



Autism and the Courts:

**Bringing Awareness and Responsiveness
to Children on the Spectrum**



What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave.

*National Institute of
Mental Health*

A large yellow triangle is positioned in the bottom right corner of the slide, pointing towards the top right.

Justice Kevin M. Dougherty
Supreme Court of Pennsylvania



AUTISM
& THE COURTS
LISTEN. LEARN. EDUCATE.



Why does this matter?

- Access to Justice
- Equity/Fairness
- Educated/Supportive Judicial System



PCSTJ
Education
Session
186
Judges

Regional
Listening
Tours
1,241

Autism and the
Dependency
Courts Taskforce

JCJC/Autism
Delinquency

Apr. 2020

July 2021

June 2024

Feb. 2020

Nov. 2020 –
June 2021

Sep. 2021

Oct. 2024

Autism
Initiative
Launched

Dependency
Survey 82% of
Judges

Taskforce
Concluded

Growing
Importance!
New Data!

According to estimates
from the CDC, about

1 IN 36

children have been identified with autism.





In your work, do you interact with youth diagnosed with Autism?

① Start presenting to display the poll results on this slide.

slido

Please download and install the Slido app on all computers you use



Do you work with parents who have a diagnosis of Autism?

① Start presenting to display the poll results on this slide.

slido

Please download and install the Slido app on all computers you use

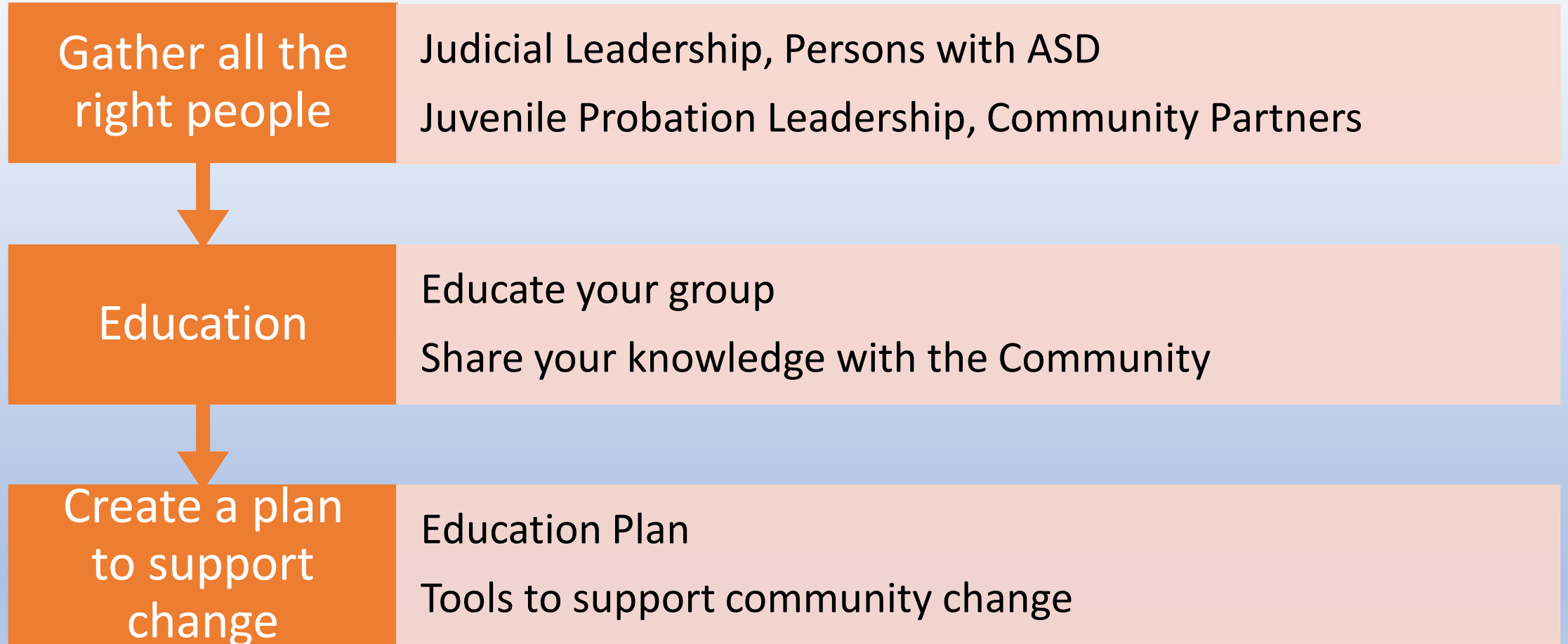


Have you participated in any training on Autism?

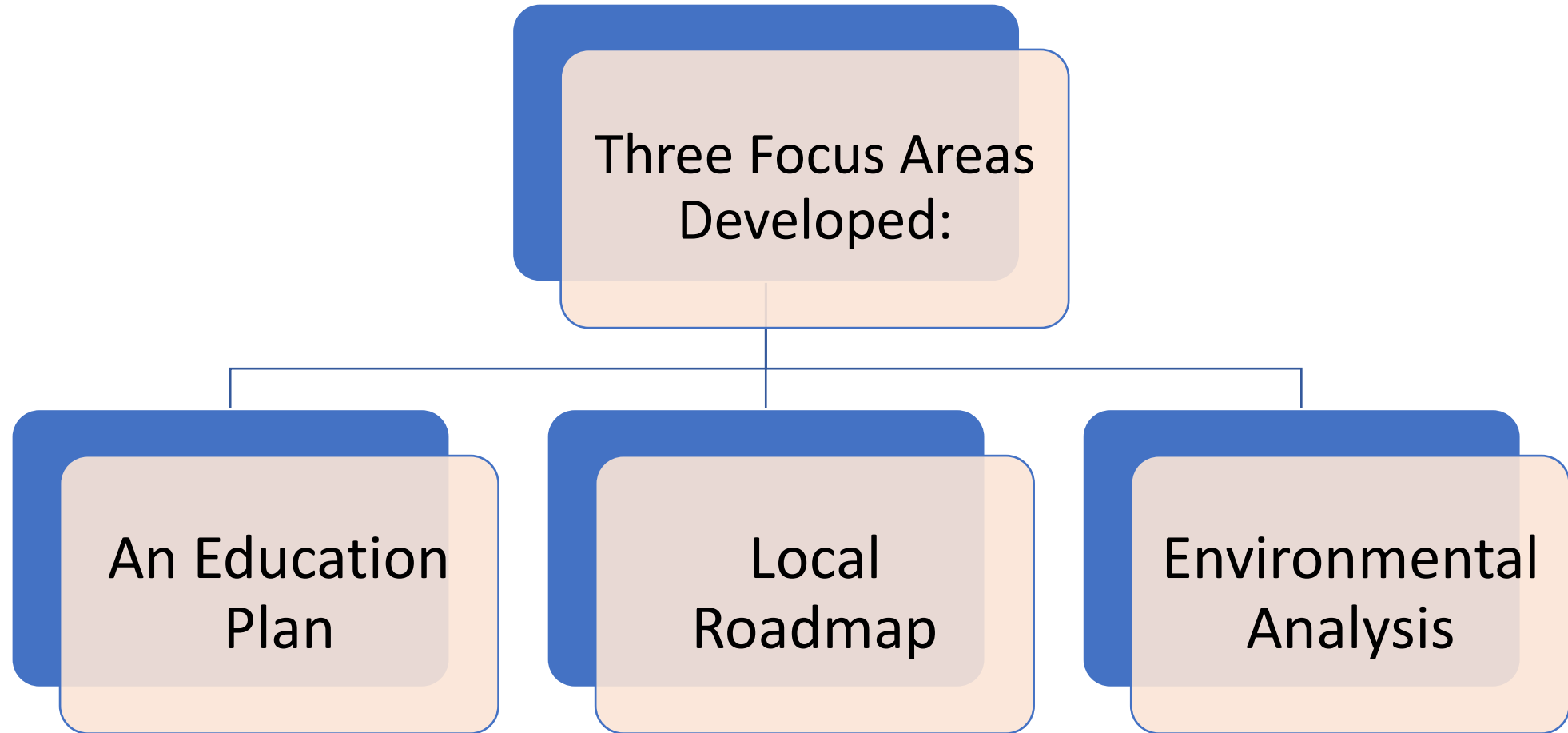
① Start presenting to display the poll results on this slide.

Activity

Where do we start?



Autism and the Dependency Courts Summit



Education Plan

Date	Autism Educational Session	Number of Participants
07/14/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: A Virtual Overview	795
07/20/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: A Virtual Overview	
07/28/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving Knowledge to Action-Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder	90
10/06/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving Knowledge to Action-Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (morning and afternoon sessions)	100
10/24/2022	Autism 101 Webinar for Child Welfare Professionals	100
12/02/2022	Virtual Advanced Session for Attorneys on Autism and Dependency Courts	268
12/05/2022	Philadelphia Environmental Analysis Findings Support Session	12
12/05/2022	Regional Autism Summit- Northeast Region	500
12/08/2022	Regional Autism Summit- Central Region	
04/20/2023	Regional Autism Summit- Western Region-Pittsburgh	100
06/02/2023	Regional Autism Summit- Western Region	70
Totals	11 Sessions	2035



Local County Roadmap

A step-by-step guide to assist counties in assessing local needs and implementing strategies to enhance the experience of children and parents diagnosed with ASD as they engage with the Child Dependency and Child Welfare Systems.

