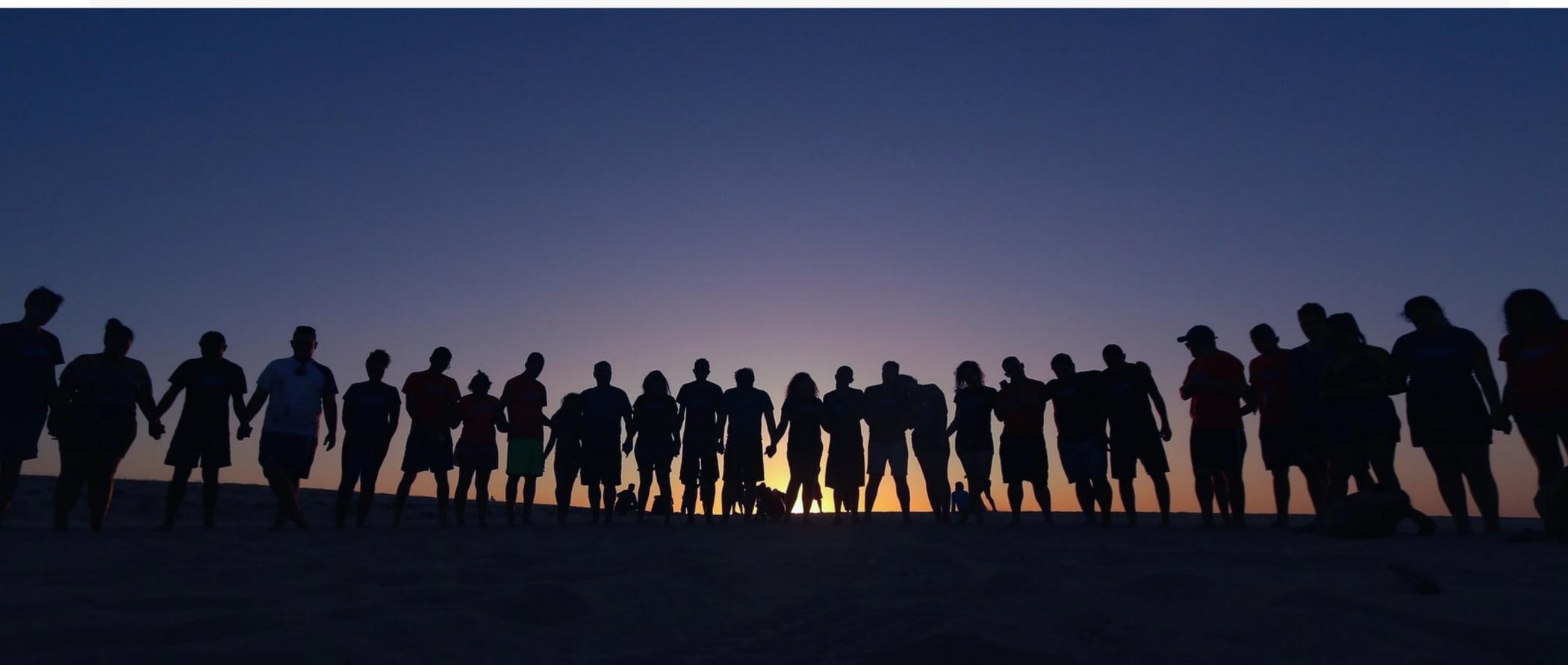


# 1. What is youth work?

Youth work is a broad term covering a wide variety of activities of a social, cultural, educational, environmental, and/or political nature by, with, and for young people, in groups or individually. Youth work is delivered by professional youth workers and is based on non-formal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation. Youth work is a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision-making. Youth work aims at building bridges, and at providing support to young people.

It aims at:

- Empowering young people
- Engaging youth in various activities
- Educating through non-formal education methods
- Enabling young people in doing the things they want, individually or in a group
- Building a trusting relationship where the young person feels that they are seen





## 2. What is autism?

The most beautiful thing about human beings is the fact that we are all different. The way we see the world, the way we experience it through our senses, and the way we communicate. The way our brain is wired influences who we are and how we act and react to our surroundings.

