



Government of Bermuda

Ministry of Youth, Social Development and Seniors

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

by

Senator Lindsay Simmons, JP

**The Journey of Autism Spectrum Disorder Out of School
Programmes**

July 15, 2026

Madam President,

I rise today to provide the Senate with an update on the work being advanced by The Office of Youth Affairs (TOYA) to strengthen support for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other neurodivergent needs within the Out of School Programme.

This work reflects the Ministry's commitment to inclusive youth development. As more children with neurodivergent needs participate in after-school, mid-term, holiday, and summer programmes, our responsibility is clear. Recreational spaces must be welcoming, structured, safe, inclusive, and properly supported.

Madam President,

The ASD initiative has developed through observation, parent engagement, staff reflection, and programme experience. It was not designed as a single event. It has grown through several programme periods, including the October 2025 mid-term session, the December 2025 holiday session, the February 2026 mid-term session, and the April 2026 programme period.

Each session helped staff understand what children need in real recreational settings. Staff observed the value of predictable routines, clear transitions, calm spaces, visual supports, sensory activities, and carefully planned group interaction.

Progress also looked different for each child. For one child, progress may mean joining a game with a peer. For another, it may mean asking for a break before becoming overwhelmed, moving through a transition with less distress, communicating a need, or building confidence through play.

Madam President,

That learning has informed the development of an ASD Curriculum Framework for the Out of School Programme. At the centre of this framework is a Recreation Social Skills Model, supported by Individual Recreation Plans for participating children.

These plans will be informed by registration questionnaire calls with parents and guardians, staff observations, previous programme notes, known strengths, identified triggers, and strategies that have already helped children succeed.

The mission is to provide a structured, high-energy, and inclusive recreational environment where neurodivergent children can build social communication, emotional regulation, independence, and confidence through play. This is recreation with purpose. It helps children practice real-world life skills in a safe and supportive setting.

Madam President,

The August 2026 Summer Session will be the **first** dedicated summer session shaped by this ASD framework. It will bring lessons from previous Out of School Programme sessions into a more coordinated summer model, using structured recreation, predictable routines, and staff-supported engagement to help children learn, interact, and grow. We currently have 12 confirmed registrations and room for more.

The curriculum will focus on practical areas of development. Social communication and peer interaction will be supported through

cooperative games, buddy activities, structured group challenges, visual communication aids, and low-pressure opportunities for connection.

Emotional regulation and self-advocacy will be supported through check-in stations, calm spaces, sensory supports, and simple ways for children to signal when they need a break. Executive functioning and daily routines will be strengthened through visual schedules, responsibility rotations, transition countdowns, and consistent daily patterns.

Personal care and independence will also be woven into the day through routines such as packing belongings, drinking water, using sun protection, cleaning up, and sorting personal items.

Madam President,

Inclusion must be intentional. Neurodivergent children should have access to meaningful recreational opportunities, while also receiving the support they need to participate safely and confidently.

Where appropriate, and where it supports the child's Individual Recreation Plan, there will be planned opportunities for interaction with the wider Out of School Programme population. These activities will be guided by staff and shaped around each child's readiness, strengths, and support needs.

Madam President,

Preparation for the August session includes staff training, practical coaching, and clear expectations across the programme. Staff must be ready before children arrive. The Office of Youth Affairs is placing strong emphasis on mandatory preparatory training, online learning, and direct coaching.

The training pathway will include autism-informed practice, routine-based social communication, social narratives, positive reinforcement, and structured work systems. Staff will also receive practical coaching from the programme coordinator, including modelling calm transitions, using sensory spaces appropriately, and supporting self-advocacy without escalating distress.

Training will continue throughout the programme through observation, reporting, and guidance. This supports consistency for children, confidence for staff, and trust with parents and guardians.

Madam President,

Leadership and coordination will be central to the success of this work. The Youth Programme Senior Supervisor will oversee implementation, standards, parent relationships, and programme growth. The Programme Coordinator will operate directly in the field, supporting activity planning,

specialized supplies, parent intake, site observations, and the practical delivery of each child's Individual Recreation Plan.

This structure supports the initiative at both the planning level and the programme delivery level.

Madam President,

This is a significant step for the Out of School Programme. It builds on the commitment of staff who have worked session after session to understand the children and families they serve. It also reflects a wider commitment to prepare environments that help children participate with dignity, safety, inclusion, and joy.

The August 2026 Summer Session will be an important milestone. Learning from this session will help inform future after-school, mid-term, holiday, and summer programming. It will also strengthen how we plan, train, communicate with parents, and support each child's experience.

Madam President,

I thank the staff of TOYA and the Out of School Programme for their commitment to this work. I also thank the parents and guardians who continue to share information, ask questions, and work with us as partners.

Most importantly, I acknowledge the children whose personalities, strengths, needs, and progress continue to guide this work.

Through this ASD initiative, TOYA is taking practical steps to ensure that more children can experience recreation, friendship, independence, and belonging.

Thank you, **Madam President.**