Environmental Analysis Tool

A tool to help identify opportunities for potential environmental and practice change at county courthouses and child welfare agencies with the goal of creating a more Autism-friendly experience for dependent children and their parents.



CPCMS Data

- Collected through the statewide dependency court data system
- Collects information, voluntarily provided, regarding persons self-reporting or diagnosed with Autism
- Provides court docket alerts for legal professionals working
- Allows courts to structure/schedule hearings in a manner that supports the respectful inclusion of persons with Autism
- Provides state data regarding the number of individuals with Autism being served by Dependency Courts.

Sensory Bags

- Resource created collaboratively with Autism Experts
- Provided during judicial officer and child welfare administrator educational sessions
- Provided during Regional Summits



Social Story

Potter County

The Courthouse



Inside the
Courtroom



When we are invited into the courtroom, I will see a lot of people. I will be asked to sit in a special spot. The judge will sit at the front of the courtroom. The judge will want to see me and ask me questions. That is because the judge wants to know me!



New Friends at the Courthouse

We may also make new friends at the courthouse.

Jasmine is a friendly dog who can sit with you during your court hearing.



My Trip to the Courthouse

Potter County



DO NOT
ENTER

W Third St

NO
LEFT
TURN

DO NOT
ENTER

NO
LEFT
TURN

Pine St

NO
TURN
ON
RED

Honorable Ryan Tira
*Court of Common Pleas
of Lycoming County*





Honorable Stephen Minor
*Court of Common Pleas of
Potter County*

*Chairman, Juvenile Court
Judges Commission*





**LISTEN.
PEOPLE START
TO HEAL
THE MOMENT THEY
FEEL HEARD.**



Jeff Love

Juvenile Probation Officer

Fayette County



Juvenile Justice Barriers

Education

- Juvenile Justice Professionals
- Police officers
- School Districts

Early Identification

- Prior to charges being filed
- Prior to YLS Category Determination



Adjudication

Consent Decree

Informal Adjustment Consent

Youth Commission

You can
make the
change





Questions

Thank you for your
attention and
participation!

Enjoy the rest of
your conference!

**“I am different,
not less.”**

—TEMPLE GRANDIN



2
0
2
4

State Roundtable Report: **Autism & the Dependency Courts**



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Justice Kevin M. Dougherty
Supreme Court of Pennsylvania

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Final Report

In September 2021, the State Roundtable (SRT) commissioned the Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce to examine ways to increase the awareness and responsiveness of children and parents diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The Taskforce, led by Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Kevin M. Dougherty, served as a subgroup to the larger Autism and the Courts Initiative, also led by Justice Dougherty. The Autism and the Courts Initiative aims to provide a more positive experience and fair justice for individuals with ASD entering all divisions of Pennsylvania's court system.

In an effort to have representation reflective of Pennsylvania's diversity, the Taskforce members were selected from rural and urban communities, all regions of the Commonwealth, and all Leadership Roundtables. The 32-member Taskforce includes Dependency Judges, Juvenile Court Hearing Officers, Attorneys, Children and Youth Administrators, and State partners. The Taskforce also included members with ASD lived experience.

Since the commission of the Taskforce, members have prioritized educating themselves and working together to create a statewide roll-out plan, provide guidance around ASD, and provide concrete tools for local use. Through these efforts, dependency professionals have increased their awareness and responsiveness to those with ASD, thereby creating a more positive experience for children and their families. The following section will briefly summarize the history of the Taskforce's work, followed by progress over the past year. Finally, the Autism and Dependency Courts Taskforce will ask to conclude its work.

History

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as *a developmental disability that can cause a wide range of challenges in social interaction, communication, and behavior. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), defines ASD as*

the occurrence of persistent impairments in social interaction and the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, or activities. As of March 2023, the new CDC estimate shows one in thirty-six (1:36) children are diagnosed with Autism. This is an increase from the previous estimate of one in forty-four (1:44). ASD was four times as prevalent among boys as among girls. Overall, ASD prevalence was similar across racial and ethnic groups.

In February 2020, at the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges, the issue of Autism and the Courts took center stage via a four-hour educational session. 186 Judges from across Pennsylvania attended the session. This session was the first time the issue of Autism was highlighted at the Conference.

In April 2020, following the success of the educational session, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) launched a statewide initiative focused on helping judges better understand and communicate with individuals with (ASD). The initiative, led by Supreme Court Justice Kevin M. Dougherty on behalf of the Court, was a monumental effort. The initiative was a first-of-its-kind partnership and hoped to provide practical guidance, best practices, and resources to judges managing cases involving an individual with ASD, as well as court information and services for families. No other state in the country or country in the world's judiciary has prioritized this issue system-wide. Given that reality, it is unsurprising that public participation and media coverage have been significant. Clearly, ASD is a diagnosis faced by many and needs additional awareness and support.

As a first step, Justice Dougherty led a series of virtual listening tours through one state roundtable and five regional roundtables. The roundtables were open to the public and included dialogue opportunities between panelists and public attendees. A total of 1,241 individuals attended the listening tours. Each roundtable's overarching goal was to understand better ASD and how it impacts a person's life experiences, particularly in the courtroom. The listening tours provided a forum to educate as well as collect input. The audience and panelists identified possible next steps to help improve the

judicial system for individuals diagnosed with ASD or Mental Health. Additional information regarding the state and regional roundtables can be found at the following link:
<https://www.pacourts.us/learn/autism-and-the-courts>

In July 2021, the Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) conducted a Pennsylvania Dependency Court Judges survey. The survey gathered information on whether children or parents with ASD attended dependency proceedings. **Eighty-two percent (82%) of responding judges indicated having hearings in which a person with ASD was present. One hundred percent (100%) of respondents reported that the individual diagnosed was a child. Thirty-eight percent (38%) of respondents indicated that the individual diagnosed was a parent.** Clearly, individuals with ASD were represented in the Dependency Court System. With this information, the Pennsylvania State Roundtable commissioned the Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce in September 2021 under the continued leadership of Justice Dougherty. The goal of the Taskforce work was to provide a positive dependency court experience for children and parents with ASD by increasing professional awareness and responsiveness to individuals with ASD.

2022 State Roundtable

The Autism and Dependency Courts Taskforce presented its first report at the 2022 State Roundtable. The report included the ASD education the Taskforce members received to make knowledgeable decisions and implement change in the dependency system. The education sessions included expert knowledge from medical, educational, and social service professionals and those with lived experience.

After receiving extensive education, the Taskforce began creating strategies and tools to enhance awareness and responsiveness of ASD across the state.

On March 29-31, 2022, the Taskforce attended an in-person Autism Summit. Taskforce members worked diligently throughout the Summit to create a strategic plan for Pennsylvania's dependency system, which included the following three areas:

1. **Autism and the Dependency Court’s Educational Rollout Plan:**

- A web-based overview of ASD for all professionals in the child welfare and dependency court system;
- An advanced in-person education for Judges, Juvenile Court Hearing Officers, and Child Welfare Administrators;
- A web-based advanced session for attorneys practicing cases in dependency and
- An educational video.

2. **Local County Roadmap** - A step-by-step guide to assist Local Children’s Roundtables in assessing local needs and implementing strategies to enhance the experience of children and parents diagnosed with ASD as they engage with the Child Dependency and Child Welfare Systems.

3. **Environmental Analysis Tool**—This tool helps identify opportunities for potential environmental and practice change at county courthouses and child welfare agencies to create a more Autism-friendly experience for dependent children and their parents.

Data

The Taskforce spent considerable time examining the need for data specific to Autism and the Dependency Courts. After extensive research and discussion, it became clear that Pennsylvania-specific dependency court data of this kind did not exist. After much discussion, it was determined that the only place to capture this level of data would be the Common Pleas Case Management System (CPCMS). As such, staff met with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Court’s Information Technology Director to begin creating this feature in CPCMS.

Based on the work completed in 2022, the State Roundtable approved the following Taskforce recommendations.

2022 Approved Recommendations

1. Approval and implementation of the Autism and the Dependency Courts Education Plan as outlined in the report;
2. Approval and distribution of the Environmental Analysis Tool to Leadership Roundtable Judges and Child Welfare Administrators;
3. Approval and distribution of the Local County Roadmap to Leadership Roundtable Judges and Child Welfare Administrators;
4. Continued analysis and development of strategies to improve the court and child welfare experience of children and families diagnosed with ASD.

2022-2023 State Roundtable

From June 2022 through June 2023, the Taskforce and Office of Children and Families in the Court's Staff worked diligently to execute the SRT-approved recommendations.

