

Neurodiversity in Museums: Crafting Community for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Presented by Jackie Spainhour on January 15, 2020

Themes/Key Ideas

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a variety of developmental impairments that effect socialization, behavior and communication. Designing museum programs for children with ASD promotes an inclusive environment beneficial to all patrons.

Jackie Spainhour provides ten concrete steps including staff training, fidget baskets, and social stories that museums can take to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for children with ASD.

Examples

[The Hunter House Victorian Museum](#) in Norfolk, Virginia offers a fidget basket and quiet space. Their staff is also trained to help neurodivergent guests.

[The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) offers extensive resources including sensory maps for visitors with ASD and their families.

[The Houston Museum of Natural Science](#) offers social stories, sensory maps, fidget kits, and sensory days.

[The Thinkery](#) in Austin offers sensory-friendly hours.

Resources

One of the best resources is your [local ASD community](#). Collaboration with these groups can ensure programming is inclusive and effective.

[Autism in Museums](#) is a UK based blog that provides helpful information on inclusive practices that can be applied to many institutions.

[Email Jackie Spainhour](#) with questions.

Helpful Tips

Have a fidget basket or backpack that includes sensory toys, headphones, or tinted glasses to help children stay grounded in their surroundings.

Dedicated quiet areas with low lighting and various sensory objects are helpful for children who get overwhelmed in the museum. If there is no building space for a specific room, a small pop-up tent in a quiet area or a spot outside could be used.

Empathy training for staff not only enables them to better help children with ASD but improves interactions and experiences with all patrons.

[Social stories](#) are imperative as they allow parents to prepare their children for the museum ahead of time.

Providing special sensory hours is important but should not be the only resource offered for sensory inclusion. The goal of programs should be inclusion within normal operating hours.