Autism is a neurological condition, therefore the brain is wired differently than the majority of people. Autism affects parts of the brain that deal with emotions, learning skills, communication, and memory.

The traits of autism can vary a lot between one person and another. However, there are three main traits that are typical of every autistic person to some degree.

These are:

1. Difference in social interaction
2. Difference in social communication
3. Difference in social imagination





Other traits may include:

- having specific interests and repetitive behaviours
- sensory integration differences such as reaction to light and sound
- difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships, ranging from troubles in following and understanding social norms in groups
- differences in understanding others' actions, behaviors, and emotions through body language, humor, irony, tone of voice
- taking longer to adapt to new environments, tasks, changes in routines,
- difficulty in understanding body language or lack in nonverbal communication

Autism is a 'spectrum'. This entails that there is a range in the difference of the condition. Some individuals are still able to be independent while others may have an intellectual disability.

Therefore, when you meet someone with autism, you have met one person on the autism spectrum. There are also different aspects of autism, as persons with different profiles have different strengths and challenges. People with autism generally prefer to be called autistic, rather than a person with autism.

Jim Sinclair, a pioneer in the autism rights movement, advocates that an identity-first language should be used, whereby being called an autistic person rather than a person with autism identifies more to the person.



Attitudes towards others affect the way people think and behave towards persons with disabilities. They also impact the outcomes for persons with disabilities in the way they are treated and able to participate in society. There are two main models in terms of disability and how disability is considered: (i) The medical model and (ii) The social model

### **The Medical Model of Disability**

The medical model looks at a person's impairment first and focuses on the impairment as the cause of persons with disability being unable to access goods and services or being able to participate fully in society. Statements such as 'he can't read that newspaper because he's blind' are an example of people being influenced by the medical model of disability. It is this medical model that has informed the development and structure of the legislation, and is reflected in people's attitudes and associated negative outcomes.

### **The Social Model of Disability**

The social model of disability aims at *removing the obstacles* people with different conditions deal with in their everyday lives. The social model researchers and thinkers claim that people living with different conditions do not have enough opportunities and space to get an education, work, have leisure time, enjoy the cinema and theatre, read, use the Internet, and shop, all of which are essential for a good and stable life. Instead, typically they are excluded and marginalized, unable to enjoy all of the activities the rest of society takes for granted.

The social model is generally the preferred model when thinking about disability. The social model has been adopted by most organisations representing persons with disability and endorsed by the UNCRPD. The social model was created by persons with disability themselves and looks at the barriers erected by society in terms of persons with disability being able to participate fully in day to day life.



The social model seeks to remove unnecessary barriers which prevent persons with disability participating in society, accessing work and living independently. The social model asks what can be done to remove barriers to inclusion. It also recognises that attitudes towards persons with disability create unnecessary barriers to inclusion and requires people to take proactive action to remove these barriers. The social model identifies the problems faced by persons with disability as a consequence of external factors. For example, in the way organisations produce information (not offering a variety of formats such as Braille and large text), or inaccessible venues.





## 3. Sensory aspect

Many autistic persons have difficulty processing everyday sensory information. Any of the senses may be over- or under-sensitive, or both, at different times. These sensory sensitivities can affect behaviour, and can have a profound effect on a person's life.

### *Too much information*

Sometimes autistic persons may behave in a way that you would not immediately link to sensory sensitivities. A person who struggles to deal with everyday sensory information can experience sensory overload, or information overload. Too much information can cause stress, anxiety, and possibly physical pain. This can result in withdrawal, challenging behaviour or meltdowns.

### *Sensory sensitivities*

Here we look at some of the effects of hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, balance, and body awareness, and ways you could help.

### **Sight**

- Objects and bright lights can appear to jump around and are perceived as brighter than they are.
- Images may fragment.
- Easier to focus on a detail rather than the whole object.

You could make changes to the environment such as reducing fluorescent lighting, providing sunglasses, using blackout curtains, creating a workstation in the classroom - a space or desk with high walls or divides on both sides to block out visual distractions.