Education Plan

The Education Plan provided sessions to Judges, Juvenile Court Hearing Officers, Children and Youth Administrators, Dependency Attorneys, and various community and state partners (see chart below). These sessions, led by the Taskforce, including Regional Summits led by Dependency Judges on the Taskforce, have reached approximately 2035 participants. This level of education participation contributed to the significant increase in Autism awareness across the state.

Date	Autism Educational Session	Number of Participants
07/14/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: A Virtual Overview	795
07/20/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: A Virtual Overview	
07/28/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving Knowledge to Action-Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder	90

10/06/2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving Knowledge to Action-Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (morning and afternoon sessions)	100
10/24/2022	Autism 101 Webinar for Child Welfare Professionals	100
12/02/2022	Virtual Advanced Session for Attorneys on Autism and Dependency Courts	268
12/05/2022	Philadelphia Environmental Analysis Findings Support Session	12
12/05/2022	Regional Autism Summit- Northeast Region	500
12/08/2022	Regional Autism Summit- Central Region	
04/20/2023	Regional Autism Summit- Western Region- Pittsburgh	100
06/02/2023	Regional Autism Summit- Western Region	70
Totals	11 Sessions	2035

Local County Roadmap

The Honorable Ryan M. Tira, Court of Common Pleas of Lycoming County and Taskforce member, offered to test the Local County Roadmap before its distribution across the Commonwealth. With guidance from the Local County Roadmap, Judge Tira created the Lycoming County Autism Taskforce (LCAT). Through the LCAT, the Roadmap was tested and utilized for over six months. This testing led to several helpful adjustments to the final tool. After completing its test in Lycoming County, the Local County Roadmap was distributed to all Leadership Roundtable Judges, Child Welfare Administrators, and State Partners for distribution and use in their respective counties.

Environmental Analysis Tool

The Honorable Margaret Murphy, Administrative Judge of Philadelphia County Family Court and Taskforce member, led the testing process for the Environmental Analysis Tool. Dr. Wendy Ross, a national expert on Autism from Thomas Jefferson University, and her team of medical professionals conducted a weeklong assessment of different spaces throughout the Philadelphia Family Court. Dr. Ross and her team observed dependency court hearings in all courtrooms and with all judicial officers. They utilized the Environmental Analysis tool to assess the following spaces:

- Each courtroom

- Family waiting areas
- Entrance and exit space
- Security area
- Elevators
- Hallways
- Stairways and escalators

Upon completion of the Environmental Analysis assessment, Dr. Ross provided the entire Philadelphia Dependency Bench with an educational session to review the analysis findings and better understand how environmental factors impact behaviors and sensory issues for those with Autism. Finally, Dr. Ross and her team provided concluding guidance and suggestions to enhance the final revisions to the Environmental Analysis tool.

After completing its test in Philadelphia County, the Environmental Analysis Tool was distributed to all Leadership Roundtable Judges, Child Welfare Administrators, and State Partners for distribution and use in their respective counties.

Additional Tools: Sensory Bags and Court Social Stories

The Taskforce and OCFC staff created two additional resources, sensory bags, and court social stories, with guidance from Dr. Ross. The sensory bags and court social stories were highlighted and distributed during the July 2022 Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges' Dependency Education Session and the 2023 Spring Leadership Roundtable meetings.

Data

With the approval to create a feature in CPCMS to capture Autism data, Taskforce members worked collaboratively with the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Court's (AOPC) Information Technology Director to create this requested data point.

This data point is captured when it is determined that an individual is either ***diagnosed*** with Autism or ***self-reported*** to have Autism. This information is provided voluntarily by children or parents. The data includes children and parents who have a diagnosis from a professional, as well as those who self-report having ASD. This data, found under the CPCMS special considerations category, helps alert Judges and Juvenile Court Hearing Officers that an individual with Autism will be in the courtroom. The special considerations report (1058) and the Daily List report (3905) will show this information.

Specific needs or details can be added to the Case Details tab in CPCMS.

The data point will also enable dependency courts to understand better the number of individuals with Autism in their system. This can help support systemic changes, such as creating sensory rooms and purchasing specialized sensory items, which create a more Autism-friendly environment and increased access to justice.

The first Autism data report occurred on November 7, 2022. At that time, eight counties in the Commonwealth had begun collecting data, showing 23 individuals with either self-reported or diagnosed ASD. The next section of this report (2024 Progress and Updates) compares the first data report to the most recent data report on April 3, 2024, to reflect the progress.

Based on the work completed in 2022, the State Roundtable presented and approved the following Taskforce recommendations.

2023 Approved Recommendations

The Autism and the Dependency Court Taskforce respectfully submits to the Pennsylvania State Roundtable the following recommendations:

1. Approval to strongly encourage and support county implementation of the Local County Roadmap and the Environmental Analysis tools;
2. Continue analysis and development of strategies to improve the court and child welfare experience of children and families diagnosed with ASD.

2023-2024 Progress and Updates

Over the past year, the Autism and Dependency Courts Taskforce worked to implement the approved SRT 2023 recommendations and monitor progress.

Using the State Roundtable structure, OCFC was able to support the Autism work occurring at the county level. In the Fall of 2023 and Spring of 2024, CPCMS data, Local County Roadmap, Environmental Analysis Tool, and Court Social Story resources were distributed to all counties through the Leadership Roundtable structure.

During Leadership Roundtable meetings and through the outreach of the OCFC Judicial Analysts, it was learned that the education plan and tools created by the Taskforce continue to be used across the Commonwealth with natural momentum. Several counties, including Fayette, Franklin, Fulton, Lycoming, Juniata, and Perry, used the Education Plan beyond the dependency courts and child welfare agencies, including law enforcement, local prison staff, all court personnel, and community partners.

In July 2023, at the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges Conference, Justice Dougherty, Judge Ryan Tira, Court of Common Pleas of Lycoming County, Shane Carey, Judicial Administrator, Pennsylvania Supreme Court, Chambers of Justice Dougherty, and Sandra Moore, Director of the Office of Children and Families in the Courts, presented the work of Pennsylvania’s Autism Initiative and the Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce, in Baltimore, Maryland. Pennsylvania remains the only known state in the country to prioritize Autism statewide and system-wide throughout the judiciary.

Data

CPCMS data collection for Autism was launched in the fall of 2022. As mentioned in the previous section, this feature alerts the court that an individual with Autism will be in the courtroom. Having this information prior to the hearing allows the court to make special accommodations, if needed, for the individual.

Since data collection began on November 7, 2022, there has been an increase from 8 to 32 counties collecting data on individuals diagnosed or self-reported to have autism. As you can see from the chart below, there has also been an increase from 23 to 421 individuals identified as having autism (see chart below). Identifying individuals with ASD and their needed accommodations provides an opportunity for a more comfortable and fair court experience.

CPCMS Data as of 4/3/24

County	Category	11/7/2022	4/3/2024	Data Increases
Allegheny	Autism	0	18	18

Beaver	Autism	3	6	3
Berks	Autism	0	1	1
Bradford	Autism	0	2	2
Bucks	Autism	0	24	24
Chester	Autism	0	5	5
Clarion	Autism	1	1	0
Clinton	Autism	2	7	5
Cumberland	Autism	6	23	20
Delaware	Autism	7	34	27
Fayette	Autism	0	17	17
Fulton	Autism	0	1	1
Huntingdon	Autism	0	3	3
Jefferson	Autism	0	13	13
Juniata	Autism	0	1	1
Lackawanna	Autism	2	5	3
Lehigh	Autism	0	2	2
Luzerne	Autism	0	26	26
Lycoming	Autism	0	27	27
Mifflin	Autism	0	1	1
Montgomery	Autism	0	16	16
Montour	Autism	0	1	1
Northumberland	Autism	0	1	1
Perry	Autism	0	1	1
Philadelphia	Autism	1	148	147
Schuylkill	Autism	0	1	1
Somerset	Autism	0	2	2
Tioga	Autism	0	4	4
Warren	Autism	0	1	1
Washington	Autism	0	3	3
Westmoreland	Autism	0	1	1
York	Autism	1	25	24
Total		23	421	398

Currently, all CPCMS data reports for autism can only be pulled through a special request to AOPC. AOPC is currently exploring ways to create a report so counties can pull the data individually. The ability to run county-specific reports will help counties monitor local progress more frequently.

Autism Benchcard

Finally, to support changes in courtroom practice, the Taskforce created an Autism Benchcard. This Benchcard will provide a quick reference for judges and hearing officers while on the bench. The expertise of the judges and Taskforce members was combined with two resources from Autism Services, Education, Resources and Training Collaborative (ASERT), “What I Am Telling You” and “Inclusive Language: Considerations for Use,” to create this Benchcard.

