

# CRITERIA FOR AUTISM FRIENDLY SPACES

POINTS OF CONNECTION PROJECT



## About Points of Connection

Points of Connection is a KA2 project funded by Erasmus+. The main objective of 'Points of Connection' is to foster better inclusion of autistic young people in our communities.

This has been done through:

1. Creation of an online Quality of Life inclusive measure and gathering of data on the Quality of Life of autistic young people in different countries.
2. Supporting in making services and public/private sectors more accessible for persons with autism in the different project countries
3. Finding points of connection to explore different platforms by autistic young people and neurotypical peers.

The project has a group of autistic young people from 5 partner countries who worked with the management team throughout the whole project.

**Points of Connection:** Autism in the Community is a project funded by Erasmus+. The coordinator is Prisms Malta, leading a consortium which includes Fundacja Imago based in Poland, Autisme-Europe based in Belgium, CRPD Malta, PLOES based in Greece, Federacio Catalana d'Autisme based in Spain and Associacao Portuguesa Voz do Autista.

Please follow the website for more information: <https://pointsofconnection.prismsmalta.com/>

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Research for this criteria has been done by the partners in the consortium of Points of Connection. Some of the criteria is an updated version of the research used in Autism Friendly Spaces project. All the information in this document has been compiled by Prisms Malta and Federacio Catalana d'Autismo.

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01

# INTRODUCTION





Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects communication, social interaction, and behaviour. Recent data from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that approximately 1 in 36 children in the United States is diagnosed with autism (2023).

## Exclusion and the Social Challenges of Autistic Individuals

Autistic individuals frequently face social exclusion due to challenges in communication, sensory processing, and social interactions. These challenges often lead to isolation, loneliness, and mental health struggles, particularly for those who do not receive adequate support (Mazurek, 2014). Research indicates that autistic individuals are more likely to experience social rejection in school, workplace, and community settings (Sasson et al., 2017).

Each exclusionary experience accumulates over time, reinforcing barriers to education, employment, healthcare, and social participation. According to Autism-Europe (2023), many autistic people face obstacles in accessing:



### Education

Lack of autism-friendly classrooms and insufficient teacher training.



### Employment

Only 10-20% of autistic individuals are employed, largely due to workplace inaccessibility and bias (Hedley et al., 2017).



### Healthcare

Many healthcare providers lack autism-specific training, leading to misdiagnosis, poor communication, and inadequate care (Nicolaidis et al., 2013).



### Community Participation

Public spaces, social events, and even daily activities (e.g., shopping, using public transport) are often overwhelming due to sensory overload and lack of accommodations (Davidson, 2010).

## The Role of Public Awareness, Support Services, and Policies

To foster inclusion, greater awareness among the general public, specialized support services, and inclusive policies are essential. Studies highlight the positive impact of community-based interventions that promote autism-friendly spaces, sensory accommodations, and workplace training programs (Guldberg et al., 2017).

Public policies play a crucial role in inclusion. Governments must ensure:

- Implementation of reasonable accommodations in schools and workplaces.
- Legislation enforcing inclusive practices in public services.
- Better funding for autism support services, including mental health resources.

## Legal Framework for Inclusion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasizes the right to community inclusion under Article 19, stating that people with disabilities, including autistic individuals, must have equal access to services, education, and employment (UNCRPD, 2006). This principle aligns with the European Disability Rights Strategy (2021-2030), which calls for autism-friendly policies and support systems across all EU member states (European Commission, 2021).



02

RATIONALE







## SECTION 01

# Accessibility

Accessibility for people with disabilities, including autistic people, is legally enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 9 mandates that persons with disabilities must have equal access to:

- The physical environment,
- Transportation,
- Information and communications, including digital technologies, and
- Other public facilities and services, in both urban and rural areas.

