

Hosting an autism-friendly event

retail store

Autism-friendly events open doors to new opportunities for families living with autism and other special needs. With some simple accommodations, you can give families a shopping experience that they've never had or may have found challenging. Thank you for your support of the autism community. Your efforts play a vital role in creating greater understanding and acceptance of people with autism.

Why might a retail store be a difficult place for a person with autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. Here are three reasons why a trip to the store can present challenges for a shopper with autism:

1. Sensory differences

Everyday sounds, like the beeps from a cash register or the hum of an air conditioner, can be painfully loud and disturbing to a person on the spectrum. Overhead lighting in a store may be blinding for them. Interactions with other shoppers on a crowded day can be upsetting to someone with autism.

2. Preference for routine and predictability

Many people with autism function best when their environments are predictable and routine. The crowds, noises, lines and fast pace of a store often lead to unpredictability and discomfort.

3. Managing community challenges

Families affected by autism may choose not to go to a store to avoid having to explain a child's behavior in public. Unusual behaviors often are a sign that an autistic person is excited about or is working hard to be in a certain place or situation. People who don't know about autism often misunderstand and wrongly judge these behaviors.

What can you do to make shopping "autism-friendly"?

Providing accommodations to help support individuals with autism and their families while shopping is simple and can make all the difference for an enjoyable outing. Here's what you can do:

1. Support sensory differences

- Turn off or lower the volume of music and limit loud noises, such as announcements from overhead speakers.
- Dim the lights and turn off flashing lights.
- Have a quiet area where shoppers can go if they are feeling overwhelmed. Quiet areas can include calming activities like coloring; calming items like yoga balls; and comfortable seating like bean bag chairs.

2. Promote routine and predictability

- Use visuals – like maps, arrows, signs and photos – throughout the store to help support shoppers with autism.
- Designate a checkout lane that's free of distractions, and try to eliminate or shorten wait time. Use a queuing system that assigns a check out time for shoppers.

3. Create an inclusive environment

- Open the store early or designate a special time for shoppers with autism and special needs.
- Provide training for staff on best practices to support customers with autism. Autism Speaks can provide training resources.

We're here to help.