

Sensory-Friendly Continuum



Sensory friendly events are important to families, including people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), who may have difficulty navigating businesses due to issues with sensory stimulation. Some examples of sensory stimulation include: loud or unexpected noises or music, harsh or flashing lights, large crowds, long wait times, strong smells, or rough textures. Often, sensory friendly events are the only time a family feels comfortable visiting a business such as an aquarium, zoo, theater, or restaurant. Even a short visit with Santa or the Easter Bunny at the mall can be overwhelming for some. Providing sensory friendly activities helps bridge the gap for the families and individuals who are not yet ready to experience a business *without* sensory friendly components or accommodations. As individuals gradually adjust to the settings and find strategies for coping, they may learn to enjoy engaging in events with fewer sensory accommodations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR BUSINESSES:

It is important for businesses to offer an inclusive, welcoming environment that provides a continuum of sensory friendly opportunities. In other words, support and give guidance to families on how they can engage with your business throughout the year, not just during sensory friendly experiences.

Below are some ways to begin the continuum of experiences:

- ◆ While hosting a sensory friendly event, share information about what time the business opens to the general public. During the sensory friendly portion of the experience, encourage families to visit exhibits before they get crowded or visit high sensory exhibits before the lights or music are turned on. This way, if the individual with ASD does have to leave when the business opens to the general public, he or she will have seen some of their areas of interest.
- ◆ Provide a social experience story online so families know what to expect and can prepare for a visit during regular hours.
- ◆ Be prepared to share with guests the best days and times to visit when it's less crowded.
- ◆ Determine if your business can make accommodations for a guest's visit. For example: If a guest requested the sound turned down or strobe lights turned off for their visit, would that be possible if they called in advance?
- ◆ Consider a list of allowable items that can be brought into the business to help the individual have a successful visit. The individual may want or need to bring a soothing item, such as a stuffed animal or fidget toy. Some individuals with autism may also use a communication device that serves as their 'voice'.
- ◆ Provide a Distract Pak® that includes items specific to your business that guests could check out or borrow during their visit. CARD can provide a list of suggested items to include such as fidgets, noise cancelling headphones, or sunglasses, to reduce loud noises and strong lighting.
- ◆ Consider allowing guests with ASD to make reservations or allow a family member to 'hold' their spot in line to reduce difficult wait times.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILIES:

Below are some ways to begin to expand beyond sensory friendly experiences:

- ◆ While attending a sensory friendly event, consider extending your visit beyond the end of the event when the business opens up to the general public. During the sensory friendly portion of the experience, try to visit all the areas of your child's interest. This way, if your child does have to leave while you are extending your time, he or she will have seen some of their favorite areas.
- ◆ If your child has difficulty with crowds, extend your visit beyond the sensory friendly experience for short periods of time and try to stay in the less populated areas. Building up tolerance for sensory struggles will take time and repeated practice. You can support your child by providing practice in gradually increasing time increments.
- ◆ Review a social experience story about the venue or create your own with your child prior to attending any event. Make a list of the exhibits or activities you want to visit. Prepare for the unexpected together: What if the movie is sold out? What if the show starts late? What if our favorite exhibit, character, or ride is closed? Make some alternate plans, just in case.
- ◆ Do a "First" "Then" activity. For example: "First" we will stay at this place of business after the sensory friendly event for 30 minutes, "Then" we can leave and drive the car to get ice cream.
- ◆ Don't wait for a sensory friendly event to visit a business, but plan ahead if your child has sensory concerns. Contact the business prior to going and ask which days and times are least crowded or if any accommodations can be made during your visit.
- ◆ If permitted, bring a soothing item such as a stuffed animal or fidget toy.
- ◆ Bring noise cancelling headphones or sunglasses to reduce loud noises and strong lighting.
- ◆ Make reservations or ask another family member to 'hold' your spot in line to reduce difficult wait times. Practice 'waiting' for short periods of time.