An initial draft of the Benchcard was shared at the Spring 2024 Leadership Roundtable meetings and the 2024 Spring Juvenile Court Hearing Officers Education Session to gather feedback. The Benchcard was then sent to the Taskforce for final comment and approval. The finalized Benchcard can be seen at the end of this report under ***Appendix A: Autism Benchcard***. If approved by the SRT, the Benchcard will be provided to the Benchbook Committee for consideration and inclusion in the Pennsylvania Dependency Benchbook, 4th edition. In addition to the Benchcard, the two resources from ASERT can be found at the end of this report under ***Appendix B: What I am Telling You*** and ***Appendix C: Inclusive Language***.

Celebrating Success!

The Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce began its work under the leadership of Justice Kevin M. Dougherty and the foundation of the Autism and the Courts Initiative. This leadership, along with the dedicated members of the Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce, Leadership Roundtable Judges and Administrators, State Partners, and the committed AOPC and OCFC staff, are responsible for the tremendous progress made in Pennsylvania’s Dependency System to increase awareness of and responsiveness to children and parents with ASD.

As of April 3, 2024:

- Approximately 2035 professionals in the Dependency System participated in training
- 11 counties are using the Local County Roadmap
- 14 counties have used the Environmental Analysis Tool
- 19 counties have “My Trip to the Courthouse” Social Story
- 12 counties have created Courthouse Calming/Sensory Rooms
- 25 counties are using Sensory Bags in their courtrooms

- 24 counties have Autism as a Local Children’s Roundtable priority.
- 32 counties are collecting CPCMS data consistently

A complete timeline of the Taskforce’s successes can be found at the end of this report under ***Appendix D: Autism Accomplishments***.

In Conclusion:

As this report describes, much has been accomplished in a very short time. Even so, Autism and Dependency Courts Taskforce members recognize that ongoing work to support persons with ASD must continue. As such, Taskforce members will continue to network with their colleagues to encourage positive changes for children and parents with ASD. All resources, tools, and reports will continue to be available on the OCFC webpage. OCFC Judicial Analysts will continue to support counties in implementing the resources and tools created by the Taskforce.

With those ongoing actions, Taskforce members believe all SRT charges have been completed and that no further Taskforce work remains. As such, the Taskforce is recommending sunseting the group.

2024 SRT Recommendations

The Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce respectfully submits to the Pennsylvania State Roundtable the following recommendations:

2024 Recommendations:

1. The Autism Benchcard be provided to the Benchbook Committee for consideration of including into the Benchbook 4th edition; and
2. The Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce sunset, as all charges have been met.

The Taskforce would like to thank the State Roundtable and Professionals across the state for your dedication and commitment to improving the experiences of individuals with Autism.



Autism (ASD) in the Dependency Courtroom

*“When you meet one person with Autism,
you’ve met one person with Autism.” ~Dr. Stephen*

Things to Consider

Does anyone on your docket today have ASD?

- ◆ Ask my staff
- ◆ Ask attorneys (Guardian ad Litem, Solicitor, Parent Attorney)
- ◆ Check CPCMS (Diagnosed or Self-Reported)

Do you have a sensory room or sensory items available in your courtroom?

- ◆ noise-reduction headphones
- ◆ fidget toys
- ◆ sunglasses
- ◆ comfort/therapy dogs- if the child feels safe with dogs

Is the child or parent displaying behaviors related to ASD (refer to the other side of this Benchcard)?

- ◆ poor eye contact
- ◆ appear distracted
- ◆ not answering questions
- ◆ fidgeting, rocking, or flapping motions
- ◆ overly agreeable when asked questions

Is the child or parent receiving any services related to Autism?

- ◆ Individualized Education Plan (IEP) at School
- ◆ County Mental Health/Intellectual Disabilities

Words Matter

Person with Autism



Autistic Person

Treatment



Supports/Services/
Accommodations

High/Low Functioning



Low/High Support
Needs

Disorder



Condition/Disability



WHAT AM I TELLING YOU?

A GUIDE FOR JUSTICE PROFESSIONALS ABOUT INDIVIDUALS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Created with support and reviewed by individuals on the spectrum.

WHAT YOU SEE/HEAR	WHAT YOU THINK	WHAT AM I TELLING YOU?
Little to no eye contact	Something to hide Trying to be deceptive	Eye contact makes me anxious and is difficult for me. I cannot look at you if you want me to hear and understand you. I may need a break from eye contact.
Aloof, inappropriate comments Outbursts or monotone speech	No remorse, rude Not listening, not paying attention	I do not understand the social implications of how I am speaking to you. I tell it like it is.
Mimicking what you are saying	He is mocking me or not taking me seriously	I have to repeat what you say to try to comprehend it and sometimes repeating things helps me calm down.
Unusual facial expressions and body language Excessive movement	Using drugs or other substances, has an intellectual disability, or appears rude	Autism causes my body to behave and react differently. I am trying to listen to you and do what you ask but sometimes my body won't let me. It is more difficult for me to communicate using "typical" facial expressions and body language.
No immediate response or no response at all	Not listening, not caring	I heard you but I need extra processing time. Please slow down, allow me time to answer your question before asking again, and repeat yourself as necessary.
Plugging my ears, closing my eyes	Non-compliance	It is too bright and loud in here, my senses are overloaded and my flight or fight response is in overdrive. Please give me some time to calm down.
Not wanting to be touched	Hiding Something	Even the lightest touch hurts me. Please warn me if you are going to touch me.
Refusing to comply	Deceptive, Uncooperative	My world is very chaotic. Routine helps make the world calmer. When my routine is disrupted I become very agitated and anxious. Please give me time to adjust to the change.
Very agreeable, admits to anything	Guilty	Making friends is hard. I have learned that doing what others want makes having friends easier. Sometimes I agree or admit to things because I have been told that that is the way to get along with other people.
Repeating the same directions numerous times	Not Listening	I learn better by seeing. Can you please show me what you want me to do?

WHAT AM I TELLING YOU?

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Created with support and reviewed by individuals on the spectrum.

WHAT YOU SEE/HEAR	WHAT YOU THINK	WHAT AM I TELLING YOU?
Little to no eye contact	Something to hide Trying to be deceptive	Eye contact makes me anxious and is difficult for me. I cannot look at you if you want me to hear and understand you. I may need a break from eye contact.
Aloof, inappropriate comments Outbursts or monotone speech	No remorse, rude Not listening, not paying attention	I do not understand the social implications of how I am speaking to you. I tell it like it is.
Mimicking what you are saying	He is mocking me or not taking me seriously	I have to repeat what you say to try to comprehend it and sometimes repeating things helps me calm down.
Unusual facial expressions and body language Excessive movement	Using drugs or other substances, has an intellectual disability, or appears rude	Autism causes my body to behave and react differently. I am trying to listen to you and do what you ask but sometimes my body won't let me. It is more difficult for me to communicate using "typical" facial expressions and body language.
No immediate response or no response at all	Not listening, not caring	I heard you but I need extra processing time. Please slow down, allow me time to answer your question before asking again, and repeat yourself as necessary.
Plugging my ears, closing my eyes	Non-compliance	It is too bright and loud in here, my senses are overloaded and my flight or fight response is in overdrive. Please give me some time to calm down.
Not wanting to be touched	Hiding Something	Even the lightest touch hurts me. Please warn me if you are going to touch me.
Refusing to comply	Deceptive, Uncooperative	My world is very chaotic. Routine helps make the world calmer. When my routine is disrupted I become very agitated and anxious. Please give me time to adjust to the change.
Very agreeable, admits to anything	Guilty	Making friends is hard. I have learned that doing what others want makes having friends easier. Sometimes I agree or admit to things because I have been told that that is the way to get along with other people.
Repeating the same directions numerous times	Not Listening	I learn better by seeing. Can you please show me what you want me to do?



Inclusive Language: Considerations for Use

Created with support and reviewed by individuals on the spectrum.

Words matter and using respectful and inclusive language can make a big difference. The goal of inclusive language is to respect people across race, class, gender and ability. This is also true when discussing Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Each autistic person experiences the world in a different way. This includes how they think, interact with the sensory world around them, communicate, and more. Being respectful of these differences through the use of inclusive language can have a positive impact on everyone.

It is also important to avoid ableist language. Ableist language assumes disabled people are not as good as nondisabled people. This is harmful as it excludes, devalues, and ignores disabled people.

Below are some common phrases that can be adjusted to be more inclusive. These phrases are preferred by many in the autism community, but autistic individuals may have specific preferences that are different from these examples. As with anyone, asking an autistic person their preferences should take priority.

INSTEAD OF.....	TRY THIS...
autism symptoms	autistic characteristics/traits/features
person with autism	autistic person
deficit	difference
treatment	supports/services/strategies/accommodations
person with a disability	disabled person
suffers from autism	impact/effect of autism
normal	neurotypical/non-autistic/person without autism
typical person/typical peer	non-autistic person/typically developing peer



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Instead of.....	Try this...
differently abled	disabled
different ability	disability
mental retardation	intellectual disability
high functioning	low support needs
low functioning	high support needs
autism as a “puzzle”	autism as a part of neurodiversity (people interact and experience the world differently)
cure	supports/accommodations/quality of life outcomes
disorder	condition/disability
non-verbal	non-speaking
special interests	focused interests
at risk for autism	increased likelihood of autism
burden of autism	impact/effect of autism



Here are some examples of what NOT to say or assume:

“You don’t look autistic”.