## Sound

- Noise can be magnified and sounds can be distorted.
- May be able to hear conversations and sounds in the distance due to inability to cut out sounds.
- Inability to cut out sounds – notably background noise, leading to difficulties concentrating.

You could help by:

- shutting doors and windows to reduce external sounds
- preparing autistic person before going to noisy or crowded places
- providing ear plugs and music to listen to
- creating screened workstation in classroom or office, positioning the person away from doors and windows.

## Smell

- Smells can be intense and overpowering. This can cause toileting problems.
- Dislikes distinctive perfume and shampoos.

You could help by using unscented detergents or shampoos, avoiding wearing perfume, and making the environment as fragrance-free as possible.





## **Taste**

- Some flavours and foods can be strong and overpowering because of sensitive taste buds. This may lead to a restricted diet.
- Certain textures cause discomfort - therefore a person may only eat smooth foods like mashed potatoes or ice cream.

Some autistic people may limit themselves to bland foods or crave very strong-tasting food. As long as someone has a balanced diet, it should be fine.

## **Touch**

- Touch can be painful and uncomfortable, and this can affect relationships with others.
- May dislike having anything on hands or feet.
- May find it difficult to brush and wash hair because the head is sensitive.
- May only tolerate certain types of clothing or textures.

You could help by:

- warning the autistic person if you are about to touch them - approach them from the front
- remembering that a hug may be painful rather than comforting
- changing the texture of food (for example: purée it)
- slowly introducing different textures around the person, such as a flannel, a toothbrush, and some different foods
- gradually introducing different textures to touch, eg have a box of materials available
- allowing a person to complete activities themselves (for example hair brushing and washing) so that they can do what is comfortable for them
- turning clothes inside out so there is no seam, removing any tags or labels
- allowing the autistic person to wear clothes they are comfortable in



## **Balance**

- May find it difficult to participate in activities like sport
- May find it difficult to stop quickly or during an activity.
- Car sickness.
- May find it difficult in activities where the head is not upright or feet are off the ground.

One could help by breaking down activities into small, more easily manageable steps and using visual cues such as a finish line.

## **Body awareness (proprioception)**

Our body awareness system tells us where our bodies are in space, and how different body parts are moving.

- May find it difficult with fine motor skills, for example manipulating small objects like buttons or shoelaces.
- Might move the whole body to look at something.

You could help by offering 'fine motor' activities like lacing boards.





## 4. Creating an autism friendly space

This involves 3 steps:

1. Youth workers' awareness
2. Physical adjustments
3. Appropriate methodologies

### Youth workers' awareness

It is highly recommended that the youth workers have more information and thus increased awareness about autism and what this entails for the autistic young people and for the group.

One can follow the educator's section in the *online modules* of [www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu](http://www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu) to learn more about the cognitive, sensory and social aspects of autistic young people.

The youth workers are encouraged to create a *social story* for young autistic people. A social story is a learning tool to facilitate the accessibility of information and support the familiarisation process of the autistic young people and their peers. This will include information about the place, how to arrive, what activities will take place, real-life photos, introduction by the youth workers who will be there with the group and other relevant information. This can be created every time an event will take place for example going on an outing. This can be in a digitalised format to be easily shared.



## Physical adjustments

Autistic persons have a high tendency to be sensitive in all of their senses. Therefore if a place is chaotic with bright lights, sounds and lots of information to take in, this might induce frustration, anxiety and overwhelming feelings.

Therefore, it is recommended that the place is not *highly sensorial*. This includes having a low volume of music or no music at all. If it is possible to have natural light since this is better than artificial light for a person with sensitivities. If the place has spotlights it's better if these are dimmed. This will allow the place to be as calming as possible. Avoid abstract art and go for scenes related to nature if there are pictures on the wall. Try to avoid bright colours such as neon colours or bright yellow. Provide comfortable cushions or bean bags. If you're going to paint the walls, opt for neutral or pastel colours.

It is recommended that if possible, you create a quiet space where a person can relax. This needs to be as calm as possible with natural light. Having sensory equipment and noise-cancelling headphones also helps.





