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Clients

Designing for Clients With Kids on the Autism Spectrum

Experts share insights into how to serve your ASD clients best

By Jaime Joyce

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There's a saying you often hear when talking with people about autism spectrum disorder, or ASD: *If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.* In other words, everybody's different. So when it comes to designing for people with ASD, "There's not really a one-size-fits-all approach," says Kristi Gaines, a professor in the department of design at Texas Tech University and coauthor of *Designing for Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

In the United States, 1 in 54 children has been diagnosed with ASD, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Given the numbers, it's likely that architects and designers will increasingly be asked to create spaces for clients with children who are on the spectrum. And while much is known about designing for people with physical differences, there's far less awareness about how to [design for those with ASD](#) and sensory processing issues.

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“It’s an area that people don’t fully understand,” says Shelly Dival, an autism design specialist in Australia and founder of the consulting firm [Enabling Spaces](#). “I think as a design community we’ve got a real responsibility...to become informed and do the best we can for our clients.”

Dival and other experts advise starting with an in-depth, child-focused assessment of a client’s needs, speaking not only with parents and caregivers but with occupational therapists, psychologists, educators, and others with whom the child interacts.

“You really want to think about how you can make the child more comfortable in their environment,” says psychologist Maryam Abdullah, parenting program director at the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at the University of California, Berkeley. “What one child who has autism needs could be so different than for another child.”

Designing for the senses is key. Some children with ASD need fewer stimuli, while others thrive with more. “Finding that right balance is kind of the trick,” says Gaines.

Some design solutions are simple. Dival recommends decorating with wood grains, greenery, and other natural elements, and using basic, rather than busy, patterns. “For someone with sensory sensitivities, this can just calm them down,” she says. A neutral color palette can also help. Some children with ASD, however, are sensory-seeking, and “may, in all seriousness, want to come home to a sparkle party with metallic paint on the wall,” says Dival.

Proper lighting is critical. Skip fluorescents in favor of LEDs. Have lights on a dimmer. Mute noise with rugs, carpeting, and acoustic panels.

Larger changes may include updating a home’s ventilation system to mitigate noise and the spread of odors, both of which can trigger adverse responses in children with ASD, or adding structural features that can aid transitions from one area of the home to another: “It could be from outside to inside,” says Dival. “So things like a veranda or a covered porch are great.” Glass panels in doors and internal windows can help kids see what’s happening in other parts of the residence. “Then they can choose whether they want to join in,” says Dival, “or stay in relative safety and just join in from a distance.”

As a project unfolds, it’s crucial to remain focused on the child. “Designers quite often like to do things that are eye-catching, but some of those things are not good from an autism point of view,” cautions Steve Maslin, a U.K.-based architect and principal inclusive design consultant at [Atkins Global](#). “Lay aside your ego,” he advises. “This is not about capturing people’s attention. If you do that you’ll end up serving yourself, not the people you’re working with.”

The impact can be far-reaching. “When you design for autism, it doesn’t just benefit people with autism,” Dival says. It can help people with dementia, anxiety and depression, and other mental health conditions. In fact, “it assists everyone,” Dival says. “We can all benefit.”

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