Autism is a broad spectrum and impacts everyone differently and because you can’t “see” autism, it may surprise you when someone discloses they are autistic. This is not a compliment. You should respect the individual who shares their diagnosis and if you need to say anything, ask if there is any way you can support or accommodate them in that moment.

“You seem normal.”

Again, each autistic individual is unique and the word normal is offensive. If you are surprised by someone who shares their autism diagnosis rather than comment, you could explain that you know very little about autism and ask how you can support or accommodate them.

“You must be good at math/music/art”.

This perpetuates an often misunderstood stereotype. Ask instead, “What are your interests?”

“What’s it like to be autistic?”

Instead you could ask, “From your experience where can accommodations and the disability experience be improved, where are people and places doing a good job?”

Asking a question about the autistic person to a parent, caregiver or support professional when the autistic individual is standing right there. Presume competence.



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AUTISM AND THE DEPENDENCY COURTS - TIMELINE

2021		
Date	Event/Activity	Description
July 2021	Office of Children and Families in the Courts (OCFC) conducted a PA Dependency Courts Survey to gather information regarding whether children or parents with Autism attended dependency proceedings.	82% of responding judges indicated having hearings that included a person with Autism. 100% of respondents reported that the individual diagnosed was a child. 38% of respondents indicated the individual diagnosed as a parent.
Sept. 23, 2021	State Roundtable commissioned the Autism and Dependency Courts Taskforce led by Justice Kevin Dougherty.	The Taskforce was asked to examine how the dependency court system could become more aware and responsive to the needs of children and parents diagnosed with ASD.
Nov.9, 21	First Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce meeting	<p>Meetings occur monthly For the next several meetings, the Taskforce gained education on Autism. Presentations included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autism 101, Kate Hooven, ASERT <u>Evaluations, Services, and Support Available through the Education System</u>, Stephanie Hoesly, M.Ed., BCBA (Board Certified Behavioral Analyst) Intermediate Unit 1; Fayette, Greene, and Washington; Training Consultation Staff specializing in Autism/Behavior; Trauma-Informed Trainer <u>Medical Evaluations and Diagnosis of ASD</u>, Dr. Scott Myers, MD and Cora Taylor, Ph.D., Geisinger Medical System
Dec. 2021	Taskforce members began collecting local Autism Resources. OCFC staff created a Regional List of Providers and Resources for Autism	All Autism Taskforce members provided a list of available providers and resources in their local and surrounding communities. This list was compiled and organized by region and shared with ASERT.

2022		
Date	Event/Activity	Description
March 29-31, 2022	Autism Summit for the Autism Taskforce	<p><i>Presentations included:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Neurodiversity</u>: Dr. Wendy Ross and her team at Thomas Jefferson University • <u>Lived Experience: A Parent Panel</u>: Police Officer Roz Talley, Philadelphia, David Fine, Esquire, Co-Founder of the Vista School for Autistic Children, and David Knauss, Retired State Worker • <u>Autism Service Cliff Panel</u>: Dianne Malley, Director of Transition Pathways; Michele Walsh, Executive Assistant to Deputy Secretary Jon Rubin; Scott Talley, Director, Bureau of Children's Behavioral Health Services, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, and Dr. Stacy Nonnemacher, Clinical Director, Bureau of Supports for Autism and Special Populations <p><i>Work by the Taskforce members:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a Statewide Education Plan • Creation of a Local Roadmap Tool • Creation of an Environmental Analysis Tool
June 6-7, 2022	PA State Roundtable Meeting	<p>State Roundtable approved the recommendations of the Autism and Dependency Courts Taskforce.</p> <p>Recommendations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approval and implementation of the Autism and the Dependency Courts Education Plan as outlined in the report. 2. Approval and distribution of the Environmental Analysis Tool to Leadership Roundtable Judges and Child Welfare Administrators. 3. Approval and distribution of the Local County Roadmap to Leadership Roundtable Judges and Administrators 4. Continued analysis and development of strategies to improve the court and child welfare experience of children and families diagnosed with ASD.

July 14, 2022	Autism and the Dependency Courts: A Virtual Overview	<p>Education Plan - OCFC hosted a Statewide Virtual session open to dependency system professionals Presentations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Autism 101</u>, Kate Hooven, ASERT • <u>Lived Experience: A Glimpse into the Life of Autism</u>, Honorable Stephen Minor, Court of Common Pleas of Potter County, Kim Bathgate, Assistant Director of Communications, AOPC, Morgan Bathgate, Student, and David Fine, Esq. K&L Gates, LLP, Harrisburg
July 28, 2022	PA State Trial Judges Dependency Luncheon	<p>Education Plan - OCFC staff facilitated a session for Dependency Judges Presentation: <u>Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving from Knowledge to Action - Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder</u>, Dr. Wendy Ross, Thomas Jefferson University</p> <p>Participants were provided a template social story, “My Trip to the Courthouse,” and example sensory item bags.</p>
Aug. 2022	Began to work with the AOPC Information Technology Department to develop CPCMS data collection for dependency proceedings.	<p>This data point will be captured under special considerations to alert judges and JCHO that special accommodations may be needed to support individuals with Autism.</p> <p>The data point will also enable dependency courts at the county level to understand better the number of individuals with Autism in their hearings. This can help support system changes such as creating sensory rooms, purchasing specialized seating, etc.</p>
Sept. 2022	Environmental Analysis of the Philadelphia Family Courthouse and testing of the Autism Taskforce’s Environmental Analysis Tool	OCFC staff facilitated the testing of the Environmental Analysis Tool by Dr. Wendy Ross and her team at Thomas Jefferson University.

Sept. 2022	Testing of the Local Roadmap Tool	Honorable Ryan Tira, Court of Common Pleas, Lycoming County- began a Local Autism Taskforce and tested the Local Roadmap Tool for functionality.
Sept. 2022	Leadership Roundtable Statewide meetings	Provided updates on Autism Taskforce work and shared instructions on CPCMS special considerations, template social stories, and the first draft of Local Roadmap and Environmental Analysis tools.
Oct. 2022	CPCMS data collection dropdown was released	CPCMS special consideration category was added to alert dependency judges and JCHO that a person with diagnosed or self-reported Autism will be attending a hearing and allow for accommodations within the courtroom.
Oct. 6, 2022	Fall Juvenile Court Hearing Officer Education Session	<p>Education Plan - OCFC hosted a Session for Dependency Court Hearing Officers (a repeat of that provided to judges in July)</p> <p>Presentation: <u>Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving from Knowledge to Action - Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder</u>, Dr. Wendy Ross, Thomas Jefferson University</p> <p>Participants were provided a template social story, "My Trip to the Courthouse," and example sensory item bags.</p>
Oct. 6, 2022	Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators (PCYA) quarterly meeting Presentation	<p>Education Plan - Children and Youth Administrators</p> <p>Presentation: <u>Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving from Knowledge to Action - Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder</u>, Dr. Wendy Ross, Thomas Jefferson University</p> <p>Participants were provided a template social story, "My Trip to the Courthouse," and example sensory item bags.</p>

Dec. 2, 2022	Advanced Session for Attorneys on Autism and Dependency Courts – Virtual	<p>Education Plan – Virtual Session open to solicitors, parent attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, and Child Counsel</p> <p>Presentation: <u>Autism and the Dependency Courts: Moving from Knowledge to Action</u></p> <p><u>Fostering an Inclusive Environment for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder</u>, Dr. Wendy Ross, Thomas Jefferson University</p> <p><i>*This training was adapted to be specifically for attorneys.</i></p>
Dec. 5, 2022	Regional Autism Summit, Northeast Region, hosted by Lackawanna and Luzerne counties	<p>Education Plan - Local level Presentations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Autism 101</u>, Kaitlin Koffer Miller is the Regional Director of the Autism Services, Education, Resources, & Training Collaborative (ASERT) Eastern Region and the co-director of the Policy Impact Project at the AJ Drexel Autism Institute. • <u>Autism Spectrum Disorder: Diagnosis and Interventions</u>, Dr. Bernadine Suppa
Dec. 8, 2022	Individualized Autism Support Session for the Philadelphia Dependency Court System highlighted practical ways to implement the recommendations identified through the Autism Environmental Analysis tool.	<p>Presenter: Dr. Wendy Ross, Thomas Jefferson University</p> <p>Participants: Dependency court judges, juvenile court hearing officers and court staff.</p>
Dec. 8, 2022	Regional Autism Summit, Central Region, hosted by Lycoming, Snyder, and Union counties	<p>Education Plan- Local level Presentations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Autism 101</u>, Lindy Mishler, MS, Clinical Consultant for the Bureau of Supports for Autism and Special Populations, Office of Developmental Programs • <u>Autism Spectrum Disorder: Diagnosis and Interventions</u>, Dr. Bernadine Suppa <p>The participants were from various community organizations, including courthouse personnel, child welfare, juvenile probation, and other community partner organizations, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and various service providers.</p>