## **Appropriate methodologies**

Predictability is important for autistic people. In order to do this a clear schedule and a specified timescale (to promote activities that do not change within a specified time) would be beneficial and will lead to autistic persons feeling safe and without anxiety.

Allowing autistic people to have a safe space where they can spend time relaxing, and lower their anxiety and distress is recommended. This will enable autistic persons to develop personal safety skills and improve their overall well-being.

Sometimes entering a place with a large number of colorful products and many people can be quite distressing and autistic persons can be overwhelmed and could potentially engage in behaviors such as meltdowns, social withdrawal, and repetitive questioning. Knowing these can help you be more understanding and not judgmental.

It is important to make autistic persons better included and attempt to find their strengths and help them make the best out of those. The idea is to find what the autistic person is interested in. This can be any activity that brings them joy and that they have knowledge about. Ask them about their hobbies, interests and activities. The recommendation is to speak in short and clear sentences. Also, it is of importance to keep in mind that due to sensory processing sensitivities, autistic persons can have a hard time understanding social cues such as body language (e.g. hand gestures and smiles).



Autistic persons often have issues understanding humor, and irony/sarcasm. It is best to not rely on body language or humor, rather try to be precise and straightforward, using plain language and avoiding excessive use of metaphor, ambiguity, and hypothetical situations.

Some autistic people are better at communicating verbally, others are better at visual communication. For those individuals with better visual communication a more concrete and structured approach with a greater use of written and visual information (which may include worksheets, thought bubbles, images and cartoons) is a good option.

Finding what works for them and what they are better at, will help them reach their full potential and it will be easier to guide them during that process.

It is important to have in mind that some autistic persons might have some behaviors such as repetitiveness, hand flapping, and stimming (self-stimulatory behaviour – repetitive or unusual body movement or noises). These actions are sometimes a sign of autistic persons trying to calm themselves or as an expression of joy. Please be aware of these situations and stay respectful without interfering and making an individual with autism and/or the person accompanying them feel uncomfortable, judged or insecure.



# Toolkit

## *Activity 1 - Getting to know what the group likes*



Aim: Identify what the group would like to explore further.

Resources needed:

- Calendar or using the calendar on their phones.
- Pictures of different activities.

Activity:

1. Provide the details of the dates that the group will be meeting.

Support

the young people with writing these dates on their calendars.

2. Explain that as a group we will go through different pictures relating to different activities and the group will vote for the activities that they would like to do. Examples include gardening, cooking, drawing, musical

activity, bowling, watching a film, sports, and/or going out.

3. Encourage the young people to suggest further activities that were not mentioned.

Tips: For persons who are non-verbal, draw 'Yes' and 'No' on either sides of the room, and the young people will go to that side of the room to vote.





## Activity 2 - Our space

Aim: Identify if the setting of the space you'll be meeting is appropriate for the group.

Resources needed:

- Ball of string
- Flip chart and markers

Activity:

1. Sit in a circle with the group and explain the activity. A ball of string will be thrown from one person to another.
2. Each person that gets the ball will choose one thing that they like from the space and one thing they would change.
3. Two young person will be chosen so that they can draw/write what their peers are saying.

Tips: For persons who are non-verbal, they can point at things or show a picture on a mobile phone of what they would like to add.





## Activity 3 - The mural

Aim: Celebrating the diversity in the group

Resources needed:

- A4 papers in the shape of puzzle pieces
- Colours, watercolours, paint brushes and coloured pencils

Activity:

1. The young people will be provided with an A4 paper in the shape of a puzzle piece.
2. The young people are then asked to draw something that describes them and their character by using their favourite colours, favourite words and/or pictures of things/activities they like.
3. After everyone has done their piece all these puzzle pieces are attached together to form a mural which will represent the diversity of the group.
4. Discussion – This will describe the diversity of the group and what makes each person unique.

Tips: Give space to the group to interact with each other, to support each other or to create a mural piece with each other.





## Activity 4 - Movie simulation

Aim: Choosing a movie and preparing the atmosphere to watch it together.