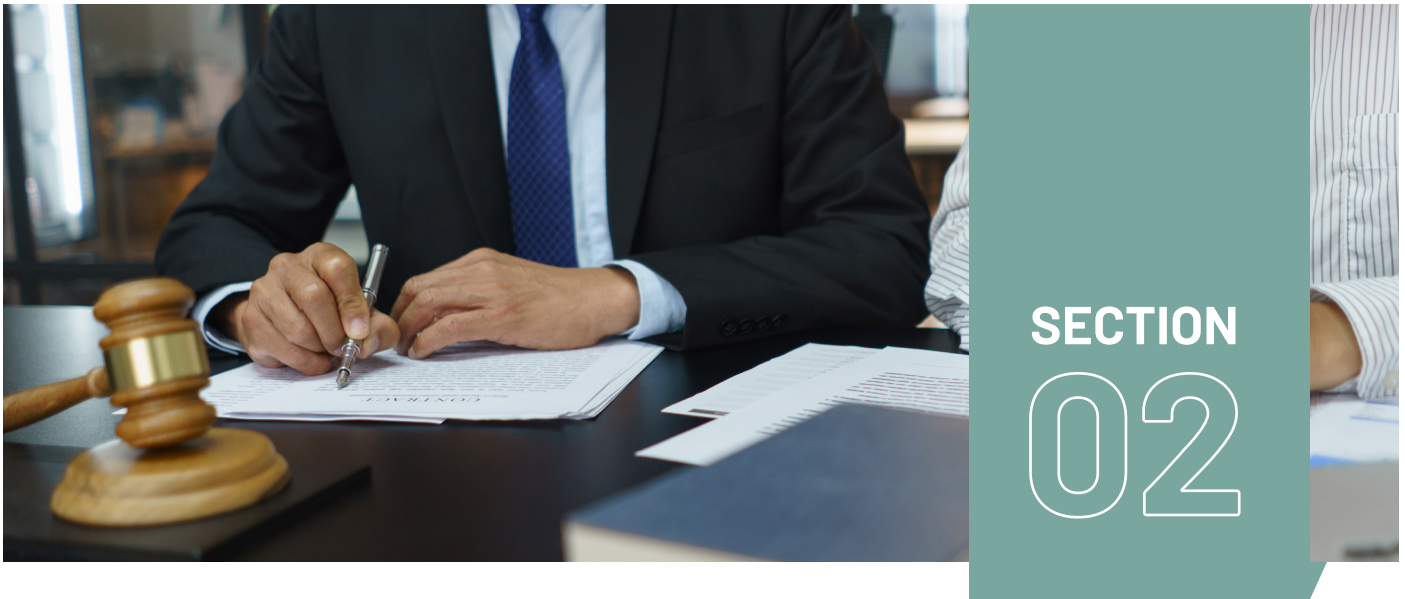
Article 9 specifically highlights the need for accessible communication technologies. However, for autistic people, accessibility extends beyond simplified language or pictograms. True accessibility requires:

- Simplifying complex structures and processes in services and products,
- Designing user-friendly interfaces that accommodate cognitive processing differences, and
- Developing adaptable systems that minimize sensory overload and improve navigation.

The European Accessibility Act (EAA), adopted in 2019, is a key EU directive aimed at regulating accessibility standards for products and services. While the EAA has a limited scope, it represents a critical first step toward improving accessibility for autistic people and others with disabilities.

It is essential that European Economic Area (EEA) member states take proactive measures to fully implement and enforce the EAA at the national level, ensuring that accessibility is not just a legal requirement but a practical reality for autistic individuals.





SECTION  
02

## The Legal Framework

To enforce and monitor the legal framework established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was established. The active participation of civil society, particularly persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, is crucial in the monitoring and implementation processes. Organizations of people with disabilities and self-advocates are integral to this monitoring process.

Autism-Europe contributes to this effort by submitting alternative reports to the CRPD. Notably, on 14 February 2022, Autism-Europe submitted its alternative report focusing on the specific challenges faced by autistic individuals and their families within the European Union. This report addressed issues such as discrimination, lack of mutual recognition of autism diagnoses, and the limited scope of the European Accessibility Act.

At the European Union level, the EU Framework for the UNCRPD was established in 2013 to promote, protect, and monitor the implementation of the Convention. The European Disability Forum (EDF) is a full member of this framework, alongside the European Ombudsman, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, and the European Parliament.

In 2022, the EDF submitted an alternative report examining the EU's implementation of the Convention since its first review in 2015. The collaboration between these organizations and the active involvement of civil society are essential to ensure that the rights enshrined in the UNCRPD are effectively upheld across Europe.



# Sensory Processing of People on the Autism Spectrum

Many autistic individuals experience difficulties in processing sensory information, such as sounds, lights, smells, and textures. These sensory sensitivities can be overwhelming and significantly impact daily life, well-being, and participation in society. Unlike neurotypical individuals, autistic people often process sensory input differently, leading to either hypersensitivity (over-responsiveness) or hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness). This can result in stress, anxiety, discomfort, or even physical pain when exposed to overwhelming environments. For example, loud environments, flickering lights, or strong odors can be distressing and, in extreme cases, trigger shutdowns or meltdowns. Yet, autistic individuals are often expected to simply cope with these challenges, despite the lack of adequate accommodations in public spaces.

## Survey on Autism-Friendly Public Spaces

A survey conducted by Autism-Europe and its partners within the Autism Friendly Spaces project (October 2020 – January 2021) gathered 128 complete responses from autistic individuals about the challenges they face in public spaces. The survey revealed that noise levels were the biggest challenge for autistic individuals, especially in indoor environments.

While reducing noise in outdoor spaces can be difficult, indoor environments can be significantly improved through structural modifications, such as:

- Soundproofing walls, floors, and ceilings to minimize echoes and background noise.
- Providing designated quiet areas where individuals can regulate their sensory input.
- Installing noise-reducing materials, such as carpets, acoustic panels, and soft furnishings.

