



Occupational Therapists and Community Partners: Working Together to Welcome Autistic People

After reviewing this brief, you should be able to,

- Explore how perceptions of autism have changed over time
- Address social and environmental factors before, during, and after special events

If you operate a community setting or host events, have you ever wondered how to create a welcoming experience for autistic visitors? This can be a daunting task. Familiarizing yourself with how people with autism perceive and interact with the world – and what makes their experiences different from neurotypical visitors is a great first step.

Autism can be experienced in many ways, and it is often referred to as autism spectrum disorder, or ASD. Over time, there has been a trend away from thinking that having autism means something is wrong, or that it is a bad medical condition. While people have long described the person before their condition, such as saying “A person with autism,” now many insist that autism is deeply connected with their sense of self and say “An autistic person” instead. Using this way of thinking, it’s easy to see why many insist that autism is a difference to be celebrated.

While people’s perceptions of autism change over time, one thing is certain: Autism is usually typified by differences in communication and social skills, and differing perceptions of the senses around each of us. As examples, an autistic person might not use words to communicate, but instead rely on images. They might also respond to social situations with repetitive body movements or sounds instead of following the usual rules of social interaction. An autistic person might also have strong reactions to sounds and smells that other people don’t even notice.

For community partners who want to create good experiences for people with autism, there are certain things that support communication, social, and sensory differences. When these are addressed, people with autism and their families report being able to stay longer and have a great time at events. Some also feel they are less likely to have outbursts that interfere

with other visitor's experiences. In fact, autism supports are beneficial to many people, and don't detract from anyone's visit.

Community members can also count on help from occupational therapy practitioners, also known as OTs or OTPs. As professionals educated to support participation of people with differences and disabilities, they can help community members prioritize the autism-friendly supports that can be put in place and eliminate the extra work behind creating accommodations that aren't all that helpful. Let's look at some of the ways community venues and events can be optimized for people with autism:

Community venues can put plans in place before people with autism visit, including

- Doing an autism-friendliness audit, checking for communication, social and sensory supports
- Mapping an autism-friendly route
- Using signage with photos, graphics, and clear words
- Educating staff and volunteers
- Designing ways to collect visitor feedback
- Enlisting occupational therapists and students, and
- Posting information on the internet such as etiquette, rules, expectations, and success stories

Many supports can be put into place for people to use during visits, including

- Providing special ways for autistic visitors to check in
- Using signage that has a variety of ways of communicating, such as photos and icons.
- Creating temporary or permanent sensory havens and
- Designing autism-friendly activity stations

Even after the visit, there are ways to learn from visitors such as

- Using visitor feedback to develop future events
- Writing visit summaries of successes and needs for improvement, and
- Writing grant applications seeking funding for future plans

Planning for autism is an ongoing process that relies on teamwork, hearing multiple points of view, and being willing to discard old ideas while inventing new ones. Community partners should celebrate their efforts, continue their collaborations, and stay informed on the latest trends in autism research and activities.