Resources needed:

- A movie, speakers, projector
- Tickets, popcorn and snacks

Activity:

1. As a group, they will choose which movie they would like to watch together.
2. The group will be split into smaller teams with different roles: who prepares and sells tickets, who prepares the food/drinks, and who prepares the movie and sound.
3. As a group, they will discuss what sound levels for everyone would be the most sensory appropriate.
4. The area will be prepared with sofas and bean bags according to what the group prefers.
5. The groups will give feedback to each other and reflect on the movie.

Tips: Give space for the group to move around during the movie, to go to a quieter area if they want to.





## Activity 5 - Music and me

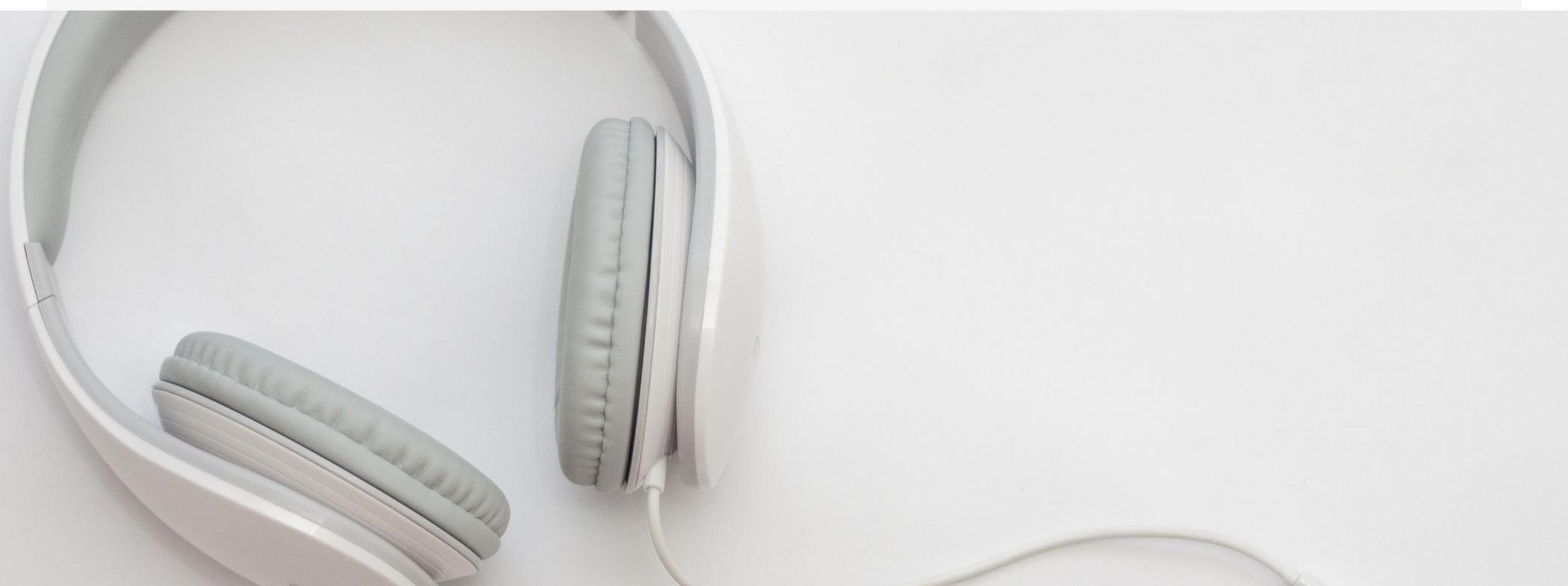
Aim: Through this activity, the young people will gain skills which are related to communication such as listening and will also challenge their skills when it comes to remembering.

Resources needed:

- None

Activity:

1. Everyone is encouraged to gather in a circle either sitting down or standing up.
2. A young person will be asked to make any kind of sound, and the other young person next to him/her must repeat that young person's sound and make another sound of his/her choice.
3. The next young person must remember both sounds and repeat both sounds including his/her sound.
4. Repeat this until all the young people in the group/circle would participate.
5. Reflect on the sounds that a person can make and how music can connect us.





## Activity 6 - Artistic relay

Aim: Communication through art.