The survey also highlighted other common difficulties autistic individuals face in navigating public spaces, including:

- **Crowds and Spatial Awareness:** Large crowds can be overwhelming due to unpredictable movements, proximity to strangers, and increased noise levels. Clear wayfinding systems, separate entry points, and controlled crowd management strategies can make spaces more autism-friendly.
- **Lighting Sensitivities:** Harsh fluorescent lighting, flickering lights, and extreme brightness can be distressing. Using adjustable lighting, natural light, and warm-toned LEDs can create more comfortable environments.
- **Accessible Communication:** Many public spaces lack clear, autism-friendly communication methods. Providing visual guides, pictograms, social stories, and alternative communication methods can help autistic individuals navigate environments more comfortably.

## The Need for Changes

For public spaces to be truly inclusive, universal design principles must be integrated into urban planning, architecture, and policymaking. This means ensuring that sensory-friendly spaces, clear communication systems, and flexible accommodations are not just afterthoughts but fundamental aspects of accessibility.

By implementing these adjustments, businesses, institutions, and public spaces can significantly improve accessibility for autistic individuals, enhancing their independence, participation, and overall quality of life.

## The Need for Autism-Friendly Spaces: The SPACE Framework

Creating autism-friendly spaces is not just about accommodation—it is about ensuring accessibility, dignity, and comfort for autistic individuals in all areas of life. Many environments, particularly healthcare settings, public spaces, workplaces, and educational institutions are often not designed with neurodiversity in mind. This can result in barriers that prevent autistic individuals from fully participating in society, leading to increased anxiety, sensory overload, and avoidance of essential services.

The SPACE Framework is a structured approach that guides the development of autism-friendly environments by addressing key sensory, social, and communication challenges. It provides practical recommendations to make spaces more inclusive and accessible for autistic individuals.

## Understanding the SPACE Framework

The SPACE Framework is built on five core principles:

- Sensory
- Predictability
- Acceptance
- Communication
- Empathy

These five areas are essential in removing barriers and creating inclusive environments that reduce stress and improve experiences for autistic individuals.



## Sensory Considerations in Autism-Friendly Spaces

Sensory processing differences are a core aspect of autism, meaning that environments filled with unpredictable sensory input can become overwhelming, distressing, and even painful. To better accommodate autistic individuals, it is important to consider modifications in the following sensory areas:

SENSATION	CONSIDERATIONS
Sight	Many autistic individuals experience visual sensitivities, where bright lights, flickering bulbs, and overly stimulating décor can be distressing. Even subtle stimuli like overhead rotary fans, high-contrast patterns, or excessive signage can contribute to sensory overload.
Sound	Environmental noise, including background chatter, humming machines, and traffic noise, can be distracting or distressing. Unlike neurotypical individuals, autistic people may struggle to filter out irrelevant sounds, making it harder to focus or communicate.
Smell	Many autistic individuals are hypersensitive to smell, perceiving common scents as overwhelming or even noxious. Others may have reduced sensitivity, making it difficult to detect odors like smoke or spoiled food.
Taste	Sensory differences in taste and texture can result in strong food preferences or aversions. Many autistic individuals prefer consistent, familiar foods and may react negatively to unexpected changes in texture or flavor. This can also extend to medication formulations.
Touch	Tactile sensitivities vary widely, from an inability to tolerate certain fabrics to discomfort with physical touch. In medical or social settings, unexpected or casual touch can cause distress, while firm pressure (such as deep-pressure touch) may be more tolerable.
Temperature	Many autistic individuals have altered temperature sensitivity, making it difficult to regulate body temperature or dress appropriately for the weather.
Proprioception	Some autistic individuals seek intense movement and pressure, leading to behaviors like rocking, jumping, or swinging. Others may experience balance difficulties or require additional spatial awareness support.
Interoception & Pain	Many autistic individuals struggle to recognize internal sensations, including hunger, thirst, pain, or fatigue. This can result in unrecognized injuries or difficulties expressing discomfort. Others experience increased pain sensitivity, requiring careful attention to how pain is assessed and managed.

## Implementing the SPACE Framework in Practice

The SPACE Framework provides specific recommendations to create environments that accommodate sensory, social, and communication needs.

### 1. Sensory Adjustments

- Sight:
  - Use adjustable lighting (dimnable or natural light where possible).
  - Remove flickering lights or visually overstimulating elements.
  - Allow for the use of sunglasses in bright indoor environments.
- Sound:
  - Reduce auditory clutter by minimizing background noise.
  - Provide quiet rooms or noise-free hours.
  - Encourage the use of noise-canceling headphones.
- Smell:
  - Avoid strong perfumes, scented cleaning products, or air fresheners.
  - Improve ventilation to reduce overwhelming smells.
- Taste:
  - Respect food preferences by offering sensory-friendly meal options.
  - Provide medication alternatives (liquid, chewable, or dissolvable).
- Touch:
  - Avoid unnecessary casual touch.
  - Offer sensory-friendly clothing choices.
  - Allow the use of weighted blankets or sensory aids.
- Temperature & Proprioception:
  - Ensure temperature adjustments are available.
  - Recognize different movement needs (e.g., seating that allows rocking or movement breaks).