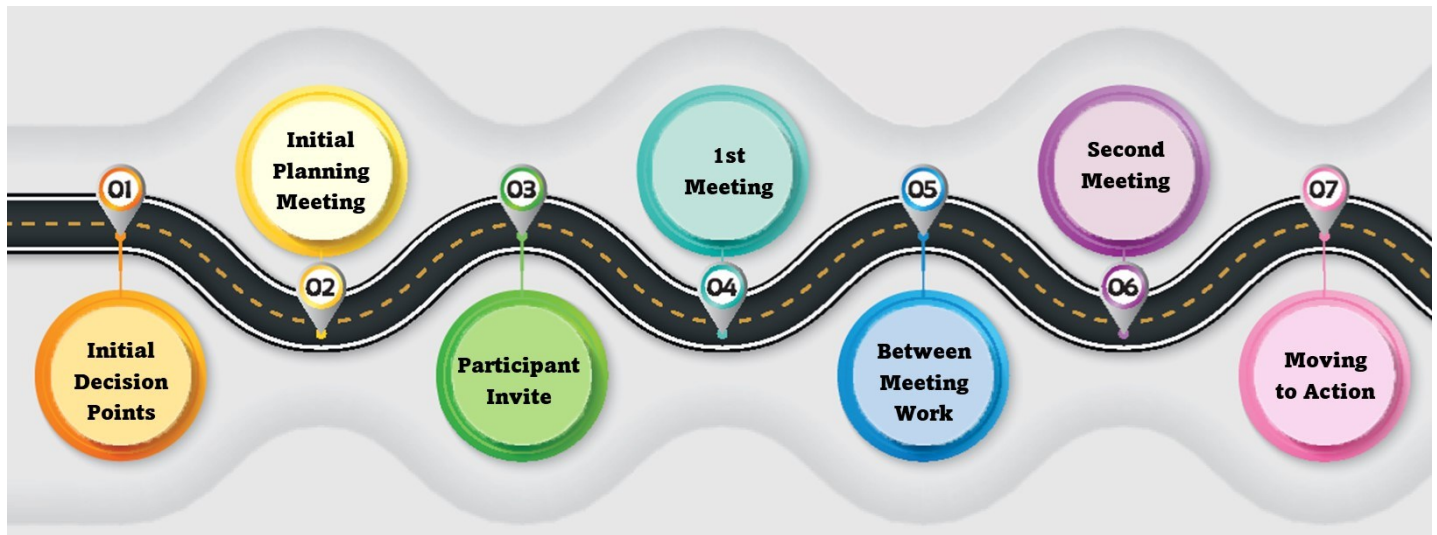
		<i>** At the two Regional Summits, an estimated 500 participants attended both trainings. This includes a combined 26 different counties and 60 different organizations. The participants were from various community organizations, including courthouse personnel, child welfare, juvenile probation, and other community partner organizations, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters and various service providers.</i>
2023		
Date	Event/Activity	Description
January 2023	Began planning for two Western Regional Autism Summits	April 20, 2023- Western Regional Summit in Pittsburgh, hosted by Allegheny County June 2, 2023- Western Regional Summit in Southpointe, hosted by Beaver and Fayette counties.
January 2023	Social Stories	Provided Taskforce members with county-specific social stories. Encouraged each Taskforce member to make sure their county has a social story.
Feb. 23, 2023	PA Conference of State Trial Judges - Dependency Luncheon	The session focused on using data to inform and guide dependency court system reform. Judge Tira reviewed Autism Data and how he used the data to support those with Autism.
March 2023	Leadership Roundtable Statewide meetings	Provided updates on Autism Taskforce work, shared information on CPCMS special considerations, and provided example social stories encouraging all counties to create them with OCFC assistance. Also distributed finalized Local County Roadmap and Environmental Analysis tools.

April 20, 2023	Western Regional Summit	Hosted by Allegheny County in Pittsburgh
June 2, 2023	Western Regional Summit	Hosted by Beaver and Fayette Counties in Southpointe/Washington
July 17-18, 2023	NCJFCJ 86 th Annual Conference	The Honorable Kevin Dougherty, Justice Supreme Court of PA, Shane Carey, Office of Justice Dougherty, the Honorable Ryan Tira, Court of Common Pleas, Lycoming County, and Sandy Moore, Director of OCFC, presented on the Autism Spectrum Disorder and Child Dependency Court: Strategies to Create a Knowledgeable, Inclusive, and Just System.
September 2023	Leadership Roundtables (LRT) data collection and monitoring	All LRTs were asked four questions to collect data regarding Autism awareness and the use of Autism Tools, as in sensory toys and sensory rooms.
2024		
Date	Event/Activity	Description
April 2024	Leadership Roundtables	All LRTs were presented with a DRAFT of the Autism Benchcard for review and suggestions.
May 2024	Juvenile Court Hearing Officer Education Session	The Hearing Officers were presented with a DRAFT of the Autism Benchcard for review and suggestions.



Autism & the Dependency System

County Roadmap



What is the County Roadmap?

The Autism & the Dependency System County Roadmap is a step-by-step process that counties can use to understand, identify, assess, and enhance services for persons with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). While focused on abused & neglected children and their families, this Roadmap can be adapted for a broader population.

How should the Roadmap be used?

The Roadmap is a guide for discussion, learning, and planning. The Roadmap is best used in a multi-disciplinary team planning process that includes a variety of perspectives. The Roadmap was designed following the process used by the State Roundtable's Autism and the Dependency Courts Taskforce.

Who should be included in the Local Autism Taskforce?

Because ASD covers such a large span of possible challenges and strengths, counties are encouraged to be inclusive in their Multi-disciplinary Team membership. Additionally, because the Roadmap's focus is on improving the experience of individuals in the child welfare and child dependency system, the team's leadership should come from the highest possible person in both the Court and Child Welfare systems. To the extent possible, team members should be decision-makers in the county. When possible, these leaders and multi-disciplinary team members should hold this issue as one of their priorities and volunteer for this work.

It is highly recommended that all the following perspectives be included in local teams:

- ⇒ Court Leadership: Judge (with authority to make system/policy changes)
- ⇒ Child Welfare Leadership: CYS Director
- ⇒ Legal Professionals: Guardians ad Litem, Parent Advocates, Solicitors, Hearing Officers, Court Administrators, Bailiffs/Sheriff Deputy (court security staff), Tip Staff
- ⇒ Child Welfare Professionals: Caseworkers, Supervisors, Managers

Team members suggestions might include, but are not limited to, the following:

Leadership, knowledge experts & persons with lived autism experience:

- ⇒ Child Welfare Independent Living staff
- ⇒ Autism Services
- ⇒ Mental Health
- ⇒ Intellectual Disabilities
- ⇒ Education (Special Ed, Alternative Schools)
- ⇒ Persons with ASD
- ⇒ Parents of children with ASD
- ⇒ Police (Pennsylvania State Police, Municipal Police)
- ⇒ Juvenile Probation

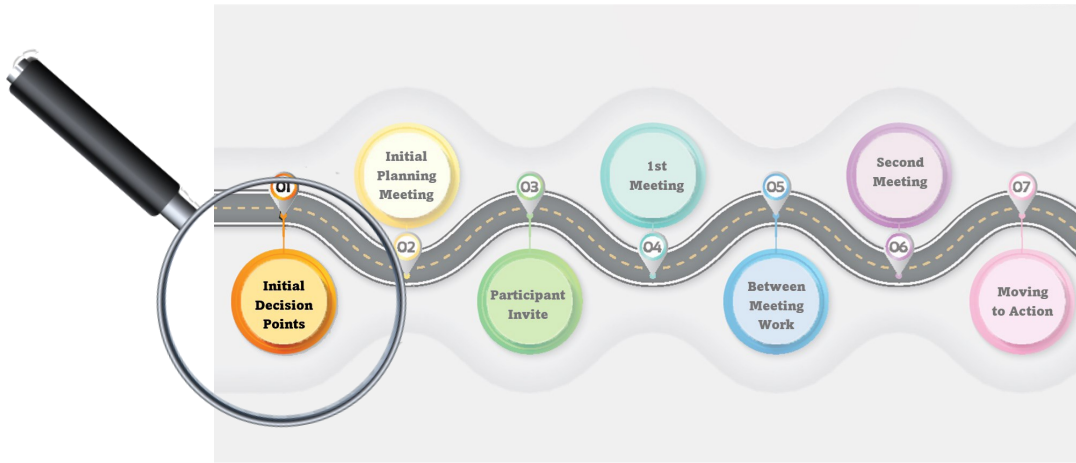
Other possible perspectives: The list below identifies views that would be helpful in the work. These individuals can be but do not have to be members of the multi-disciplinary team, but their perspectives should be shared with the team.