Resources needed:

- 16 pieces of paper A3
- paint/ coloured pencils or markers
- cup with water
- paint brushes and paint palette

Activity:

1. Prepare different stations with the resources.
2. Place the young people in the stations and ask them to start drawing something of their choice as there would be background music going on.
3. Once the music stops, the young people must change their station (Always moving to the right) and continue drawing on the painting of others.
4. Do this until the young people arrive back in their starting positions.
5. You must then ask the young people whether the painting was close to the picture they had in mind when they started the activity.





## Activity 7 - Mirroring

Aim: Communication through body movement activity.

Resources needed:

- Speakers

Activity:

1. Choose one person to be the leader and one person to be the 'mirror'.
2. The leader does movements for the other person to copy. The mirror copies the leader's movements exactly, as though they're in a mirror.
3. Young people are encouraged to not physically touch each other. Just to watch each other closely and copy the movements.
4. Take turns being the leader and the mirror.
5. Do this until the young people arrive back in their starting positions.
6. You must then ask the young people whether the painting was close to the picture they had in mind when they started the activity.

*Mirroring movement activities helps young people improve their physical coordination and gross motor skills.*





## Activity 8 - Traffic lights

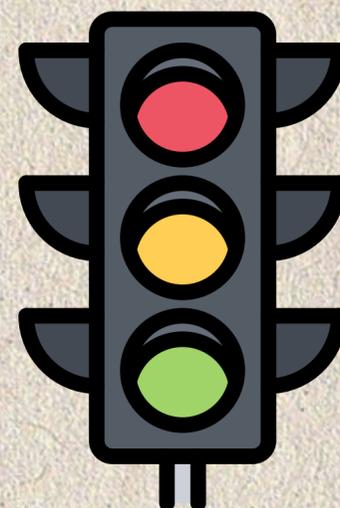
Aim: Playing a game together in a group

Resources needed:

- 3 different papers with colours Red, Green and Yellow

Activity:

1. Stand at a distance across the room.
2. Explain the instructions to the group: green colour means run, yellow colour means move slowly and red colour means stop moving.
3. Say, green light as you hold up the green colour so the young people can see it.
4. Suddenly say, red light as you hold up the red sign.
5. If anyone is still moving, tell him or her to return to the starting line.
6. Call out the different colours as you continue to play the game.





## Further reading

Anderson, D. K., Liang, J. W., & Lord, C. (2013). Predicting young adult outcome among more and less cognitively able individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(5), 485–494.

Dillenburger, K., Mckerr, L., Jordan, J.-A., & Keenan, M. (2016). *Staff Training in Autism: The One-Eyed Wo/Man...* International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 13(7), 716.

Eigsti, I. M. (2013). *A Review of Embodiment in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4.

Fletcher-Watson, S., McConnell, F., Manola, E., McConachie, H. (2014). *Interventions based on the Theory of Mind cognitive model for autism spectrum disorder (ASD)*. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 3.

Gallese, V. (2006). *Intentional attunement: A neurophysiological perspective on social cognition and its disruption in autism*. *Brain Research*, 1079(1), 15–24.

Harms, M. B., Martin, A., & Wallace, G. L. (2010). *Facial Emotion Recognition in Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Review of Behavioral and Neuroimaging Studies*. *Neuropsychology Review*, 20(3), 290–322.

Maglione, M. A., Gans, D., Das, L., Timbie, J., Kasari, C. (2012). *Nonmedical Interventions for Children With ASD: Recommended Guidelines and Further Research Needs*. *Pediatrics* Nov, 130, 169-178.

Wolstencroft, J., Robinson, L., Srinivasan, R., Kerry, E., Mandy, W., & Skuse, D. (2018). *A Systematic Review of Group Social Skills Interventions, and Meta-analysis of Outcomes, for Children with High Functioning ASD*. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(7), 2293–2307.



This guidebook was created by Prisms as part of the 'Autism Friendly Spaces' project funded by EU funds. Thank you to Agenzija Zghazagh for their collaboration in the Bridge Youth Centre and the support in the creation of tools.



*The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union