### 2. Predictability & Routine

- Provide clear schedules and advanced notice of changes.
- Offer social stories and visual guides explaining what to expect.
- Minimize waiting times or allow for appointments at quieter hours.

### 3. Acceptance & Inclusion

- Train staff to understand and accommodate autistic individuals.
- Encourage flexible policies to support individual needs.
- Foster a culture of respect and patience in public settings.

#### 4. Communication Accessibility

- Use simple, clear, and direct language.
- Provide visual supports such as signage with symbols, written instructions, and step-by-step guides.
- Offer alternative communication methods (AAC, text-based communication, or written summaries).

#### 5. Empathy & Emotional Support

- Recognize sensory distress and provide support without judgment.
- Allow for personal coping strategies (e.g., fidget items, stimming, avoiding eye contact).
- Encourage autonomy while providing necessary accommodations.







03

# CRITERIA FOR AUTISM FRIENDLY SPACES ACCREDITATION

This Accreditation system enables private sectors and public entities to apply for the 'Autism Friendly' Certificate.

The **general criteria** for being granted the accreditation certificate include:

#### A: Staff Training



Choosing minimum two employees per service for staff training – this can be through the online modules at [www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu/online](http://www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu/online) modules or asking for a live training about awareness about autism. At completion, they will receive a certificate. They will be the main reference point to provide guidance to customers/clients regarding autism.

#### B: Adjustment of physical space



Adjustment for physical space to better cater for people with autism will be done. This will be done with guidance by professional people in the area. This can include an on-visit check, depending on the type of service to be accredited

#### C: Adjustment of physical space



This includes being part of the campaign for this service of accreditation; being included in our mobile app and website. We also encourage accredited services to campaign about their accredited – and this would in turn raise awareness about autism in the communities.

Following this, according to the type of service being accredited, different specific criteria and suggestions are in place. In the following sections, different services are highlighted with more information about accreditation of the different services.







SECTION

01

# Retail & General Services

## 1. Supermarkets

### Challenges Faced by Autistic Individuals in Supermarkets

Supermarkets can be overwhelming environments for autistic individuals due to intense sensory stimuli such as bright lighting, loud noises, strong smells, and crowded spaces.

A focus group and qualitative interviews conducted by Ashley Robertson (2013), explored the sensory challenges faced in supermarket environments.

Key findings included:



#### Visual Sensitivities

Bright lights, particularly humming fluorescent lights, were described as “artificial” and “horrible.” One participant reported that supermarket lighting caused headaches and nausea, while another described an effect where certain colors made time feel “disjointed.”



#### Auditory Overload

The combination of background music, checkout beeps, and loudspeaker announcements can create an overwhelming sound environment, leading to anxiety and distress.



#### Cognitive Overload

The number of tasks required to complete a shopping trip can be overwhelming. Autistic individuals reported stress caused by navigating aisles, remembering to bring multiple items (coins, bags, membership cards, tickets), and packing groceries quickly at checkout.



## First-Hand Accounts from Autistic Individuals and their caregivers

Several individuals and support persons provided insights into key challenges autistic individuals face in supermarkets:

### ● Cognitive Load & Checkout Anxiety:

*"I used to just think about bringing my wallet, now I have to think about a coin for a shopping cart, a ticket for the parking spot, a reusable bag, a member's card... but the fact that you have to be fast at the checkout counter and pack everything very fast is a bigger problem than anything above."* – Autistic person from Belgium

### ● Queueing Difficulties & Need for Priority Access:

*"Persons with autism should have priority when waiting in queues, no matter where."* – Support person from North Macedonia

### ● Need for Autism Awareness Among Supermarket Staff:

*"Supermarkets should have a period of time stipulated for them. [...] More awareness to the employees at the shop about autism."* – Support person from Malta

## Recommendations for Autism-Friendly Supermarkets

To create a more accessible and sensory-friendly environment, supermarkets should implement simple but effective adjustments:

### 1. Sensory Modifications

- Soft lighting (avoid fluorescent or flickering lights).
- Reduce or eliminate loud background music and unnecessary announcements.
- Turn off beeping and loud noises from checkout machines where possible.
- Minimize strong smells (e.g., cover strong-smelling foods like fresh fish).

### 2. Communication & Wayfinding

- Clear visual signage: Use pictograms or images to indicate the contents of each aisle.
- Social stories or visual shopping guides to help autistic individuals navigate the supermarket.
- Simple language for signage and store policies.

### 3. Checkout & Queueing Accommodations

- Priority checkout lanes for autistic customers to reduce waiting times.
- Longer time to pack groceries at checkout without pressure.
- Self-checkout stations with sensory-friendly options (no sudden beeps or flashing screens).

### 4. Designated Quiet Hours & Spaces

- Quiet shopping hours: Supermarkets should implement dedicated sensory-friendly shopping times (e.g., early morning or late evening) with dimmed lights and reduced noise levels.
- Quiet room (if space allows): A designated area for autistic individuals to take a break if needed.