- ⇒ Commissioners/County Executive
- ⇒ Substance Use Experts
- ⇒ Pediatricians/Medical Societies
- ⇒ Domestic Relations
- ⇒ Court Administration
- ⇒ Transportation Representatives



Step-By-Step

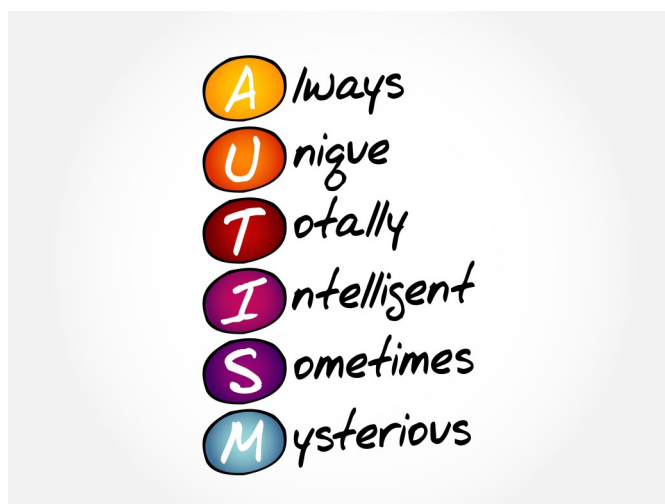
Step #1 – Initial Decision Points



These initial decisions will likely be made by the Judge and Child Welfare Administrator

- Do we know what Autism is?
- Do we know how many children or parents involved in the child welfare and/or dependency system are diagnosed with ASD?
- We know this is a statewide issue, but is it a priority for our county?

Once the decision is made to prioritize this issue in the county, proceed to step #2.



Step #2 – Initial Planning Meeting



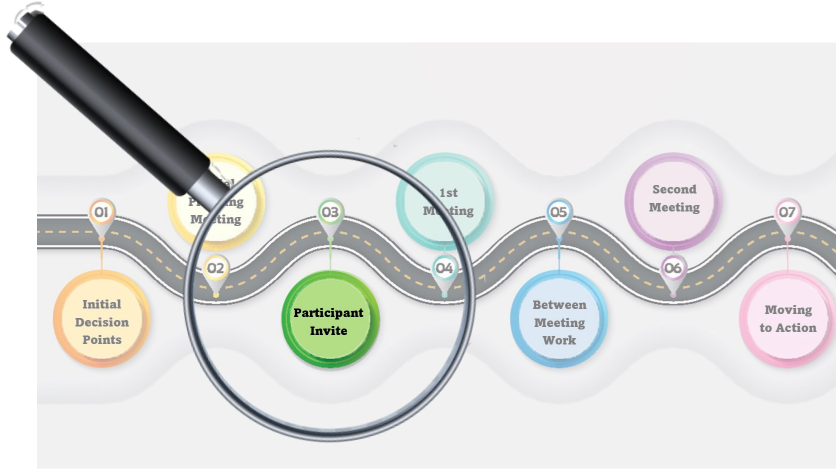
This initial planning meeting is for the Team Leaders, and a select number of persons identified help initiate the process. At a minimum, this group should include the judge, child welfare administrator, an autism expert, and staff person(s) identified to facilitate the work.

Initial decision points for this group:

- Do we know what Autism is?
- What available autism data do we have specific to children and families in our county, our child welfare agency, our dependency courts, and our schools?
- Will this group be a sub-group of our Local Children's Roundtable?
- Using the list on page two of this guide, do we want to identify specific individuals for this work, or do we want to do an open invitation and see who expresses interest? (see example email)
- What is our vision and mission Statement?
- What are our initial goals/outcomes that support our vision and mission?
- When do we want to hold our first meeting?
- How often should we meet?
- How long should each meeting be?
- Do we want to hold virtual or in-person meetings?
- If virtual, who will set up the meetings?
- If in-person, who will host the meeting space?
- Will our work focus on child welfare and dependency court or be more expansive?

Once the group has at least initial answers to the above items, move on to Step #3.

Step #3 – Invitation to Participate



- Invite participants to a meeting (see example email/letter). This invitation is best coming from the judge and child welfare administrator if possible.
- Create an agenda for the first meeting. Please keep it simple. (see example 1st meeting agenda)
- Decide who will lead the meeting or specific agenda discussion items.



Step #4 – First Meeting



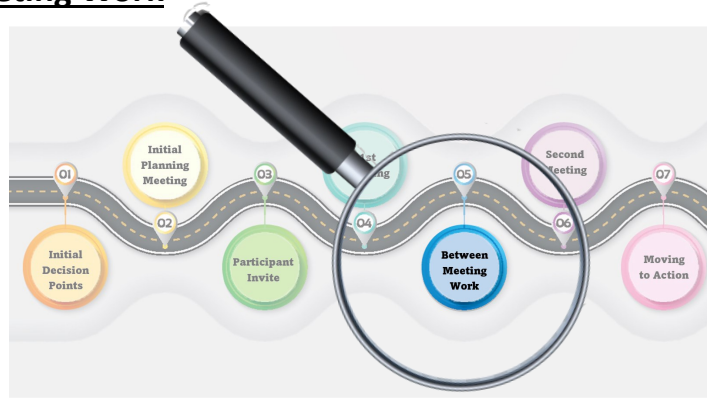
- Hold the meeting.
- Explain the focus of the group: vision, mission, and initial goals. (see examples)
- Explain why team members were selected: their interest, their influence, their knowledge, their ability to get things done, etc.
- Explain the expectations of team members. Two of the most significant include being open to learning and different perspectives; and mandatory attendance of members. Your work will build from one meeting to the next. Missing meetings will slow your progress.
- First, seek to understand. There is a tendency to jump to solutions before being clear on the issue. Resist doing that. First, seek to understand.
- Gain a sense of team members' Autism understanding (encourage the safe space concept/rule in the meeting. No question is off-limits. We are all learning together.) Many will not fully understand Autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and that's okay.

- Encourage open discussion regarding how persons with ASD experience agencies and courts (or other entities, depending on the scope of your team's work).
- Share the ideas generated in Step 2 (2). Make any changes needed with the larger group's input.
- Encourage the concept of this being a shared learning/growing experience. Gather ideas for future education of team members.
- Assign a task for team members – Ask each team member to identify autism services available in the county or used by children/families even if the service is in another county. Ask team members to provide this information to an identified staff person before the next meeting.
- This assignment has two purposes. It gets team members vested in the work immediately with a request that isn't overly time-consuming or burdensome. It provides valuable information regarding what services, supports, and gaps may exist.

Provide the next meeting date, time, and location.



Step #5 – Between Meeting Work



Begin the development of a County Specific Resource Catalogue

- The assigned staff person creates a list of services identified by team members to be shared at the next meeting.

Add additional members, if needed, based on meeting #1 discussions

Identify education topics and speakers - Keep this short, no more than 15 minutes of your meeting time. This limited presentation time is essential. You want to enhance your team's knowledge, but you do not want your meetings to become education sessions solely. This group is about understanding and implementing strategies to help children and parents with ASD. Example meeting educational topics might include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Autism 101 – What is it?
- Autism and our Schools
- How is Autism Diagnosed?
- What happens when children turn 18 or 21?
- What do parents of children with Autism have to tell us?

Create the next meeting agenda

Send meeting reminder and agenda (do this about one week before the next meeting)

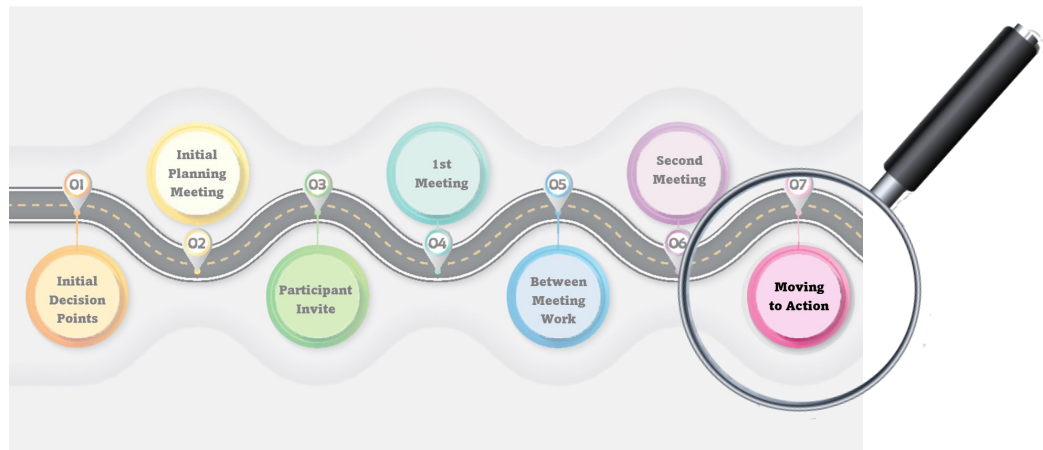
Step #6 – Second Meeting



The agenda for your second and subsequent meetings will likely come naturally from your first meeting. The process, topics, and priorities should be based on the information you gather locally. Caution: Do not move on to solutions or strategies until the team fully understands the challenges. (see example second meeting agenda)



Step #7 – Moving to Action



Once you have a good idea regarding services, supports, gaps, and challenges for individuals with ASD in your county systems, it's time to determine what you can do to enhance the experience of individuals with ASD.

