



# 'Diversity is strength'

Library's programs like Sensory Story Time help kids with autism

**Amanda Sieradzki** Council on Culture & Arts

**L**ibrary Story Time programming is a space where families can enjoy reading picture books aloud and singing songs along with their local librarian. For Christine Earp, library services coordinator for the Lake Jackson Branch, taking her own children to Story Time programming was always somewhat of a challenge. • "My children have had a big impact on how I do my job," says Earp. "I have a fully neurodivergent family and I have firsthand experience seeing the differences between an autistic individual and neurotypical individual, and the things that keep them away from a place like the library. My first son would run around a lot at Story Time which was hard, and my second son who is autistic did the same thing and was even less engaged."

See **STORY TIME**, Page 2B

### If you go

**What:** Celebration of Autism and Neurodiversity

**When:** Events throughout April

**Where:** Leon County Public Library

**Cost:** Free and open to the public

**Contact:** For more information, visit <https://leoncountyfl.gov/Celebration>

Christine Earp implemented the first Sensory Story Time at the library, followed by a month-long "Celebration of Autism and Neurodiversity" in 2021 that provided programming during April, which is Autism Awareness Month. PROVIDED

# Story time

Continued from Page 1B

In 2019, Earp began working on increasing services for neurodivergent individuals. With the support of her manager and the library's administration, she formed a team that focused on developing new, more inclusive programming for all.

The Leon County library system partnered with FSU's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) on training librarians and other staff members to earn "autism-friendly business" status for the local library branches.

## Sensory Story Time

One year later, Earp implemented the first sensory Story Time at the library, followed by a month-long "Celebration of Autism and Neurodiversity" in 2021 that provided programming during April, which is Autism Awareness Month.

This year, Earp is excited to offer several major events centered on providing resources for families and the community, including a month-long art exhibit at four locations, free screenings for families, and a resource fair.

"I have an amazing team of people that are working on all of this and have taken my little seed of a dream and turned it into a garden," says Earp.

Growing up, Earp loved surrounding herself with books. She most enjoys the peaceful environment provided by the library and dabbles in all genres, but tends to favor stories that thematically focus on the "rise of the underdog."

It was after reading, "What Color is Your Parachute" by Richard Nelson Bolles that she decided to go back to school and become a librarian.

## New ways to reach autistic children

After Earp earned her master's degree in library science, she worked in adult services and youth programming before transitioning into her current role as library services coordinator. She says her favorite part of the job is serving the community at large, whether it's assisting a student with a school project or helping a patron fill out an online form.

"It's all about the people," says Earp. "We're their resource and this library belongs to them. Our whole day is centered around how can we best serve our community."

This mission is what drove Earp to find new ways to reach autistic and neurodiverse patrons. In her own research, she found that simple adjustments to programs like Story Time could make great impacts in terms of inclusivity. She first introduced Sensory Story Time as a virtual program during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Christine Earp at Story Time. The Leon County library system partnered on training librarians and other staff members to earn "autism-friendly business" status for the local library branches.** PROVIDED PHOTOS



**Christine Earp prepares for Story Time. The Leon County library system partnered with FSU's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) on training librarians and other staff members to earn "autism-friendly business" status for the local library branches.**

While other Story Times would include visual slideshow on the Zoom platform, Earp minimized visual clutter that could be overstimulating and replaced it with calming colors.

She created a schedule that she would introduce at the beginning of Story Time to aid in transitions for attendees who might have difficulty going from reading a book aloud to a finger puppet play.

## Making 'an impact on someone's life'

Earp says FSU's Project Pals training course was instrumental for her whole staff to understand best practices when creating Sensory Story Time. She has

been delighted to see the growth and change in attendees over the past year and a half as the program has transitioned from virtual to in-person.

"I have one family who attended for about six months and saw dramatic changes in their daughter from the very beginning," says Earp. "The first time I saw her at the program she did not make eye contact with me at all. Now she shows me her dolls and tells me stories about her day and is fully engaging. When you can make an impact in someone's life like that, it's amazing."

The more inclusive programming has also had an impact on Earp's own son—though he has outgrown attending Story Times as a participant, he loves being a

youth volunteer and assisting with younger patrons.

"He loves being a helper," says Earp, who implemented the "stay and play" program for patrons who would like to have 30-minutes of extra transition after the structured Story Time. "It's a time where parents and caregivers can informally chat and there's parallel play with kids of all ages. It's an opportunity for older children to interact with younger children in a really inclusive and accepting environment."

## Celebration of neurodiversity

The library's month-long celebration of Autism and Neurodiversity will kick off with "Artists & Autism: Celebrating Neurodiversity" at Able Artists Gallery in Railroad Square on April 1 featuring a performance by "The Electric People" band.

The festivities will continue with the library's part of the exhibit opening on April 2. Earp says patrons can also look forward to the return of the "STEAM" sensory adventure packs which will include new crafts available for pick-up throughout the month. Earp hopes patrons of all abilities and backgrounds will feel welcome to attend all events.

"Diversity is strength," says Earp. "These programs are for everybody and this is everyone's library. We want everyone who comes to have a pleasant experience."

*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*

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