### 5. Pre-Preparation of Products

- Pre-grated cheese and other processed products to reduce the need for manual preparation (which can create unwanted sensory experiences) when possible.

Supermarkets play a crucial role in everyday life, and ensuring they are accessible to autistic individuals is an essential step toward inclusivity. By implementing simple yet impactful adjustments,

supermarkets can reduce sensory barriers, ease cognitive stress, and create a more positive shopping experience for autistic individuals and their families.

Creating an autism-friendly shopping environment is not just beneficial for autistic people—it improves accessibility for all customers, including those with sensory sensitivities, anxiety disorders, and other disabilities.

## 2. Retail Shops

### Challenges Faced by Autistic Individuals in Retail Stores

Retail environments can be overwhelming for autistic individuals due to sensory overload, unpredictable social interactions, and a lack of accommodations. Many shops are designed with a focus on aesthetic appeal and marketing rather than accessibility, making the shopping experience difficult for those with sensory sensitivities.

Lynne Soraya (2015), in her personal account *Shopping While Autistic*, describes the significant barriers autistic people face in retail spaces. She highlights how bright fluorescent lights, unpredictable social interactions, strong smells, and background noise contribute to stress and exhaustion while shopping. This is further supported by research from the National Disability Authority (2017), which states that many autistic individuals experience sensory processing difficulties and that creating 'low arousal' environments is key to ensuring accessibility.

To make retail shops more autism-friendly, sensory adjustments and staff awareness must be prioritized. It is also essential that accessibility assessments consider not just physical barriers (e.g., wheelchair accessibility) but also sensory and cognitive accessibility to create a truly inclusive space.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Retail Shops

#### 1. Sensory-Friendly Environment

- Use fragrance-free cleaners to avoid strong chemical smells that may cause distress.
- Dim the lighting and use non-fluorescent bulbs to reduce visual sensitivity.
- Minimize background noise: Mute screens, lower speaker volumes, and limit loud announcements.
- Provide a low-arousal shopping experience, particularly during dedicated quiet hours.

#### 2. Clear Communication & Predictability

- Ensure clear and simple signage throughout the store, using pictograms and visual labels.
- Organize shelves and aisles in a structured, predictable manner.
- Offer visual shopping guides or social stories to help autistic individuals navigate the store comfortably.

#### 3. Personalized & Flexible Shopping Options

- Offer appointment-based to allow autistic customers to shop in a quieter environment with one-on-one assistance if needed.
- Allow online ordering with flexible pickup times to reduce time spent in-store.
- Provide a quiet area where individuals can take a break if feeling overwhelmed; if the space allows.

#### 4. Accommodations for Children & Families

- Offer sensory toys or fidget items at checkout counters to help autistic children manage sensory input.
- Provide flexible queuing options, such as a priority checkout lane for autistic customers to avoid long wait times.

Accrediting a retail shop as autism-friendly is not just about meeting minimum accessibility requirements—it is about creating a welcoming and inclusive shopping environment where autistic individuals and their families can shop comfortably, independently, and confidently.

By implementing these sensory-friendly policies, staff training programs, and personalized accommodations, businesses can enhance customer experience, improve accessibility, and foster inclusivity.

## 3. Restaurants & Cafeterias

### The Need for Autism-Friendly Restaurants & Cafés

For many autistic individuals, dining out can be an overwhelming experience due to sensory sensitivities, unpredictable environments, and communication challenges. Bright lighting, loud background music, and crowded spaces can increase anxiety and discomfort, making it difficult for autistic people and their families to enjoy meals in public settings.

In 2016, the Autism Society of America, in collaboration with several partners, launched a nationwide initiative to encourage businesses, including restaurants and cafés, to become autism-friendly. The program emphasized the importance of using universal design principles, ensuring that accommodations not only benefit autistic individuals but improve the dining experience for everyone.

Similarly, the National Autistic Society UK (2020) highlights that many autistic individuals struggle with noisy environments, and that a calmer, more structured setting can reduce stress and create a more inclusive dining experience.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Restaurants & Cafés

#### 1. Sensory-Friendly Dining Environment

- Use dimmable lighting to allow customers to adjust brightness levels.
- Lower music volume or provide silent dining hours for a calmer atmosphere.
- Minimize noise pollution by using sound-absorbing materials, such as carpets, wall panels, or soft furnishings.
- Offer a designated quiet area where guests can enjoy their meals without background noise.

#### 2. Accessibility & Communication Accommodations

- Provide easy-to-read menus with clear labelling of ingredients and allergens.
- Include visual menus with pictures to help autistic individuals understand meal options.
- Use clear signage across the restaurant, including symbols for restrooms, exits, and order pickup areas.

#### 3. Food & Dietary Accommodations

- Ensure gluten-free and allergen-friendly options are clearly marked on the menu.
- Provide customizable meal options to accommodate sensory preferences (e.g., allowing customers to request food without sauces or seasonings).

