



Autism Friendly libraries

Tips for library staff and volunteers

In partnership with...

Imagine if something as simple as going to the library had the potential to cause you stress, anxiety, embarrassment.... even a panic attack.

For people with autism, their local library can be a vital resource... as long as that library follows a few simple steps to make sure it is autism friendly.

Research shows that people with autism are much more likely than the general public to visit libraries, and to visit them twice as often.

There are around 700,000 people in the UK living with autism today - that's more than 1 in 100.

More than 90% of those people would visit the library more often if some changes were made.

Here's a few top tips...



Tolerance

Autism is a hidden disability - you can't always tell if someone has it and people sometimes wrongly think that the person is simply behaving poorly.

People with autism and those with them can easily feel judged. Simply be kind and don't judge.

Asking what you can do to help makes a huge difference.

Communication

When talking to the person, talk to them not the person with them.

It's a respect thing. Find out and use their name, and tell them yours. Ask how you can help. A little effort goes a long way.

Try to avoid broad, open-ended questions such as "what sort of books do you like?" It's much better to be more precise... "Shall I show you where the non-fiction books are?"

And remember - people with autism have very variable communication skills themselves. Get to know them and find out what works best for them.

Meltdown and Behaviour that may challenge

Autism affects everyone differently. However, some people can get easily overstimulated. This can cause a variety of different behaviours as the person is trying to cope with their environment.

It's completely normal.

You should either ignore it (unless they're damaging property or putting themselves or others at risk of harm, in which case you may need to intervene or offer additional support)...

Or, ideally, if you have a safe, quiet space, ask if they would like to use it.

Private space

Quiet or private space makes a huge difference - even if it's just an area with some beanbags, you will be opening up your library's environment.

If you can, also designate a room as a private room - a space where people with autism can wind down following a difficult time or find some quiet space.

But as we said, autism affects people differently. And the addition of a sensory space with low lighting, interesting textures and calm music represents a real gold standard. You'll need expert support to create this type of environment.

Noise and movement

For many people, the number one cause of sensory overload is noise.

Libraries are generally quiet places, and this is one of the reasons for their popularity for people with autism. But... there's a twist.

Many people with autism need a quiet environment, but make noise themselves. People might talk to themselves or others, they are easily excitable, they might move around.

You should make it clear that your library is autism friendly, and that includes tolerance of certain levels of noise.



Autism friendly signage

Lack of public awareness is a major reason for people with autism feeling excluded from the library. A critical part of being autism friendly is to advertise it.

Posters, window stickers and a range of other materials are available to help you tell your visitors that the library is autism friendly.

Other signage

Many people with autism hate uncertainty.

They need to have absolute confidence, before entering an environment, about where to go, what to do and what the schedule is. You can really help them, and the person who supports them, here.

Have a map of your library available on your website and on the front door. Signpost the different sections using visual imagery - rather than just words.

Make sure you signpost the toilets, access to drinking water, quiet or private space, in the same way.

And have a social story - a simple guide to the library and its rules - available at the front desk.

More ideas

Here's a few more important suggestions. You'll need to signpost many of these things:

- Have ear defenders available at the counter.
- If you can, take out or turn off hand driers.
- Allow people with autism to queue jump if necessary.
- Ensure there is access to water.
- Create access to computers in a private area.
- Produce a fun playspace that isn't just for toddlers.
- Open spaces with minimal clutter.
- Last but not least, consider changing the lighting. Normal strip lighting can be painful for many people with autism. Turning the lighting down, or installing autism friendly lighting, can make a huge difference.



Autism Friendly sessions

You might also want to consider running dedicated autism friendly sessions. These are popular in cinemas. Indeed, there has been over a quarter of a million visits to autism friendly screenings run in association with Dimensions.

The lights are on low, the volume is down, there is tolerance of noise and movement, and there are no trailers. In this way, people with autism can access the cinema knowing the environment will be appropriate for them.

Many have told us they would value the same from libraries. Dedicated autism friendly sessions would give people confidence that they are not being judged, that they are in a safe environment, and that people understand their needs.

Of course, as well as running specific sessions, please do make guests with autism comfortable and welcome in all library events and activities.

We hope you agree most of these changes are common sense, practical and quite simply the right thing to do.

Why not take the first steps today?

Download the promotional materials and make sure all your library staff and volunteers have watched the training film and read these top tips.

Visit www.dimensions-uk.org/autismfriendly