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Autism in museums

Museums large and small have come a long way in recent years in improving physical access to buildings and intellectual access to collections. Audio Described and British Sign Language interpreted tours are making a regular appearance in museum event programmes.

Support for families with autistic children is also slowly becoming a feature, although there is a lack of thought for autistic adults. This is particularly disappointing as museums have so much to offer in terms of work experience and volunteering opportunities, and autistic individuals in return have much to offer museums.

Barriers for autistic visitors

Autistic visitors to museums can face a number of barriers:

- travel to and from a museum via public transport can be an obstacle due to sensory and anxiety issues
- the unknown - having no idea what there is in the museum, as each gallery can be very different
- coping with sensory overload: transition from bright to low lit galleries, audio from exhibitions, noisy cafes, noise from other visitors and hand driers in toilets
- navigating large and confusing physical spaces, where it can be hard to find the exit or toilets when needed
- queuing for busy activities or exhibitions, particularly at weekends, half term and summer holidays
- unsupportive and judgmental front of house staff that have no autism awareness
- shops often placed at entrances and exits that can prove difficult to bypass.

There are lots of low-cost ways museums can provide a more supportive atmosphere, and a museum's website can be a key tool for communication in providing pre-visit information:

- sensory maps that can show quiet and noisy areas

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- details of quiet times of the day to visit,
- visual stories that can be downloaded that feature what the entrance looks like, what the staff wear and what activities might take place in the museum.

Guidance on providing an autism-friendly experience

For museums wishing to take the next step there are a number of options.

Early Openings

For busier museums, early visits before the general public have access can be useful. The Science Museum, Natural History Museum, Manchester Museum and the Great North Museum all offer early autism mornings. There are a number of elements to consider before putting on this type of event:

- consult with local autism groups for advice and feedback. The Science Museum worked with the [Southwark](#) Branch of the National Autistic Society
- train all staff. The Natural History Museum included security staff in their training. Training can also be more informal, visit another autism event and learn from that experience - e.g possibly a trip to a relaxed theatre event like the Lion King. Training doesn't have to be expensive, start by showing the National Autistic Society video "What is autism?" and build from there. Training can be cascaded through the organisation by an autism champion who can attend courses and feedback ideas
- provide pre-visit support with a visual story, have copies available on the day, and provide support to children and adults. In particular make it clear which galleries are open and when the museum will be opening to the general public
- think about an area for downtime or chill out or provide a temporary sensory space. Both the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum have a sensory space available for early morning visits, with cushions, lights and sensory toys
- offer a range of events - don't limit activities to what you think autistic visitors would like. The Science Museum had a late night for autistic young people aged 16-25 yrs, and activities included making a mission patch colouring, soldering and a lecture on mobile phone design
- the most important element to a successful programme is to gain feedback from families - evaluate what works and continually evolve the event to make sure the target audience enjoy themselves.

Backpacks

Early openings are not necessary for all museums, think of ways to help families feel welcome whenever they chose to visit.

The V&A Museum of Childhood offer families backpacks specifically aimed at autistic visitors, and the V&A offer a sensory backpack to be used as part of a visit to the Ceramics Gallery. Point to consider include:

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- work in consultation with an autism group. They can help road test the packs, offer suggestions and promote to their contacts
- backpacks can contain sensory support materials like ear defenders and [Picture Exchange Communication System \(PECS\)](#) symbols.
- backpacks can tell a story and help you navigate a gallery - think about the content and how it relates to the visit.

Further reading

[Kids in Museums](#)

[Metropolitan Museum of Art - Sensory Map](#)

[Natural History Museum Dawnosaurus](#)

[National Autistic Society Branches](#)

[National Autistic Society - What is autism?](#)

[Science Museum Early Birds Mornings](#)

[Science Museum Visual Story](#)

[V&A Museum of Childhood Autism Backpack](#)

[V&A Museum Sensory Backpack](#)

Useful information

For details of other local autism groups please visit the [Autism Services Directory](#)