

Hosting an Autism-Friendly Event

RESTAURANTS

Autism-friendly events open doors to new opportunities for families living with autism and other special needs. Through some relatively simple accommodations, you can provide families the chance to experience a meal out at a restaurant that they may not have experienced before 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 Restaurant Be a Difficult Place for a Person with Autism?

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder, refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. There are three reasons why a trip to a restaurant might present challenges for a diner with autism:

1. Sensory Challenges

It is often said that people with autism see the world differently than their peers. Everyday sounds like the beeping sound made by a cash register or the hum of an air conditioner, might be excruciatingly loud to a person on the spectrum. Interactions with a large crowd of diners could be upsetting to a child or adult with autism.

2. Need for Routine and Predictability

Many people with autism function best when their environments are predictable and routine. Waiting an extra ten minutes for his or her food can be enough to cause a meltdown for a person with autism because he or she is not able to eat at the anticipated and desired time. The crowds, noises and fast pace of a restaurant can all often lead to unpredictability and discomfort.

3. Family's Fear of Judgment

Finally, many families affected by autism may choose not to dine out for fear of disturbing other diners or being judged for their child's behavior. This fact alone may inhibit a family from dining out.

What Can You Do to Make a Restaurant Experience "Autism-Friendly"?

Accommodations to help relieve the challenges presented by a meal at a restaurant are relatively simple and can allow families in the autism community the chance to enjoy such an exciting occasion. Suggestions include:

1. Addressing Sensory Challenges

- Turn off or lower music and limit the potential for loud noises, such as clanging pots.
- Dim the lights and turn off flashing lights.
- Reserve tables in the quietest part of your restaurant. If possible, designate a "quiet room" in the restaurant where diners can go if they are feeling overwhelmed. Quiet rooms can include calming activities like coloring.

2. Addressing Routine/Predictability

- Use visuals throughout the restaurant to help support diners with autism—such as maps, arrows, signage, photos, etc.
- Do your best to eliminate wait time and provide the most accurate timing estimates. A queuing system that assigns a specific time for the food to arrive can be very beneficial. Ask if the family would like the bill with their meal or afterwards.

3. Addressing Fear of Judgment

- Consider opening the restaurant early or designating a special time for visitors with autism and special needs. If this is not possible, choose a time when crowds are at a minimum.
- Provide basic training for staff on best practices to support diners with autism. Autism Speaks can provide training materials.