#### 4. Booking & Flexible Dining Options

- Offer reservation-based dining options to allow autistic individuals and families to plan their visit in advance.
- Provide online pre-ordering services to reduce wait times and minimize social anxiety.
- Allow flexible seating arrangements so customers can choose quieter tables or areas with less foot traffic.

Becoming an autism-friendly restaurant or café is not just about meeting accessibility requirements—it's about creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone can enjoy their dining experience comfortably. By implementing sensory-friendly adjustments, improving staff awareness, and offering accessible communication options, restaurants and cafés can significantly enhance the experience for autistic customers, their families, and the wider community.

An inclusive dining environment benefits all customers—not just autistic individuals—but also people with sensory sensitivities, social anxiety, or other disabilities, making the restaurant more inviting to a broader customer base.

## 4. Bank

### The Need for Autism-Friendly Banks

For many autistic individuals, visiting a bank can be an overwhelming experience due to sensory overload, complex communication processes, and rigid bureaucratic procedures. Bright lighting, long

wait times, confusing paperwork, and fast-paced interactions with bank staff can increase anxiety and stress, making banking difficult for autistic people and their families.

Autistic individuals may also face barriers in understanding financial terminology, managing accounts, and navigating digital banking services, which can impact their financial independence. To address these challenges, autism-friendly banking initiatives focus on improving accessibility, reducing sensory barriers, and fostering better staff awareness.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Banks

#### 1. Sensory-Friendly Banking Environment

- Use soft lighting and avoid flickering fluorescent lights that can be overwhelming. If the bank already has fluorescent lights, dim or do not switch them all at once.
- Reduce background noise by lowering music volume and limiting loudspeaker announcements.
- Create a designated quiet waiting area where customers can wait in a low-stimulation environment.

#### 2. Clear Communication & Accessibility

- Provide easy-to-read banking documents with simplified language and visual explanations.
- Offer alternative communication methods such as picture-supported instructions, assistive technology, or quiet, one-on-one consultations.
- Ensure that ATMs and self-service machines have user-friendly interfaces with options for adjustable screen brightness and text-to-speech features.
- Implement clear wayfinding signage throughout the bank using icons and color-coded areas to help customers navigate independently.



### 3. Staff Training & Customer Support

- Offer an “Autism-Friendly Banking Representative” service, where a designated staff member is trained to provide additional support.
- Allow flexible appointment times so that customers can book quieter periods to avoid long queues and rushed interactions.

### 4. Flexible Banking Services & Digital Accessibility

- Develop autism-friendly online banking platforms with simplified navigation, visual aids, and clear step-by-step instructions.
- Offer pre-booked appointments for in-person services to reduce wait times and unpredictability.
- Provide digital banking assistance via chat or email for customers who prefer written communication over phone calls.
- Ensure accessibility in mobile banking apps by allowing users to customize font sizes, colors, and contrast settings.

### 5. Accommodations for In-Person Banking

- Implement priority service for autistic individuals to reduce waiting times and minimize stress.
- Provide quiet rooms for private financial discussions in a low-stimulation environment.
- Allow for a trusted support person (e.g., caregiver or family member) to accompany autistic individuals when needed.
- Offer a “Know Your Customer” (KYC) option where autistic customers can register their needs in advance to receive personalized banking assistance.
- Offer a social story or a video walk through so that autistic persons can familiarise themselves prior to the visit to the bank.
- Offer an option of noise reducing headphones and sensory fidget toys.

Accrediting a bank as autism-friendly is not just about ensuring compliance with accessibility standards—it’s about fostering financial inclusion, independence, and confidence for autistic individuals. By implementing sensory-friendly modifications, improving staff awareness, and offering flexible financial services, banks can make financial systems more accessible and empower autistic individuals to manage their finances with ease.

Creating an autism-friendly banking environment benefits all customers—not just autistic individuals—but also those with anxiety disorders, learning disabilities, and other cognitive differences, ultimately making banking more inclusive for everyone.





## SECTION 02

# Travel & Transportation

## 1. Airports

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Airports

Airports are often bustling environments filled with unfamiliar sights, sounds, and procedures, which can be particularly overwhelming for autistic individuals. Recognizing these challenges, several international airports have implemented programs to create more inclusive and supportive experiences for neurodiverse travelers.

For instance, Malta International Airport has been awarded the 'Autism Friendly Spaces' accreditation certificate by Prisms. This accreditation acknowledges the airport's commitment to accessibility and its efforts to support autistic passengers through various services and facilities.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Airports

#### 1. Sensory-Friendly Environment

- Quiet Spaces: Provide designated quiet areas where travellers can retreat from the bustling terminal environment. Offer a quiet room, if possible, as part of its journey facilitation service, allowing passengers to relax in a low stimulation setting.
- Controlled Lighting and Sound: Implement adjustable lighting and minimize unnecessary noise in certain areas to reduce sensory overload.

#### 2. Pre-Travel Preparation

- Visual Guides: Offer downloadable visual guides that outline the airport journey step-by-step.
- Offer social stories/guides to help passengers familiarize themselves with the terminal layout and procedures before their trip.
- Practice Runs: Allow families to schedule visits to the airport prior to their departure date, enabling them to experience the environment and processes in a controlled manner.

