

Case Study: The New York Transit Museum's Ready to Ride Program, Day Habilitation Day, and Subway Sleuths Internship

Visit the New York Transit Museum's Access Programs webpage [here](#).

Summary of Programs

The New York Transit Museum offers several programs for individuals with developmental disabilities who are transitioning into adulthood; each program makes use of the museum's unique resources to offer recreational opportunities, travel training, and practical job experience.

Ready to Ride

- The program uses the museum's unique resources to give students practical subway travel experience.
- Each participating group receives two one-hour-long sessions of hands-on travel training.
- The Transit Museum partners with schools and day habilitation groups to serve 6th-12th grade groups and adults.
- Ready to Ride is staffed by the museum's Special Education and Access Coordinator and up to one additional museum educator.

Day Habilitation Day

- A community program that gives Day Habilitation groups the opportunity to experience the museum in a relaxed setting, and to learn more about the museum's other access programming.
- Groups must register in advance, but the program is free of charge.
- Day Habilitation Day takes place twice a year during quieter days at the museum, from 11am-2pm, and groups can arrive and leave at any time during that period.
- The program is staffed by 5-7 museum educators.

Subway Sleuths Intern

- The Subway Sleuths program staffs one intern who participated in the program when he was younger.
- The intern is supervised by the Subway Sleuths program supervisor; she creates tasks and a schedule for the intern.

Part Time Inventory Associate

- The Transit Museum's Education Department created a part-time Inventory Associate position, and partners with Birch Family Services to fill this position with an employee on the autism spectrum.
- For more information about this employee and the Transit Museum's partnership with Birch Family Services, watch [this video](#) and read [this post](#).



Program Profile - Ready to Ride

The Transit Museum offers their Ready to Ride program for individuals with developmental and/or learning disabilities in two different age groups: 6th-12th grade classes and adults. For either age group, the program is typically broken into two classes, with certain partnerships adding a third class that operates as a celebration of students' work. The Transit Museum works with a variety of public schools (through

NYC DOE's District 75 Travel Training Office), private schools, day habilitation programs, and service organizations to bring groups to the museum for Ready to Ride.

Because it is housed in an abandoned Subway platform, the Transit Museum is able to accurately simulate each step in taking a ride on the Subway. Program leaders take advantage of Subway maps, working turnstiles, and their collection of train cars located on a working Subway platform. The Ready to Ride program takes place on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, when the museum does not have other school group visits, so that there are fewer museum visitors. This allows for a quieter, less overwhelming environment than practicing on an actual Subway platform, where students might encounter large crowds of busy commuters.

In their first class, students practice mapping out a Subway route from the museum to the Times Square – 42nd Street stop, buying a MetroCard from an MTA officer, swiping their MetroCards, locating the conductor's car, and getting on and off the train at the right stop. Students also answer questions about and practice different scenarios they might encounter on the train; for example, not giving money to performers or strangers begging, giving up their seats to an elderly or pregnant person, and not placing their bags on the seat next to them.

In their second class, students practice these same tasks, but through an iPad challenge, where they go from station to station and are asked to trace their route on the map, buy a MetroCard, swipe their Metro Card, and find their way downstairs to the train platform. These activities are largely self-directed. Students then play a role-playing game in which they act out different scenarios on the Subway, giving examples of good and bad Subway behaviors.

Program Profile - Day Habilitation Day

Day Habilitation Day takes place twice a year: once in the Fall, and once in the Spring, on citywide bus maintenance days. Because schools cannot get bussing for field trips on these days, there are no school group visits, which



means the museum is less crowded than on a typical day. Day habilitation groups register prior to the event, and can arrive anytime between the designated hours of 11am to 2pm. The museum typically sees about fifteen registered groups on Day Habilitation Day.

Day Habilitation Day is largely self-guided, and groups can navigate around the museum however they want. Anywhere between five and seven museum educators staff the event, and rotate between posts at check-in, an information table, a ticket booth photo opportunity, and a train car where they make themselves available to groups to answer questions about the trains and their history. These educators are already scheduled to be at the museum during the hours of Day Habilitation Day, so there is no additional cost associated with staffing them for this program.

The museum reaches out to day habilitation groups that have visited the museum in the past to invite them to Day Habilitation Day, and also uses these groups who have already visited the museum to reach other day habilitation groups within the same larger organization. For example, if one day habilitation group from a certain family services organization has attended once, the museum staff would reach out to the larger organization to invite any other day habilitation groups that are a part of that organization.

