Supporting independent travel

The ability to travel independently is a skill that is often taken for granted. Being able to use public transport is the gateway to accessing employment, education, social opportunities and support.

One young person whom I supported regularly took just over one hour to make a journey that should only last 20 minutes. They would get on their local train, alight after a few stops, wait for the next train which was on the same line and finish their journey. Taking two shorter journeys, albeit over a longer time, helped to alleviate some of the stresses they were feeling.

This is just one example of how an autistic person addresses the challenges they face in using public transport - some have creative solutions and others may need support from a relative or professional. In this article I’ll discuss some of the key challenges and solutions that I have encountered when supporting autistic adults to access public transport.

Unreliable structure

One of the most common methods of supporting autistic people is to increase the structure in any activity. Whether you are travelling by bus, train, or plane there is generally always a very specific timetable you can refer to, but as most of us will know, all transport is susceptible to delays and cancellations. Even slight deviations from the expected structure can cause a drastic negative effect. Thoughts often drift towards uncertainty, ‘If I cannot rely on my bus to be here on time then what else will go wrong?’

Solution

While structure is incredibly important, where possible it is best to allow for some flexibility in the bus/train times. Allow for a period of time that the bus will arrive as opposed to a specific minute. Many transport companies now have their own smartphone applications which update regularly with information about delays. Using such apps is likely to decrease anxiety by empowering the individual - no longer do they have to ask other people for updates, they can check for themselves.

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Visualisation

Being able to remember and visualise when a stop is approaching on public transport can be an issue for some autistic people travelling. This can be the case for familiar but particularly unfamiliar journeys.

Solution

Last year a Volunteer Mentor with The National Autistic Society Scotland encountered this problem with a young man he was supporting. To overcome it he turned the journey into a game. When they practised the journey together they picked out landmarks along the route, everything from funny billboards to notable buildings. Memorising what landmark came next created a list which could be followed to measure the journey progress and alert the young man when he was due to get off the bus.

Technology can also help to overcome this problem. Applications like Google Maps allow people to follow their journey on their mobile phones. By switching GPS on and entering a destination as the final stop, an individual can watch their progress along the highlighted route.

Buying tickets

Sometimes the only barrier to using public transport is buying the correct ticket. The terminology used by rail companies can easily cause confusion to the inexperienced traveller: what exactly does off-peak mean? Does buying a single ticket mean that I cannot travel with a friend?

To buy a ticket requires an interaction to take place, traditionally this is either with the driver or with a person behind a cubicle window. Formulating the words and putting them in the correct order to make a purchase can be challenging for some autistic people, especially if they feel the pressure of a queue of people forming behind them.

Solution

Overcoming this problem has never been easier thanks to the introduction of automated ticket machines in train stations and the latest smartphone applications that allow you to purchase bus tickets in advance.

These solutions might be enough to negate the challenge but ideally any person, regardless of ability, should be able to use some method of communication to interact when making a purchase. Good support can help but check if your local area provides tools such as Autism Alert Cards. Some transport providers are now training staff in autism awareness, and an alert card can prompt them to adapt their own behaviour and be more understanding of an autistic person’s needs.
The elements we cannot control

Using public transport will undoubtedly mean that autistic people will encounter other members of the public. While many elements of travelling can often be planned and controlled – time of arrival at the train station, which train to get on, which seat to sit at – autistic people cannot control who sits next to them. What if that person decides to start a conversation with them? They also cannot control if there is a delay, or a replacement bus service or a myriad of other variables.

Solution

What autistic people can control is how they prepare and react to any of these circumstances. A favourite tip used by a number of autistic people is to use earphones. Some will listen to their favourite songs or podcasts; others might not have anything playing. In either case, other members of the public are less likely to start a conversation with them if they have earphones in.

If there is a delay or other unexpected circumstances, then having a prepared plan would be ideal. For example, calling or texting a family member or friend could ease any anxiety caused and provide support.

It can be helpful for autistic people to know that they have a backup plan in case something does go wrong. Another good tip is to keep an emergency fund of money in the event that they may need to take a taxi - this is often a comfort that instils enough confidence to at least try some activities.

Conclusion

These are only a handful of the dozens of challenges that might affect an autistic individual. The solutions won’t work in every case but they were developed to try to overcome some of the challenges autistic people may face. Ultimately the key to overcoming most challenges is to treat the person in need of support as an individual. Do not make assumptions regarding the ease of certain activities or the appropriateness of some types of support. It might take a few weeks or it might take a few years but in my experience, the majority of autistic people are capable of travelling independently.