

Accessible environments



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This resource looks at how you can adapt your environment to support autistic people and their families. Autistic people thrive on being in familiar environments with routine and structure. Some may not be comfortable with the idea of change and may have difficulty moving from one environment to another.

Autistic people may experience sensory differences. They may be over-sensitive or under-sensitive to:

- sights
- sounds
- smells
- textures.

This can be a positive thing, but can also cause distress or discomfort. Some examples of what may cause anxiety due to sensory sensitivities:

- bright lights
- excessive noise
- smells
- crowds
- queues
- overly hot or cold environments.

Watch our *Too Much Information* film which shows how Alex, aged 11 experiences a typical UK shopping centre and how overwhelming it can become. Alex finds it difficult to filter out noises and lights as he walks into the centre.

 www.autism.org.uk/tmi

Many autistic people will avoid everyday situations because of their sensory sensitivities. Simple adjustments can be made to make environments more autism-friendly.

Accessible environments – hints and tips

There are many adjustments that you can make to your environment, adapting the facilities that you have to support autistic people.

Bright lights

- Can you reduce the brightness of the lights within your buildings? If this isn't possible in all areas of your buildings can you allocate an area where lights are dimmed and it is quieter than the rest of the building(s)?

Noise

- Do you play background music? Can the volume of this be reduced?
- Can you reduce other noise? Provide information about what could happen and when so that people are prepared.
- Provide alternatives to noisy hand dryers in toilet areas.
- Some autistic people choose to wear ear defenders in noisy environments. Could you have some available for loan if needed?

Crowds and queues

- Are there areas of your buildings which are susceptible to crowds? Is there a way that you can minimise this? Maybe the recent COVID measures gave you strategies to manage these? Let autistic customers know which times tend to be quieter and which are busier. Could you allow customers into your venue outside of these times, opening earlier or later for those who need it? If you have a busy waiting area, for example, in a medical clinic could someone wait outside or in their car and be called when it is their turn?
- Is there a system by which you can support people to avoid queues? If tickets can be booked online make sure you publicise this. Or could you open up alternative routes?

Temperature

- How do you monitor the temperatures within your buildings? Are there ways that you can adapt the temperatures across your buildings? Do you have good ventilation systems?

Maps

If there are multiple areas to your building, a map could help autistic visitors to navigate their way around. You could highlight areas that could be busy or noisier that they may wish to avoid, for example a museum gallery with loud exhibits or the area of a shop selling strongly scented products. If appropriate, offer alternative routes, 'quiet trails', through a venue.

Sensory story

A sensory story would take a visitor on a journey through your venue using the senses. You could begin with a description of the venue and what services are included within it. You could then take visitors on a journey of what they might be expected to see, hear, smell and taste if they were to visit.

Quiet space

Some businesses are able to provide sensory rooms. These are quiet spaces usually with low lighting and comfortable seats. They may have sensory toys and specially trained staff available. If you cannot offer this, you can still be autism-friendly. Is there a quiet space within your business or service that is away from the main crowds, has low level lighting (or lighting that can be dimmed) where an autistic person and their companions could retreat to if an environment becomes too much?

Autism hour

You could organise a special autism hour during a less busy period, or this could be a quieter session just for autistic visitors. This could be a monthly event, opening an hour or two later or earlier than usual. During the autism hour you could dim your lighting and turn down music or other sounds and have staff who understand autism on hand.

Relaxed performances

Theatres, cinema and other venues that offer live entertainment could offer specific performances or screenings that are autism-friendly. This could include:

- reducing sound levels
- changing lighting
- a relaxed attitude regarding moving in and out the auditorium
- quiet areas away from the main areas of the venue
- training for staff and cast to help autistic people.

More information and useful links

Good practice guide

Our [good practice guide](#), produced in collaboration with Mind, aims to help mental health professionals adapt talking therapies for autistic adults and children.

Informed by the views of mental health professionals, over 1,500 autistic people and almost 2,000 family members, the guide describes often simple adjustments and adaptations which can make a huge difference. There's useful advice on what services can do as a whole to improve the experience of autistic people, as well as suggestions for therapy sessions. Some of the information could be useful to other health services.

➡ www.autism.org.uk/shop/products/books-and-resources/good-practice-guide

Too Much Information

The National Autistic Society's Too Much Information campaign was created to increase public understanding of the five core features of autism and to give people and understanding of the actions they can take to help autistic people.

➡ www.autism.org.uk/tmi

Some examples of autism-friendly practices

Premier League sensory rooms

Premier League clubs are starting to install sensory rooms within their football stadiums.

➡ www.premierleague.com

Thornbridge Hall sensory story

Thornbridge Hall provided a sensory story for its visitors. It's available online to read and download prior to a visit. It includes the attractions on the site and tells visitors what they might see, hear, smell and taste while on a visit.

➡ www.thornbridgehall.co.uk/accessibility

Checklist

Download the checklist from www.autism.org.uk/autismfriendlyenvironments as a starting point to the changes you can consider to make your environment more welcoming to autistic people.

Would you like recognition for the changes you have made?

The National Autistic Society can provide you with recognition for the changes you have made and the positive customer experience that autistic people can expect from your business. The Autism Friendly Award will consider the experience you offer autistic people and award those businesses that meet a high standard of autism-friendly practice. The award will not only celebrate your work but also signify to autistic customers and their families that you are committed to them having the best experience whilst they visit you.

Find out more about Autism Accreditation and the Autism Friendly Award.

➡ www.autism.org.uk/accreditation



We would like to thank the Kusuma Trust for funding the creation and publication of our autism-friendly guides, making this fantastic work possible. For more information about the Kusuma Trust and their impact in the UK, Asia and Gibraltar, please visit

➡ www.kusumatrust.org