

Make time for autism awareness

We've all been there before, mindlessly grocery shopping after a long day of work.

We curse the need to shop during the workweek and dream of being at home on the couch.

This can't get any worse, we think.

Oh, but the piercing wail of a child two aisles over begs to differ.

The longer the cries persist, the more irritated we get. There's something about a hysterical child that strikes a nerve.

"Nice parenting," we sarcastically mutter to no one. "Get control of your child."

The response is a common one. At some point, we've all reacted similarly.

But when someone you love has autism, your perspective is different. You understand that not every crying child is the same. And you realize how challenging seemingly simple situations can be.

Autism and autism spectrum disorder are general terms for a series of brain disorders that affect development. One of every 88 children born in the U.S. has an autism spectrum disorder.

Individuals with autism have social impairments, communications difficulties and repetitive behaviors. Generally, individuals with autism continue to require supports and services as they age.

Understanding autism is understanding that not all situations are created equally.

Let's look again at the situation above.

What can a store employee do if he or she encounters a hysterical child who clearly can't be consoled? Obviously, the employee has to follow employer policy, but if the employee is able to assist and feels compelled to do so, asking the parent "Is there anything I can do to help?" is a good place start.

If the child is autistic, he or she may have to leave the store to calm down. Store employees can help by pointing parents to the nearest exit. They can also assist with any merchandise the shopper accumulated.

Since its inception, AIM Independent Living Center's Autism Advocacy Group has sought out groups to teach them about the unique challenges faced by those with autism and their loved ones.

The group's target audience is police officers and first responders, emergency and routine medical professionals, those within the legal community, and Transportation Security Administration and airline personnel.

Last year, the group presented to the staff at the Elmira-Corning Regional Airport. The training was well-received and beneficial to employees who serve individuals with disabilities every day.

Understanding how to interact with an individual with autism takes education, time and patience, but it's worth the effort. Autism awareness can enrich lives across the board.

For more information on the advocacy group, contact Wendy Watkins at 733-3718, ext. 223.

John Zick is the governmental and public affairs coordinator at AIM Independent Living Center in Corning. He can be reached via email at jzick@aimcil.com.