

HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM BETTER WELCOME FAMILIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM?



Kids in Museums believe museums are for everyone. But many families and young people with autism find visiting museums difficult. Here are some simple ideas to help overcome hurdles faced by these families and young people. Most of these ideas are cost free – all they need is a little time and commitment.

Let your visitors be themselves. It's not a museum's job to decide what counts as proper and improper behaviour, as long as it doesn't cause discomfort and distress to other visitors. Celebrate the wonderfully diverse ways visitors respond to your objects and the stories they tell.

FIRST THINGS FIRST – make a plan

- **Decide on your aim.** What do you want to achieve? Is it to support more families with autism to visit your museum? Is it to support them to come at special times or at any time? Is it to support them to be regular repeat visitors? Is it to help them develop new skills? You can start with small ambitions and build on them.
- **Get to know autism.** There are many misconceptions. Do your research – there are suggestions of where to look below.
- **Ask families and young people what they need.** Understand what the barriers are for families with autism. What can make them reluctant visitors? What particular challenges do museums present? Talk to families with autism – link up with a local group, school or just ask around.
- **Remember not every autistic person is the same.** There's no such thing as a typical family or young person with autism. Everyone is different. Respect this and don't be surprised if what works for one family might not for another. Flexibility is key.
- **Experience what others are offering.** Look for other museums which are running successful autism programmes, some examples are below. Look for autism-friendly initiatives outside the museum sector. Go to relaxed performances at your local theatre or cinema.
- **Play to your visitors' strengths,** rather than ask families and young people with autism to conform to what you consider normal traits and behaviour. Autism isn't a problem to be solved. Your visitors can bring skills and support to your museum.
- **Aim to be inclusive.** Don't risk boxing families and young people with autism into a bit of your museum.
- **Think about families.** Make sure siblings and other family members are part of your plans. Young people with autism have sisters, brothers, cousins, grandparents and parents who want to be included too.
- **Decide on your first small step.** Make sure it's achievable. Don't try and do everything at once.
- **Include all your staff** in your plans. Security, catering assistants, cleaners, curators, front of house, volunteers and senior managers should all be aware of and share your aims.
- **Still nervous?** Get advice. See links below for where to get more information and support.

THE VISIT – some simple things you can do to make it welcoming

Create a visual story of your museum and put it on your website. It needs to include things like the lifts, toilets and café. What does the entrance look like? The galleries? The staff uniform? Short video clips can be very helpful. Below are links to some examples.

- **Use your website** to let young people and families know what to expect. Let them know about any services or support you offer. Be sure to include any major changes in your museum as soon as possible, such as construction work and refurbishments. Include information about outside the museum, as well as inside.
- **Make it clear visitors are free to enter and exit** for a break at any time during their visit – you can give them a sticker or ticket to allow re-entry.
- **Provide sensory backpacks.** They could include maps, toys to touch, activity suggestions, trails and ear defenders. Below are links to some examples.
- **Design trails to avoid areas of the museum which may be tricky.** Quiet trails, bypassing noisy places, or trails that avoid bright lights, dark spaces or crowded rooms. Point out places which have more interaction and sensory opportunities to get stuck into. You don't have to alter your galleries, just let families know what and where will work best for them.
- **Have a clear point of contact for any queries.** Advertise this on your website and at the front desk. A helpful person at the other end of a phone really helps.
- **Advertise quieter times** on your website and marketing materials. This allows families to make informed choices about when to visit.
- **Invite families and young people to the front of queues.** There might be a reason someone finds it difficult to queue that isn't immediately visible. Put up a notice that makes it clear families can ask.
- **Provide ear defenders.** There may be unexpected noises in your museum – such as visitor-activated commentaries or hand dryers in the toilet. These can cause distress.
- **Create a break out space.** Noise, bright lights and crowds can be overwhelming. Blank walls, soft colours, cushions, comfortable seating, soft blankets, stress balls, drinking water and dimmer switches are helpful. Provide sketchbooks, paper and pencils, and copies of your autism-friendly resources. You can have one object to focus on, with interpretation that supports quiet reflection. Everyone appreciates somewhere to relax.
- **Use your school lunch area at weekends for families** who'd prefer to have a quieter place to eat. Boast about providing this.
- **Trust families to know what's best for them.** Don't immediately intervene if a child has a meltdown, but give families the freedom to deal with it themselves at first. They're the experts.
- **Remember to reach out to families** who might be reluctant visitors through local networks. Let community groups and services know you're making an effort and have made changes. Ask them to spread the word.
- **Follow up with families,** children and young people. Ask them what they thought of your provision. Set yourself next steps to be even better. Being autism-friendly is a process, not a goal. You have to do it every day.

Making your museum autism aware will mean your museum is more welcoming of everyone

WHAT IS AUTISM?

Organisations who can provide information and advice:

- [Ambitious About Autism](#) is the national charity for children and young people with autism
- [The National Autistic Society](#) offers [training courses and consultancy](#) and has information on [trips to museums](#)
- [Mencap](#) provides information on autism and learning disabilities

Resources created by families and young people with experience of autism:

- Claire Madge of [Tincture of Museum](#) has a range of dedicated posts and links on [autism in museums](#) including a useful [blog post](#)
- Jack Welch talks about an autism-friendly museum [guide](#)
- Rosie Barnes has created a powerful, visual insight into life on the autism spectrum: [Understanding Stanley – Looking Through Autism](#)

Stories about autism:

- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon
A valuable insight into young people with autism spectrum conditions
- *The Reason I Jump: one boy's voice from the silence of autism* by Naoki Higashida
Naoki shows the way he thinks and feels about his world

Some of the things museums are offering:

- [Sensory packs](#) at V&A
- Pre-visit information and a chill out space at [Eureka, Halifax](#)
- Early bird, night owl events and visual stories at [Science Museum, London](#)
- Early opening and hands on activities at [Manchester Museum](#)
- Monthly relaxed visits at [The Story Museum, Oxford](#)
- Regular events at the [Royal Observatory, Greenwich, London](#)
- A visual story from [Farnham Museum, Farnham](#)
- A variety of resources from New York's [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)
- An interactive [London Virtual Tour](#) where you can look inside top attractions before visiting in person
- Stories and descriptions about visits to the [Smithsonian Institute](#) in Washington DC