Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurological disability that affects a person’s ability to communicate, understand language, play, and socially interact with others. The first signs of ASD usually appear as developmental delays before age three. Every person with ASD is different.

However, there are some common characteristics of individuals with autism that may occur.

- Difficulty in using and understanding language
- Difficulty with social skills and navigating social situations
- Over or under sensitivity to sensory stimuli, including sound, sight, taste, touch, or smell
- Repetitive behaviors such as spinning or lining up objects
- Difficulty with changes to surroundings or routines
- Challenging behaviors such as aggression or self-injury

Many individuals with autism prefer to use public transportation instead of driving their own car or relying on other people to give them a ride to the places they need or want to go. For this reason, it is important to become familiar with mass transit options, and the social rules to follow when using public transportation.

Here are some tips about using HART and the TECO Line Streetcar:
Information for Parents and Caregivers

When a person with ASD uses public transportation, it’s important that the individual know what to expect from the trip, especially if the individual is resistant to change or is doing so for the first time.

Preparing for the HART trip

Here are a few ideas caregivers can consider when preparing for the trip:

- Get familiar with the transit vehicles by sharing photographs of the different vehicles
- Break the transit travel process into small routines and practice each routine before the anticipated trip. The routines may include packing a lunch, planning the HART trip, viewing the schedule, walking to the bus stop, checking OneBusAway Tampa for real-time arrival information
Before the travel date, **plan one or more short bus trips with the individual to see buses on the road, departing from terminals, and arriving at various destinations**

**Assemble an “off we go” bag** of favorite calming tools, electronic devices, books, drawing pad, and snacks for the trip

**Most individuals with ASD respond positively to visual schedules**

### General Tips to Use Public Transportation

It is important to become familiar with mass transit options and the unwritten social rules of mass transit.

- Stay to the right when walking in crowded areas, and allow people that are walking faster than you to pass you on the left. Many people using mass transit are in a hurry to catch a bus, train or streetcar.
- Allow all people to get off of the bus, streetcar, or van, before attempting to get on.
- When riding the bus or streetcar, do not stare at people. This may make them uncomfortable. Instead, look out of the window, read something you brought along, play a game on your phone, etc.
- Make sure you use headphones if you want to listen to music, play a game, watch a video, etc. If you have to talk on your phone, do so quietly and keep your calls short.
- If there is a row of empty seats available, sit in the empty row in the seat closest to the window. If there are no empty rows, you can sit next to someone in an empty seat. You can also stand when riding the bus or streetcar as long as you do not block the aisle or the doors.
- Public transportation can get very crowded during the times of day when people are commuting to/from school or work. If you are not in a hurry, you might want to wait for a bus or streetcar that is not as crowded.
• Avoid touching other people or crowding their space whenever possible.
• Maintain good personal hygiene. People do not like to smell strong smells in close quarters.
• Keep your personal items safe by keeping a hand on them and/or keeping them close to you. If the bus or streetcar is crowded, do not put your belongings on the seat next to you. The seats are for other passengers.
• If an elderly person, person with a physical disability, a child, or a mother holding an infant gets on and there are no seats available, it is expected that you give up your seat to that person and stand until a seat becomes available.
• Additionally, some forms of transportation have seats specifically designated for the elderly or people with physical disabilities. Do not sit in these seats unless they are the last seats available and there are no elderly or people with physical disabilities who need them. If there are no seats specifically designated for the elderly or people with physical disabilities, it is commonly expected to leave the seats closest to the exit for them.
- Sometimes people on the bus break the rules. Encourage individuals on the spectrum to not attempt to confront a rule-breaker. The driver will intervene if necessary.
- Some buses have a front door and a back door, but other buses only have one door. Not all buses are designed or look exactly the same, and sometimes you can get a bus that looks different from the one you had the day before.
- There will be occasional public announcements that play for everyone to hear on the buses. They can be bothersome; a reminder about headphones may be appropriate here.
- Sometimes there are newer drivers who don’t always fully know the routes yet. Because of this, passengers sometimes need patience and understanding. You may have different drivers on different days or a substitute driver.
- Sometimes the drivers are focused on being timely (especially if they are late) and may not be so personable.
- Some of the bus stops are more susceptible to bad weather than others. Check the forecast and dress for the day. You may want to wear layers, pack an umbrella, etc.
- Try to use the bathroom before going on the bus.
If you are riding the bus in the dark, be sure to wear light or bright colored clothing and/or signal the driver with a lighted device so they see there is someone to pick up at the stop.

The number of the bus and the destination of the bus are often listed above the windshield. Some numbered buses, for example, have two different ending destinations. Be sure you know which bus you need. You can also check with the driver before getting on to be sure you are on the right bus.

Get on the bus in the order of who was waiting at the bus stop the longest. Be sure to use the door nearest the driver, and not the rear door.

Have your ticket or payment ready when you get on the bus. Most buses will only accept exact change, so if you are paying in cash, be sure you know how much is needed before getting on the bus.

If you are going to transfer from one bus to another bus, purchase a one-day pass, it will be cheaper than paying for one-way rides each time you board.
• Know the order of stops, and about how long it should take to get to your destination, so that you are ready to get off at your stop when the bus gets there. You can also ask the driver what time you will reach your stop.
• Pull the cord or push the stop button about a block before the stop you need to get off the bus. Otherwise, if there is no one waiting to get on the bus, the driver may continue driving past your stop.
• Buses tend to be busy at times. If you are unable to get a seat, use the hand grips and poles to keep your balance and avoid falling onto people.
• HART has a Trip Planner that you can use to plan your trip so you can estimate the cost, length of trip and any transfers.
Information for HART/Transit Employees

Let the Caregiver Be Your Guide

- Always ask about the person’s primary form of communication
- Ask about sensory sensitivities to light, sound, touch, and smell
- Inquire about previous trips and what worked to minimize anxiety and calm the individual

Modify the Physical Environment

- Be aware that there may be a fight-or-flight response to any new stressful situation; select a seat away from the aisle to help motivate the individual to stay seated
- Consider using headphones if the person is sensitive to sound
Reinforce Cooperative Behavior

- Provide specific praise and encouragement for all cooperative behavior
- Ignore behaviors that appear different (unusual body movements, unexpected vocalizations, inappropriate words or comments)
- Use pictures to redirect attention showing what will happen and what is expected

Be Prepared, Be Proactive

- Remember prevention is always the best intervention
- When senses are overloaded and anxiety escalates, some individuals with autism may respond with aggressive behaviors toward others or themselves
- Enlist caregivers to help redirect, reassure, and restore calm to any escalating situation
- Remember, planning ahead is always a good way to have a positive outcome