Your team must move to action beyond simply learning or discussing the issues.

Goals and action that are doable, measurable, and successful motivates team members.

Depending on the size of your team, select one or two (no more than that) actions that can be easily accomplished and will have a significantly positive impact on individuals with ASD and their experience with the child welfare agency and court.

Examples of Action might include:

- Education for child welfare and dependency system professionals
- Education for community members
- A forum to hear from persons with ASD
- Conducting an Environmental Analysis of your child welfare agency and court
- Developing a comfort dog program
- Developing a peer support program
- Implementing a process to collect data

Monitor and measure the impact of the actions you implement.

Environmental Analysis Tool

This Analysis Tool is intended for Local Children's Roundtables led by the Lead Dependency Judge and Children and Youth Administrator to improve the experiences of children and parents diagnosed with Autism within the dependency system. Opening communication and making simple changes to the physical environment can lead to tremendous success for everyone within the dependency court system.

The Autism and Dependency Court Taskforce created this tool to promote systemic reform across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The options, strategies, and guidelines were intentionally designed to be simple and positively impact as many children and parents as possible.

Current statistics collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that 1 in 44 children and more than 5.4 million adults in the United States have a diagnosis of Autism. This tool was designed to help counties analyze their courtrooms, waiting areas, and child welfare agencies with the goal of creating a more friendly environment for children and parents with Autism needs.

In addition to the physical environment, this tool was designed to support people diagnosed with Autism who may have unique communication needs. This tool helps counties assess their ability to meet these unique communication needs and provides suggested adaptations and strategies. The tool also provides considerations to help prepare persons with Autism to experience new environments and situations, both of which can be triggering events.

The first step in making a system change begins with communication and preparation. Communication will be vital to obtaining the needed information for planning, including input from the children and parents that we serve.

Environmental Analysis Tool

Communication and Preparation			
Questions	Yes	No	Options/ Strategies/Guidelines
Does your county have a way to communicate to the Judicial Officer the possible unique/individualized needs of a child or parent diagnosed with Autism?			<p>Check the CPCMS dropdown for possible indications of Autism.</p> <p>Create an agreed-upon communication method between the Agency or other parties to the case and court, so the Judicial Officer is provided with the child's or parent's individualized needs ahead of time.</p> <p>Be sure a greeter is ready and willing to meet the child/parent.</p> <p>Create a checklist to be discussed with the child's caregivers to include questions such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes you feel calm/safe? • What makes you feel uncomfortable or triggers you? • What are some of your favorite things? • What can we do to help you if you are upset? (Contingency plan of support) • What time of the day is the best time to be at the courthouse?
Can the court adjust the time of the hearing to accommodate the child's or the parent's best time of day?			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider having children or parents diagnosed with Autism as the first hearing of the day to prevent long wait times or delays. • Ask caregivers if the child or parent has a time of day that is best for interactions and schedule the court hearing at that time.
			Ways to help prepare:

Environmental Analysis Tool

Do you prepare children or parents with Autism to visit the courthouse or agency?			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow a tour of the courthouse/agency before the hearing or appointment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Meet the Judge and other courthouse staff or agency staff ➤ Consider having a designated person as a greeter to assist the child/parent through the courthouse ➤ Arrange the tour for a time of day the courthouse is not busy or crowded • Create County-Specific Social Stories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Video tour of the courthouse/agency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Post on the county website ▪ Provide a link to the video ➤ Social story of the specific courthouse/agency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a paper copy (laminated) ▪ Provide on the county website for viewing and/or printing ➤ Posters showing the different areas of the courthouse/agency • Provide a list to parents/caregivers of reminders to assure the child's needs are met before the court (similar to what the school provides before PSSA testing) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Get a good night's sleep ➤ Eat a healthy meal ➤ Follow schedules or routines as much as possible (including medication schedules) ➤ Review the Social Story or Video
Do you allow a child's or parent's designated support person into the courtroom/appointment with them?			Find out who the child's or parent's support person is and allow them to be in the courtroom/office with them. This could include a provider, relative, or kin who can help the child or parent communicate and help alleviate any anxiety.

Environmental Analysis Tool

Physical Environment Analysis			
Going to the Court Room or Meeting Place			
Questions	Yes	No	Options/ Strategies/Guidelines
Do children and parents in your county have transportation resources sensitive to sensory needs available?			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice the trip to the courthouse or CYS agency before a court or appointment times Consider the weather that is occurring that day- is it thundering, and is that a trigger
Does your courthouse have a noisy or busy lobby?			Consider planning for the child or parent with Autism by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering an alternative entrance to the courthouse that is less busy and quiet <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>ensure alternative entrances do not have active alarms when in use</i> Adding signs and directional arrows to the walls and floors to help someone navigate their way through a busy area
Does your courthouse have a metal detector at the entrance?			Consider planning for individuals with Autism by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using an alternative entrance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>ensure alternative entrances do not have active alarms when in use</i> Silencing the machines Allowing fidgets and other comfort toys past the security point Allowing assistive technology beyond the security point
Do you need to use an elevator to access the courtrooms and waiting areas?			Consider planning for children and parents with Autism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering stairs

Environmental Analysis Tool

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change the location of the hearing or meeting
Waiting Areas			
Questions	Yes	No	Options/ Strategies/Guidelines
Does a child/parent have to sit in a waiting area or lobby before their scheduled court hearing or meeting?			<p>Consider offering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory toy kits (ASERT Handout) • Alternative quiet room • Noise-canceling headphones • Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats) • A tent for a child to use
<p>Does your waiting area or lobby have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to adjust the lighting (bright lights/dimmer switch) • Variety of seating options to support someone with sensory challenges • Sensory toy box (fidgets, etc.) • Quiet area or ability to have music • Place to charge assistive technology • Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) • Noise-reducing headset or disposable earplugs • Snacks • Comfort dogs/service animals 			<p>Consider offering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory toy kits (ASERT Handout) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disinfecting wipes ▪ Disinfection spray ▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking • Alternative quiet room • Noise-canceling headphones <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disinfecting wipes ▪ Disinfection spray ▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking • Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats, swing) • A tent

Environmental Analysis Tool

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort dog/service animals
Hearing and Meeting Rooms			
Questions	Yes	No	Options/ Strategies/Guidelines
<p>Does your courtroom have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to adjust the lighting (bright lights/dimmer switch) • Variety of seating options to support someone with sensory challenges • Sensory toy box (fidgets, etc.) • Quiet area or ability to have music • Place to charge assistive technology • Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) • Noise-reducing headset or disposable earplugs 			<p>Consider offering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory toy kits (ASERT Handout) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disinfecting wipes ▪ Disinfection spray ▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking • Alternative quiet room • Noise-canceling headphones <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Create a plan to sanitize and restock supplies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disinfecting wipes ▪ Disinfection spray

Environmental Analysis Tool

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snacks • Comfort dogs/service animals 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who will be responsible for cleaning and restocking • Alternative seating (egg chairs, spinning chairs, wobble seats) • Comfort dog/service animal - if the child/parent is comfortable with having a comfort dog/service animal
Do you know who in your courthouse can provide basic adjustments to the physical environment?			<p>Who can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust the blinds • Adjust the temperature • Adjust the lighting • Bring the Comfort dog/service animal • Provide alternative routes to the courtroom such as stairs or less used elevator
Do you have alternative ways to have the hearing or meeting?			<p>Considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hybrid of virtual/in-person for witnesses to limit the number of people in the courtroom • In Chamber Hearings • Hearings at the school or other location the child is comfortable (in extraordinary situations only) • Use a quiet room • Judicial Officer questioning to minimize trauma and assist with the focus of the proceedings; "Tell me something good." • Judicial Officer sitting with the child or parent

Environmental Analysis Tool

Do you allow a child's or parent's designated support person into the courtroom/appointment with them?			Find out who the child's or parent's support person is and allow them to be in the courtroom/office with them. This could include a provider, a relative, or kin who can help the child communicate and help alleviate any anxiety.
Do you allow a child to have a special place in the courtroom?			Consider having a safe spot within the courtroom, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative seating (bean bag chair, egg chair, etc.) • The child sitting in the jury box, if available • The children walking around during the hearing
Monitoring Progress			
Questions	Yes	No	Options/ Strategies/Guidelines
Does your courtroom/agency have a suggestion box for feedback?			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider having a brief survey about the physical environment of the courthouse/agency for all participants to complete and use the results to guide changes. • QR code to access an electronic survey • Anonymous survey with a locked box for responses • Provides a built-in Continuous Quality Improvement/ Monitoring

Environmental Analysis Tool