Program Profile - Subway Sleuths Intern

Subway Sleuths is an award winning after-school program for children on the autism spectrum in 2nd-5th grades. The Transit Museum currently staffs one intern named Leo for this program who was a Sleuth (a participant in the program) when he was younger. Leo is the first Subway Sleuths intern, although the practice of bringing a former Sleuth into the museum as an intern for the program is one that will continue for future semesters. The internship program grew out of a desire to engage former Sleuths who still had a passion for the museum, and to provide a mentor with autism to current Sleuths. Leo plays one game with the Sleuths each class, and creates activities for the Sleuths; activities have ranged from a scavenger hunt around the museum to a presentation on the history of the W train.

The Subway Sleuths intern is supervised by Meredith Gregory, the museum's Special Education and Access Coordinator. She assigns him projects and activities, checks in with him via email during the week, and creates his schedule. Leo is at the museum

from 4:00-5:45 one day a week, at the same time that the Subway Sleuths program is running.

Highlighting Best Practices

Establish a routine, then build on it.

The first Ready to Ride class sets up a routine: the students enter the museum, determine their subway route on the map, practice swiping their MetroCard, then transition downstairs onto a train on the subway platform to practice appropriate subway behavior. The second class uses the same routine, but asks students to perform the tasks independently, with less guidance from teachers or museum staff. Additional information is also layered into the second class. The familiarity of the routine makes the self-guided “iPad challenge” and other new practices more manageable by first reinforcing prior information, then scaffolding new information onto the prior information.

“For the first part of Ready to Ride, we really only need one educator... For the second Ready to Ride, we have an educator that they don’t know in the booth and also an educator that they don’t know down on the platform lying out in a train car. They’ve already practiced the travel skills, but this is to kind of throw them off a little bit and make them interact with someone they don’t know, because when they go into a Subway station, and they’re buying a MetroCard or they need help, they’re going to have to be dealing with MTA employees that they don’t know. So it’s just kind of upping the practice a little bit by having them engage with staff members at the Transit Museum that they haven’t previously worked with.”

-Meredith Gregory, Special Education and Access Coordinator at the New York Transit Museum

Teach skills-based lessons in a way that allows students to really practice the task you’re teaching them.

Learning about a skill in the environment where that skill will be used and with the materials you’d need to use that skill makes it much easier for people with autism to translate these skills to their daily lives. Action based learning in addition to verbal explanation and visual aids help students make the cognitive leap from a lesson to a life skill.

“...when [the Ready to Ride program] was started, the educators were seeing this amazing resource that has turnstiles, maps, train cars – it has all the elements that you would need to learn how to ride the subway, and it’s a quiet space – there aren’t busy commuters walking through – so we saw a resource that we could really give to the community to train these students. Traveling the subway is such an important part of New York but it is also really hindering for people with autism, so we really saw a need for this program to actually practice these skills.”

-Meredith Gregory, Special Education and Access Coordinator at the New York Transit Museum

Use strong visual aids to help students process new information.

In the Ready to Ride program, students’ learning is aided by repeatable, recognizable visual icons. These icons are lifted directly from icons used on real subway platforms, so they can be translated into practical life skills. For example, students learn to board



the train where they see the conductor’s sign - a black and white diagonally striped bar that exists on every subway platform. Students learn about appropriate or inappropriate behavior through the visual aid of a “red guy” (someone who is not behaving appropriately) and a “green guy” (someone

who is behaving appropriately), icons commonly seen on subway advertisements. These visuals help to reinforce verbal information given by educators.

Consider partnering with existing organizations serving students and adults in transition.

For Ready to Ride, the Transit Museum partners with schools, service organizations, and the Department of Education’s special needs district’s travel training office. These partnerships ensure that the museum receives enough participants in the Ready to Ride

program. Certain partnerships have more tailored programs, and others run more typically.

