

The Cool Aspies & Socialization During COVID:

Our Perspectives

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Why the *Cool Aspies* Began

Young adults who still wanted a social skills group-like atmosphere post-high school

Parents who worried that their children were lonely

Not enough opportunities for young adults with mild social disabilities

Need for high-school students with similar profiles to have older role models as they transition to adulthood



Who We Are

- *Cool Aspies* is a social club for young adults with ASD and related neurodiversity
- All members are from Northern Virginia, D.C., and Maryland suburbs
- *Cool Aspie* members are mostly between the ages of 18-27, and split evenly by gender
- Capped at 40 members
- We believe in self-determination: ***Nothing about us without us!***



How We Are Unique

- No fee to join and free or affordable events
- Not a “therapeutic” group- just a social club
- Members recommend the activities
- No staff- just friends



Goals and Expectations of Membership



- **Goals:**

- Make friends
- Have fun
- Learn about leisure activities in our community
- Improve social skills
- Develop both independence and interdependence
- Become self-determined people



- **Expectations:**

- Members complete application each calendar year
- RSVP independently
- Arrange transportation to events
- Parents are NOT allowed

Aaron

What We DO

Over our first 12 years, our numerous activities have included:

- Bowling
- Cooking class
- Laser Tag
- Art galleries
- Canoeing
- Holiday gift shopping
- Concerts
- Anime Conventions
- Plays
- Hiking
- Parties
- Nature Centers
- Rock Climbing
- First Aid/CPR certification
- Embassy crawls
- Line Dancing
- Lego building
- Historic Tours
- Eating Out
- Pottery
- Yoga
- Gymnastics
- Karaoke
- *Washington Nationals* baseball games
- Museums
- Riverboat Excursions
- Mini Golf
- Ice Skating
- Water Parks
- Building Bat Houses
- Tae Kwon Do
- Job interview class
- Comedy class
- Movies



Volunteer Work in the Community



- Training the Alexandria Police & Sheriff's Departments
- Assisting with the *Smithsonian Morning at the Museum* Access Program



- Helping parks with trail renewal and removal of invasive plants
- National Zoo advisory panel



CAMP: Cool Aspies Mentoring Program

- Members who have some expertise in an area of life, including:
 - Attending college
 - Living on your own
 - Having a job
 - Using public transportation
 - Self-advocacy
 - Technology
- Mentors work 1:1 with other members or in a group
- We help each other be successful!



Skills We Learn in Cool Aspies



- Using public transportation
- Scheduling skills
- Using smartphone effectively
- How to tip
- Completing forms with personal information
- Knowing who you can call when you need something
- What activities are nearby that we might enjoy
- How to ask our friends in the community to lead classes for us

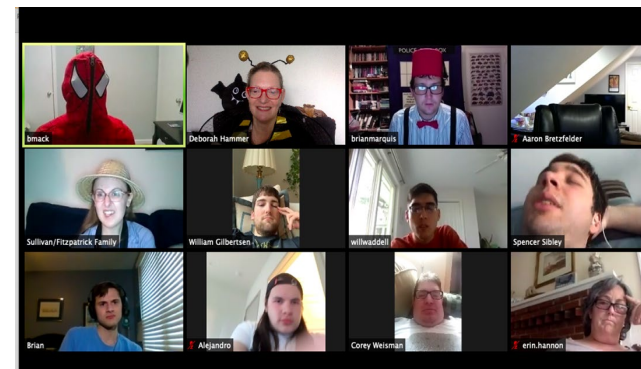
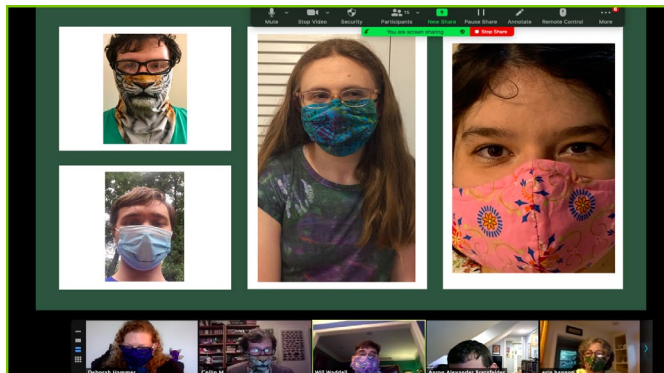
Virtual Meetings During 2020-2021

- **Activities Included:**

- Escape Room
- Talent show
- Game nights
- Special interest show and tell
- Costume and holiday parties
- Lip-Sync Contest
- Holiday Sing-along
- Ice Breakers
- Visits from celebrity animals
- World tours and museum visits
- Behind the scenes at the National Zoo

- **Classes Included:**

- *Love on the Spectrum* series
- Understanding Autism
- Bats
- Health Series
- Recognizing Fake Media
- ASL
- Mindfulness
- All about *Covid19*
- Improv Acting
- Cooking
- Organizational Skills



Lessons Learned: Summary of Virtual Events

- **What has worked well:**

- Some new members joined
- No transportation difficulties
- Reduced our anxiety with new places, crowds, and sensory issues
- Gave us opportunities to communicate and get to know each other better
- We meet more frequently
- All events are free!!!
- Lots of virtual opportunities and speakers

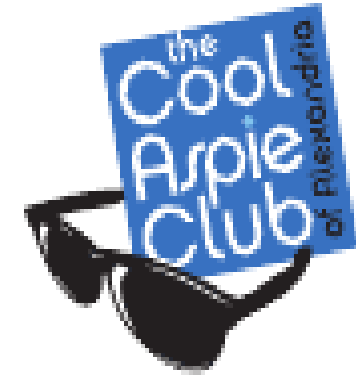
- **What didn't work as well:**

- Some established members stopped coming or came infrequently due to discomfort with Zoom platform or lack of technology (internet)
- Tech. problems during the meetings, (hearing each other, freezing, etc.)
- No food at our events (or rarely- our one cooking class was just so-so)
- We miss being with each other in person

Socialization During COVID: Our Perspectives

Sarah

Aaron



Tom

Alex

