

Autism Friendly Business Initiative



About Autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disability that can cause social, communication and behavioral challenges, to varying degrees. There is often nothing about how people with ASD look that sets them apart from other people, but people with ASD may communicate, interact, think, and learn in ways that are different. As a spectrum disorder, the skills and abilities of people with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged. Some people with ASD need a lot of help in their daily lives; others need less (CDC, 2017).

With about 1 in 59 individuals affected by autism and more than 3.5 million Americans living with autism, it's important that your business be ready to accommodate individuals and families affected by autism.

Through its Autism Friendly Business Initiative, the Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin is helping businesses learn more about autism and supporting them as they take steps to be more autism friendly.

People with autism have different ways of thinking and experiencing the world around them. Many people with autism have differences that affect their sensory systems and may find it challenging to keep their sensory systems regulated. Schools, businesses and others can help by assessing and modifying their environments to make them more accessible and inclusive for individuals and families with autism.

Many individuals with autism perceive sensory information such as sounds, smells, textures, tastes and sights differently. For example, certain sounds (fire alarms, vacuums, hair dryers, sirens) may be painful. Or perhaps particular smells (perfumes, candles, flowers, foods) may be overwhelming and distracting.

Various types of lighting (fluorescent) may also be extremely bothersome. Each person is different and may benefit from different accommodations (don't be afraid to ask what might help your patrons/clients!) but this resource will provide general ideas to help make your business a welcoming and friendly place for people with autism.

In addition to sensory accommodations, many people with autism will benefit from knowing what to expect when visiting your business. Offering visual supports such as social narratives could help people with autism prepare for a visit to your business. A social narrative is a visually represented story that outlines what a typical visit to your business might look like. The Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin has samples available.

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Sensory Accommodations



Auditory/Hearing

- Reduce and limit background music
- Provide seating away from kitchens, snack bars, or other areas where there tend to be unexpected noises
- Offer noise cancelling headphones
- Provide a quiet place to take breaks
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Use clear, concise sentences and short words.



Visual

- Reduce lighting (or increase if too dark)
- Avoid use of overhead fluorescent lighting
- Use natural light or lamps whenever possible
- Turn off televisions or flashing lights/signs



Tactile

- Provide easy access to small hand fidgets (i.e. squishy, soft, & textured)
- Ask before touching. For example, "May I shake your hand?" or "May I touch your wrist to take your pulse?"
- Avoid unnecessary touch whenever possible



Proprioceptive

Proprioceptive sense: knowing where your body is in space

- Communicate any structural differences that may cause someone to trip or fall
- Clearly define walkways
- Double check rugs to make sure they are secure
- Offer a weighted blanket or lap pad
- Provide visuals of your building that highlights key areas (restrooms, exits, stairs, sensory areas, etc.)



Olfaction/Smell

- Encourage staff to be fragrance/perfume free
- Eliminate air fresheners and scented candles
- Use scent-free cleaners

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General Accommodations



Presume competence. Always speak directly to the person you are communicating with, despite any apparent disability or difference. Never assume that someone can't understand you.



Be kind and respectful to everyone, even if you don't understand someone's behavior.



Welcome any tools or supports people may bring in for themselves (sunglasses, headphones, hand and oral motor fidgets, visual supports).



Embrace and welcome alternative communication methods (picture strips, typed communication, voice output).



Develop social narratives and other visual supports to help people know what to expect when visiting your business. Contact the Autism Society for examples.



Give extra processing time for people to respond before repeating yourself. Be clear and concise with verbal communication.



Add pictures/images to any written material. Example: a restaurant may add a picture of each item on their menu.



Be Flexible about trying new ideas and keep an open mind about accommodations you might not have considered before.