Autism Audits: They Might Start in the Parking Lot and End with the Toilets

After reading this brief, you should be able to,

- ○ Describe what an environmental audit is

- ○ Know how to conduct an environmental audit

- ○ Understand what should be reported - and why

Step one: Make objective measures of environmental friendliness

That's a pretty bold statement, isn't it? It's possible you are wondering how something non-living can be friendly - or not. Maybe in a literal sense that statement doesn't sound quite right, but the reality of it is the environment you are surrounded by can go a long way to promote or stifle a good vibe. An autism accessibility audit helps people prepare themselves for being out in the community - and helps the community venue know how to optimize all the things they can change, and to alert people to the things they can't. Audits can note sensory, communication, and social factors in any environment. The aim of an audit is to ensure that the space, which includes toilets, parking lots, elevators, drinking fountains, and break areas, is as accommodating as possible for neurodiverse visitors.

While anyone can assess the autism friendliness of their own venue, it's really helpful to have auditors who have practiced and learned something about the components of autism audits. This can include special educators, occupational therapists, and speech and language pathologists. Equally important are the real experts in the field - people who are neurodiverse. In fact, having a neurodiverse advisor will provide you with a level of authenticity for programming, documents, activities, and environments you intend to work in.

In the case of autism audits, whenever possible, it is helpful to have a team of neurodiverse and neurotypical auditors working together. One example might be a special education teacher with a few of their students. Another team can be members of a family who accompany a neurodiverse visitor. Team School will have the benefit of exposure to many types of neurodiversity, but the teacher just doesn't have the experience of living it. On the other hand, Team Family may only have their personal experiences to rely on, but they have lived it day in and out - they just know the drill. When a neurodiverse auditor needs help to audit, it's still worth the effort! Another valuable member of an auditing team is someone from a place that's similar to your own, because they have a pretty good idea about how the environment of your place has to operate.

There's a couple of ways to keep track of the things you learn. One simple way is for auditors to note what they discover using digital survey tools like Google forms. We use neutral statements about sensory, communication, and social aspects of the environment that are accompanied by dropdown menu options on a five point agree/disagree Likert scale. Here's an example: *The temperature of this place was just about right.* Then you can agree or disagree with that neutral statement.

You might be wondering how we pick the things we looked at in the first place. For several years we've been keeping track of what we learn from three sources: Our observations and what people tell us about places, research evidence, and well, the Internet. If you are a savvy consumer of actual facts on the Internet and don't get sidetracked - you can learn a lot.

The goal of this whole auditing process is twofold: to figure out what the autism friendliness strengths and weaknesses of any environment are, and to inform autistic people about specific aspects of the environment where they may need to use their own strategies to manage things. To help auditors objectively evaluate the environment, several things can help:

- Reviewing feedback from neurodiverse visitors themselves.

- The venue website and social media posts for information on hours, special events, busiest times, and other resources or events.
- Auditor's observations of the place.
- And we do have our favorite totally unbiased smartphone apps- here's some of our favorites:
  o A classroom noise level app can be used to note overall noise levels - usually in a visual way
  o A decibel (dB) reader app which measures overall and zone sound levels
  o An interior and exterior thermometer app to measure overall and zone temperatures
  o A light meter app to measures overall and zone lighting levels and intensity

Apps are important because they do not have an opinion and they are consistent. There is a big difference between saying something was very loud, or saying ambient noise was in the 80-decibel range. Whoa. With help, people can draw their own conclusions from this objective reporting. An example can help them get the point. Knowing that garbage disposals have a noise level of 80 dB can make a dry or boring number reporting system seem much more relatable. People have their own internal standards for comfort and measurement - and what one person describes as loud may not be the same for others.

The important part is that practice and talking through audits can help everyone come together to develop a helpful report. When auditors have finished their walkthroughs, they can share their thoughts and talk about what the digital survey forms say. Recording this conversation on a phone recording app can be really helpful - and word for word comments can juice up a report. Audits can include the following information:
- Temperature inside and outside, and if applicable, by zones
- Smells inside and outside and smells of other people

- Noise levels from inside and outside the building and if applicable, by zones

- Clarity and usefulness of visuals, signs, and labels

- Lighting inside and outside the building and if applicable, by zones

- Crowding and crowd management

- Parking, including congestion, appropriate signage, painted curbs, speed bumps and traffic buttons, pedestrian walkways, and adequate lighting

- Layout and organization of buildings and exterior spaces

- Signage for restrooms and entrances/exits

- Availability of people to help if needed, people identifiable as employees

- Communication options when purchasing items or achieving venue or event goals

- Access to different types of communication including words and images, computer keyboards, help buttons

- Space to move

- Options for comfortably using personal self-management strategies like stimming

- Safety factors including evacuation routes, surveillance, signage, identifiable personnel, store maps, and merchandise security

- And for now, COVID precautions like masks, policies, sanitization, distancing are evident

A *report for neurodiverse visitors* can include good-to-know factors, high-impact sensory, communication, and social aspects of the environment, feedback from neurodiverse individuals, and suggestions for preparing for attending the venue. The report for neurodiverse people can also include statements such as "We recommend visiting _____ to other neurodiverse people." Follow this with the option for including planning statements such as, "We recommend visitors plan for noises in the 80 dB range (loudness of a garbage disposal)."

A *report for the community* venue can include sensory, communication, and social aspects that are well managed, factors that are not modifiable, but people should be aware of, and possible recommendations. The report for the community venue can conclude with statements like "We think these are some of your environmentally friendly strengths and these are some areas you may be able to improve. Please feel free to contact us with questions or for ideas or strategies."

Reports for autism audits can look very similar to one another - and that's ok! Creating a basic template that can changed up is helpful and creates consistency. If there are action items to consider, be realistic, and make your suggestions specific. Above all - help each other out! The more audits you do, the better you will get at the whole process, the more consistently autism friendly all of your venues can be, and the more predictable things can be for autistic visitors!