Big Brothers Big Sisters
OF EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

General Effects: Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental and neurological disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate, understand language, play and relate to others. Autism is considered a "spectrum" disorder, which means that each person is affected differently and to varying degrees. For example, one person with Autism Spectrum Disorder may have mild symptoms, while another may have serious symptoms, both looking drastically different. For this reason, a person's individual symptoms are more important than the general diagnosis.

Characteristics of ASD:
- *Difficulty with social interactions. This could include talking back and forth, working, or playing with others*
- *Overreaction or under reaction to one or more of the senses: sight, touch, taste, smell, or hearing*
- *Preoccupation with particular object*
- *Need for routine*
- *Wide range of variability in abilities*
- *Repetitive actions or movements*
- *emotional reactions and expressions that do not match the situation*

Advice for Mentors:

Planning Ahead:
- Each child experiences their own level of symptoms and severity. Get to know your Little. Often, the family of the Little will be your best resource for you to learn about your Little's needs and abilities.
- Check with your Little's guardian to see if your Little is on medication and if your Little will be taking medication on the days of your outings (some kids do not take their medication on weekends or school vacations). Whether your Little takes medication that day will likely affect their behavior while you're out. Talk to their guardian if there's an activity you'd like to do that might be better if they did take their medication- lots of parents are flexible on this. Please refer to the section on "Health, Medications and Allergies" of the "Match Safety Guidelines for Bigs"
- Explore triggers and coping techniques with your Little's guardians, understanding what environments/activities may be triggering for your Little and how to best handle or redirect repetitive behaviors and reinforce desired behaviors.

Outings- Planning Activities:
- Youth with Autism benefit from consistency. A routine can prevent confusion and stress for the Little and assist with transitions between activities or going home. Tell your Little the plan at the beginning of each outing. Tell your Little a time limit for when you will move on to a different activity and provide reminders.
- Express commitment to your Little in different ways. A Big can create a calendar with the activities a match plans and schedules. Allowing a Little to see this will illustrate that this is long term, and show them that you are not leaving.
- Avoid cancelling hang outs as much as possible. It is important to show your Little that you will not break plans and leave, allowing them to trust you and build connection. If you do need to cancel, do so in advance and provide an alternative time to hang out. Emphasize that you WANT to hang out and prioritize rescheduling.

Be a support for your Little:
- Remain positive and strength-based. Discover what your Little enjoys doing, and provide opportunities to pursue these strengths/talents. Reinforce jobs well-done and inspire a sense of competence. Be flexible about expectations and be patient.
- Use simple and explicit language. A child with a spectrum disorder may not pick up on body language and non-verbal cues.
- Avoid assumptions of what your Little will know or demonstrate in regards to non-verbal communication, body language, conversational skills, interpersonal skills, etc. Do not scold or make light of a situation, but rather, model appropriate communication skills. Children with ASD do not naturally pick up on "social cues," so Bigs can model proper communication and relationship skills and behaviors. This can include: respecting personal space, practicing greeting, making eye contact when speaking, expressing your feelings in an appropriate manner, etc.

PLEASE CALL MATCH SUPPORT at (617) 956-0283 FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO DISCUSS YOUR MATCH