



# Hosting a Sensory Friendly Event

**A sensory friendly event is an event that is designed to be less sensory stimulating and overwhelming. This approach often makes it easier for individuals who have sensory sensitivities, such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who are sensitive to things like noise, colors, sounds and smells, to participate in social activities and community or professional events. If your event is open to the public, you may not know if someone planning to attend has sensory sensitivities. It is therefore important to consider ways to make events welcoming for everyone who may attend.**

## Considerations when Planning an Event

People who have sensory issues may under- or overreact to sound, touch, smell, taste and/or light. Here is a closer look at each sensory area, along with tips to make the event more welcoming.

**Sound:** Some individuals with autism may not respond when people speak to them. However, at other times they may be startled and upset by even the softest sounds. Sudden noises such as a ringing telephone can be upsetting, and they may respond by covering their ears and making repetitive noises to drown out the offending sound. Some may wear or bring headphones into new environments to block out sounds that are overwhelming.

*TIP: If your organization regularly plays background music or has displays with sound, it may be helpful to turn them down or even turn the sound off completely during the event.*

**Touch:** People with autism also tend to be highly sensitive to touch and texture against their skin. Even a pat on the back may be painful and bumping into other people in a crowded area can be physically overwhelming. Additionally, large crowds can create a feeling of claustrophobia and anxiety.

*TIP: Offer a high-five or handshake and give the person an opportunity to decline. If you anticipate a large turnout for your event, you may want to consider limiting attendance or staggering start times. Having a designated "quiet room" may also provide a break from crowds if needed.*

**Smell:** Some people with sensory issues are acutely aware of smells such as shampoo, deodorant, laundry detergent, air fresheners and fabric softener in the environment around them.

*TIP: Turn off or remove artificial air fresheners from areas that will be used during the event, including bathrooms. It may be also beneficial to request that staff refrain from wearing perfume or cologne the day of the event.*

**Taste:** Some individuals with autism follow special diets or are averse to different tastes and textures of food.

*TIP: If food will be available, be sure to provide a variety of options and, if possible, provide a way for people to notify you in advance about special dietary considerations.*

**Sight:** Bright lights can be difficult for a person with autism. Some people have such a sensitivity to light that they report being able to see the pulses in a florescent bulb. For this reason, some will wear hats and/or sunglasses indoors.

*TIP: Offer areas of dim lighting, or cover intense florescent lighting in the ceiling with fabric during the event. Allow the person with sensory issues to wear a hat or sunglasses at the event, even if the typical dress code bans them.*

**Below are some additional tips that can help make your event welcoming for individuals with autism, as well as others with sensory issues.**

### **Designate a Quiet Area**

It is important to have a designated area where people with sensory issues can take a break from the event. It should be quiet, with dim lighting and out of sight from others. The area should include places to sit and be free from excess debris and clutter. Providing access to coloring books, paper, crayons and sensory/fidget toys may also be helpful. Marking this area on a visual map and having signs on sight for attendees can be helpful, especially during large events.

### **Provide Social Stories**

For some individuals with autism, it is difficult to deviate from their normal routine. Social stories can help ease some of the anxiety of such a disruption by providing the individual with information about what they can expect at the event. Creating a social story can be as simple as taking pictures of the business or location of the event (e.g., parking lot, front door, reception area, main rooms, bathroom, quiet area) and posting them with a written description of what the individual is likely to encounter during the visit. The text should be written in the 1st person. [Click here for examples.](#)

### **Provide Sensory Toys/Activities**

Sensory toys and activities are items or motions to help satiate the sensory needs of those who need extra input to function and concentrate adequately in social environments. They can be things to squeeze, pull, swing, stretch, jump on, press, smell, listen to, chew, or look at. There are sensory toys for all five senses and do not have to be expensive or large. Providing a “sensory station” would be helpful at the event if possible.

### **Allow Support Staff to Join for Free**

Some individuals with autism have support staff to assist during community outings. This person is an integral piece to a successful outing for many individuals. Unfortunately, the burden of covering admission or event fees for the staff often falls on the individual or family and may discourage them from attending. Allowing support staff to attend at no- or lowcost will help the event be successful for everyone.

### **Ask for Feedback**

No matter the amount of training and education prior to an event, the best source of guidance will be the attendees themselves because each person’s specific needs are unique. If you are uncertain of what to do at any time, just ask. Most individuals with autism, as well as their families, will be happy to give tips, pointers and suggestions of how to help. When greeting a family for the event, be sure to tell them who to ask if they have questions or need assistance and encourage them to provide any feedback that may make the event better in the future.

### **Advertising**

If people know the event is sensory friendly, it will increase the chance people who may have been anxious about attending will feel more comfortable and welcome. Consider posting to social media as well as contacting local organizations, such as support groups. Local news and radio stations, newspapers and entertainment magazines also are a great option for getting the news out about your event.

**If you’re planning a sensory friendly event and need additional assistance, contact ASERT! We can help with locating local support groups, post the event online and provide additional training or resources for staff!**

*This information sheet was developed by the Autism Services, Education, Resources, and Training Collaborative (ASERT).*

*For more information, please contact ASERT at 877-231-4244 or [info@PAautism.org](mailto:info@PAautism.org)*

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