### 3. Streamlined Procedures

- **Fast-Track Services:** Implement fast-track options through security and boarding processes to minimize waiting times and reduce stress. Malta International Airport offers fast-track assistance as part of its services for autistic passengers.
- **Assisted Check-In:** Provide dedicated assistance during check-in to help with baggage handling and navigating the terminal.

### 4. Clear Communication

- **Simplified Signage:** Use clear and straightforward signage with visual aids to assist in navigation.
- **Information Accessibility:** Ensure that all informational materials are available in easy-to-understand formats, including visual stories and guides.

Achieving autism-friendly accreditation signifies an airport's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. By implementing these measures, airports not only enhance the travel experience for autistic individuals and their families but also set a standard for others in the industry to follow. Creating an environment that accommodates the needs of all passengers fosters a more welcoming and efficient travel experience for everyone.

## 2. Public Transportation

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Public Transportation

Accessible public transportation is fundamental for daily life, providing access to education, employment, healthcare, and social participation. Many autistic individuals do not have a driver's license and rely on public transit as their primary mode of transportation. However, research indicates that autistic individuals frequently encounter significant barriers when using buses, trains, taxis, and other forms of transit, which often hinder their full participation in society (Deka et al., 2016).

The most common barriers faced by autistic individuals when using public transportation include:

- **Sensory Overload:** The combination of loud noises, bright lights, crowded spaces, and strong smells in transit environments can be overwhelming. For some, background chatter, honking horns, or flashing advertisements may cause fatigue, stress, or even physical discomfort (Dirix et al., 2022).
- **Hypo-Sensitivity Challenges:** While some autistic individuals experience heightened sensitivity, others may have reduced sensory awareness. This can result in missing important safety cues such as announcements, warning signals, or approaching vehicles.
- **Safety Concerns:** Public transportation systems involve fast-moving vehicles, complex navigation, and unexpected interactions with strangers, which can create safety risks for autistic individuals. Challenges include:
  - Navigating roads and stations safely in environments with heavy pedestrian and vehicle traffic.
  - Elopement risks, where an autistic individual might wander away from a safe zone, potentially leading to dangerous situations (e.g., train platforms, bus terminals, ferry docks).
  - Social misunderstandings, where unfamiliarity with social norms or difficulty expressing distress may lead to miscommunication with staff or other passengers (Zalewska et al., 2016).
- **Lack of Autism-Specific Training for Transit Staff:** Most public transport employees do not receive training on how to communicate with and support autistic passengers. As a result, misunderstandings may escalate into uncomfortable or even dangerous situations.
- **Unclear Communication:** Confusing signage, overwhelming maps, and inconsistent announcements can make navigation challenging. Route changes, delays, and unexpected disruptions can be stressful, particularly when passengers receive limited or conflicting information (Rezae et al., 2019).

Recognizing these challenges, several transportation authorities have taken steps to improve accessibility. For example, Malta Public Transport has introduced real-time tracking and trip planning features in its Tallinja app, helping autistic passengers reduce uncertainty and better plan their trips.

By implementing autism-friendly transportation initiatives, public transit providers can ensure that autistic individuals experience greater autonomy, comfort, and inclusion.

## Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Public Transportation

### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Quiet or Sensory Rooms: Provide dedicated quiet spaces at major transit hubs where autistic individuals can take a break from overwhelming environments.
- Sensory Kits: Offer kits containing ear defenders, noise-cancelling headphones, fidget tools to help autistic passengers regulate sensory input during travel.
- Controlled Sensory Input: Use non-fluorescent lighting, soft colors, and sound-dampening panels in stations and vehicles to minimize overstimulation.
- Designated Sensory-Friendly Spaces: Provide specific low-stimulation areas on buses, trains, and ferries where noise and bright lights are minimized.

### 2. Physical Accessibility

- Spacious Pathways: Ensure that transit hubs and vehicles, when possible, have ample space to reduce overcrowding and allow easier navigation.
- Priority Seating: Designate priority seating areas near windows, exits, or in low-traffic zones to accommodate autistic individuals who need quieter spaces.
- Flexible Boarding Options: Allow autistic passengers to board before or after the main crowd to minimize sensory overload.
- Comfortable Waiting Areas: Ensure that bus stops, train stations, and ferry terminals provide sheltered seating areas to reduce environmental stressors.

### 3. Safety Precautions

- Clear Signage and Barriers: Install high-contrast, easy-to-read warning signs near platform edges, escalators, and road crossings.
- Security Assistance: Provide easily accessible help points where passengers can request assistance if needed.
- Staff Training on Crisis Management: Train security personnel to handle critical situations involving autistic passengers with sensitivity, avoiding unnecessary escalation.