“We have several partners that we work with for Ready to Ride, and that ensures that we get a certain amount of groups every semester. Our three partnerships that we have this year are Birch Family Services – and with Birch Family Services, each group does a two part visit to the museum, and then I go to each Day Habilitation location and do an art making activity based on things that they learned in the museum through Ready to Ride. Our school partner is Cooke Center Academy and they are bringing three separate classes this semester – so that’s a two part visit for each class – and then we’ll do a family celebration... where they can bring their families back to the museum... And then our third partner is the District 75 travel training office... They have travel trainers who evaluate whether [students] are ready for their travel training program. If they are, they do one-on-one training of traveling the subway, and then the final culmination is that they get shadowed on a ride on the train or the bus, where the trainer is standing far away and kind of watches what the person does... So we like to use Ready to Ride as the first introduction, where teachers can bring their students here to see if they’re ready to apply for the travel training program... There are three head travel trainers...so I work with them to bring groups to the museum. They work directly with teachers and they have certain classes that they want to bring to the museum.”

-Meredith Gregory, Special Education and Access Coordinator at the New York Transit Museum

Find a day that the museum is usually less busy, and invite groups serving people on the autism spectrum to visit the museum those days.

Early openings can be successful, but you don’t have to schedule additional hours for employees if you look strategically at the days when the museum is naturally less busy, then use those days as opportunities to engage Day Habilitation groups or other community groups serving people who may benefit from a quieter, less crowded space.

“Day Hab Day takes place on a day when we don’t already have school groups in the museum, because it’s a bus maintenance day – it’s called a no field trip day, when schools can’t get bussing. So we make sure to have our Day Habilitation Day on a day we know the museum is going to be really quiet in the morning.

That's just to allow more groups in the space, so we're not at capacity, and also to give those Day Habilitation groups a quiet, VIP experience. We're not closed but we don't have any school groups."

-Meredith Gregory, Special Education and Access Coordinator at the New York Transit Museum

Recognize groups that may already be accessing the museum, and find ways to engage them in a more meaningful way.

The Transit Museum attracts many visitors on the autism spectrum because so many people with autism are drawn to trains and transportation. The museum's staff noticed that many groups of people with autism were coming to the museum without any guidance or assistance from the museum; Day Habilitation Day grew out of a desire to engage these groups in a more intentional and meaningful way.

"Day Habilitation groups are always looking for discounted programs and free programs... We get self-guided groups from Day Hab programs weekly. We get a lot of them. And many times they get upset that they have to pay full price admission. So this is a way to give them free admission to the museum, to really meet the needs of the group, but also let them know the rules of the museum and...what we offer. They were coming here and they didn't know our mission, they didn't know any of the other programs we offered, they didn't know how to be safe in the museum, so Day Habilitation Day not only gives them access to the museum but it gives us access to tell them more about what we offer and who we are so that they can be better prepared in the future when they want to bring more groups... What I found for both Day Habilitation Day and for Ready to Ride, is you have to do the basics of emailing and getting in contact just to let people know it's available, but the need for these programs is clearly there, because we're getting really large groups for Day Habilitation Day, so it's not like pulling teeth for those programs because it's something that groups are really looking forward to doing..."

-Meredith Gregory, Special Education and Access Coordinator at the New York Transit Museum

Capitalize on program participants' interests to offer engaging volunteer, internship, or job opportunities.

Both Leo, the Subway Sleuths intern, and Jason, the part-time Inventory Associate, are a good fit for their positions because they are passionate about transportation. The

motivation to do their job well already exists. For younger students participating in programming, it can be very beneficial to see an older person with autism positively engaged in a leadership role, and these interns or employees can act as mentors for the younger participants.

“The reason for our Sleuths internship was to really engage former Sleuths who still have a passion for this museum who are no longer Sleuths age, and also help them with that transition period and getting an internship. The Sleuths intern also serves as a mentor for the sleuths who are in that day...it was totally worth it to see these Sleuths connect with an older, former Sleuth who has this passion, and also to see Leo excited about work, where his family has said he has never once wanted to do anything with work before. He will work in class because he has incentives, but in terms of any kinds of internship opportunities, he’s just never been interested. So him seeing that work can be associated with your passion has really been amazing for him and for his family.”

-Meredith Gregory, Special Education and Access Coordinator at the New York Transit Museum

Additional Resources

- [Ready to Ride lesson plans part 1](#)
- [Ready to Ride lesson plans part 2](#)
- [Ready to Ride take home packet](#)
- [Video about the museum’s Inventory Associate](#)
- [American Alliance of Museums blog post about the museum’s Inventory Associate](#)