

Hosting an autism-friendly event

theater

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 theater 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 theater 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 theater can present challenges for a person with autism:

1. Sensory differences

Everyday sounds, like clapping or lobby music, can be painfully loud to a person on the spectrum. Sitting next to a stranger also can be upsetting.

2. Preference for routine and predictability

Many people with autism function best when their environments are predictable and routine. Having to wait through previews before a movie or a delay in a curtain opening for a stage adjustment can be enough to cause a meltdown for someone with autism.

3. Managing community challenges

Families affected by autism may choose not to go to a theater 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 the theater "autism-friendly"?

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

1. Support sensory differences

- Adjust the volume and limit noises that can be loud or startling. Offer ear plugs.
- Turn the lights up so it's not dark. Don't use bright lights on the screen.
- Have a quiet room where visitors can go if they are feeling overwhelmed. Quiet rooms 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 theater to help support visitors with autism.
- Designate a refreshment stand that's free of distractions and try to eliminate wait time.
- Start the show on time.

3. Create an inclusive environment

- Open the theater early for families to be seated without crowds or choose a show time that's less crowded.
- Provide training for staff on best practices to support people with autism. Autism Speaks can provide training resources.

We're here to help.