

Autism and Design

Questions + Answers from the May 6, 2013 Webinar

Q: Can autism be a latent condition in childhood and then emerge later in adolescence or even adulthood? [Keary K. Horiuchi, AIA]

A: Very good question but we are not qualified to answer questions related to medical aspects of autism. A very good resource for this is <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html>.

Q: Is there any location where autism is looked at in ADA 2010? [Amanuel Woldemikael]

A: Autism is listed as one of the impairments covered by ADA but for more specifics you will need to read through the document.

Q: You showed a photo of desserts. Does sugar effect autistic people's behavior negatively? [Naomi Deutsch]

A: Very good question but we are not qualified to answer questions related to medical aspects of autism. A very good resource for this is <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html>. Another resource is *The Autism Revolution* by Martha Herbert.

Q: Is there any known reason for the apparently dramatic increase in the incidence of autism? [Edmund Wilson]

A: Very good question but we are not qualified to answer questions related to medical aspects of autism. A very good resource for this is <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html>.

Q: Has the clinical definition of autism in 1943 changed in any way as it is now defined (as of 2011) -- that may account for the rapid rise of its incidences? [Keary K. Horiuchi, AIA]

A: It has and the CDC's website discusses the diagnostic criteria.

Q: "Need for crosswalks," does this imply that better neighborhoods for autistic residences preclude car-based/suburban areas (vs. urban ones with better pedestrian infrastructure)? [Keary K. Horiuchi, AIA]

A: Pedestrian safety is essential, but some suburban communities have very good pedestrian infrastructure; it's more a matter of the quality of pedestrian services/infrastructure than urban vs suburban locations.

Q: Who pays for these facilities? [Dawn Zuber]

A: Funding comes from a variety of sources including private financing, LIHTC, Section 811 funds from HUD, block grants, project-based Section 8, many states have trust funds or other resources for affordable housing for people with developmental disabilities, etc.

Q: Is there a reason for ensuite bathrooms? Is it better for them? [Nina Caporale]

A: As for most people, having privacy is a positive thing. For people with autism, proximity to others often can be difficult so providing a bedroom with private bathroom, if possible, cuts down on potential stressors.

Q: Are there examples of or design strategies for supportive living environments specifically for people experiencing the Asperger's' Syndrome portion of the spectrum? [Edward Truscelli]

A: Yes, actually many of the residential communities currently operating work with people with Asperger's syndrome. Typically each program adjusts the amount of supervision provided to meet the individual's needs – from 24-hours per day to several hours per week. An example of one program is the Community Housing for Adult Independence Program in Boston operated by Jewish Family & Children's Services. JCFS operates a group home for four adult men with Asperger's syndrome/high-functioning autism as well as several apartments in high-end apartment complexes.

Q: Induction cooktops for safety? [Scott Allen]

A: Yes, for autistic people who are learning to cook or able to cook on their own, induction cooktops are a good choice.

Q: One project you showed had cathedral ceilings. Doesn't that lead to a lot of uncontrolled noise in the homes? [Edward Steinfeld]

A: It depends on how the acoustics in the room are balanced and if the residents are hyposensitive. If wall section is properly designed and the flooring and wall coverings are appropriate the sound will be absorbed and there should not be a preponderance of excess noise. While cathedral ceilings might be overly high, it is necessary to provide enough vertical space for the gross motor movements that people with autism often engage in: jumping, hopping, running, etc.

Q: Have you read Christopher Alexander's Pattern Language, and would that sensory/spiritual approach to design potentially help autistic individuals? (His theories have proven to be successfully applied to health care architecture and improved the healing process there.) [Stephen Long]

A: This is an intriguing idea. We haven't seen any project directly using Alexander's patterns, but it may be something to consider.

Q: Any idea of the cost per square foot on any of the projects you showcased? [John Crowell]

A: No, not at this point.

Q: Are these housing models suitable for the aged autistic person - someone in their 80s for instance. How is this model different from what we would optimally want for an 'normal' aged person who would benefit from group living? [Margaret Weidlein]

A: Some of the residents in these developments are in their 60s; we haven't seen any one in their 80s living in these place, but then there were very few people diagnosed 80 years ago. There are many different housing models. One that we showed, Mt. Bethel Village for example, is very much based on an assisted living model for seniors. In some cases, and for some individuals, the model may be very compatible.