### 4. Social Support

- Companion Policies: Allow caregivers or companions to travel without additional charges or restrictions.
- Buddy System: Assign trained transit staff as buddies to assist autistic passengers when needed.
- Clear Communication & Predictability
- Simplified Signage and Wayfinding: Use icons, color-coded maps, and step-by-step visual guides to make navigation easier.
- Real-Time Updates: Provide timely announcements and notifications about delays, cancellations, and route changes through multiple formats (visual displays, apps, text messages).
- Pre-Travel Resources: Offer social stories, video guides, and interactive travel practice sessions to help autistic passengers prepare for transit environments.



Achieving autism-friendly accreditation demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and accessibility in public transportation. By addressing sensory, physical, and social barriers, transit authorities can create environments that empower autistic individuals to travel independently and confidently.

Creating an inclusive transportation system benefits all passengers—not only those who are autistic but also elderly travellers, people with anxiety, parents with young children, and individuals with other disabilities. By fostering a more predictable, low-stress travel experience, public transportation can become a gateway to greater independence and inclusion.







# Healthcare Services

## 1. Clinics

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Clinics

Access to healthcare is a fundamental right, yet many autistic individuals face significant barriers in clinical settings. These barriers stem from sensory processing challenges, unpredictable appointment schedules, lack of autism-informed professionals, and communication difficulties. In addition, autistic individuals often experience higher rates of chronic conditions, mental health concerns, and atypical responses to medications, making accessibility in healthcare settings even more critical.

Autistic individuals may also struggle with navigating healthcare systems, leading to delays in diagnosis and treatment. A lack of understanding from medical professionals often results in misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatments, and diagnostic overshadowing, where autistic traits are mistaken for mental health issues rather than recognizing underlying medical conditions.

A neuroaffirmative approach in clinical settings ensures that autistic patients receive care that respects their needs, promotes autonomy, and reduces distress. This includes predictable appointment scheduling, sensory-friendly environments, flexible communication methods, and trained staff who understand neurodiversity.

## Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Clinics

### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Adjustable Lighting: Offer soft lighting and avoid fluorescent lights that may flicker and cause discomfort.
- Noise Reduction: Implement soundproofing in consultation rooms and minimize background noise. Allow patients to use noise-canceling headphones.
- Sensory-Friendly Waiting Areas: Provide quiet spaces with minimal distractions and allow patients to wait in their car or a designated quiet area instead of crowded waiting rooms.
- Comfortable Seating & Temperature Control: Ensure that clinic seating is spaced out to reduce crowding and that temperature can be adjusted based on patient needs.
- Provide Sensory Toys and Seating: Offer sensory-friendly seating options (e.g., soft chairs, rocking chairs) and fidget or sensory toys in waiting areas to help with self-regulation.
- Use Calming Color Palettes: Paint clinic walls in pastel colors such as mint green, lavender, or soft blues to create a calm and soothing environment.
- Install a Sensory Wall: Incorporate tactile elements, textured surfaces, and interactive panels in a designated area to provide a positive sensory experience while waiting.

### 2. Predictability & Appointment Management

- Consistent Scheduling: Assign the same doctor or healthcare provider whenever possible to build trust and reduce anxiety.
- Flexible Appointment Booking: Allow for online booking systems instead of requiring phone calls, which can be stressful for autistic individuals.
- Advance Preparation & Clear Information:
  - Provide visual guides or social stories explaining what to expect during a visit.
  - Share step-by-step explanations of medical procedures before and during the consultation.
  - Notify patients well in advance about appointment changes or delays.

### 3. Communication & Supportive Interactions

- Alternative Communication Methods:
  - Provide written summaries of discussions and treatment plans.
  - Allow for text-based or visual communication options for those who find verbal communication difficult.
  - Support the use of Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) devices.
- Time to Process Information:
  - Give patients extra time to answer questions without rushing them.
  - Avoid pressuring them into eye contact or small talk.
- Train Healthcare Providers on Autism:
  - Ensure clinic staff receive training on how to interact respectfully and effectively with autistic patients.
  - Reduce or explain medical jargon and communicate in clear, straightforward language.
  - Explanation of next steps before using any equipment or administering medication.

### 4. Accommodations for Medical Procedures & Therapies

- Flexibility in Physical Examinations:
  - Offer gradual exposure to medical tools for patients who may have tactile sensitivities.
  - Allow patients to bring a trusted support person or sensory aids (e.g., weighted blankets, fidget tools) to help with regulation.
- Medication Considerations:
  - Acknowledge atypical responses to medication and adjust treatment plans accordingly.
  - Respect sensory preferences when prescribing medication, such as offering alternative formulations (e.g., liquid, chewable, or dissolvable medications).

## 5. Accessibility & Service Design

- Online Therapy & Virtual Consultations: Offer telehealth options to reduce the stress of in-person visits, when possible.
- Reduce Wait Times: Limit the amount of time autistic patients must wait before their appointment begins – have options of waiting in the car or outside and then receiving a message when its their turn.
- Clear Signage & Navigation Assistance: Ensure wayfinding signs are clear and provide color-coded maps for easier navigation within the clinic.
- Flexible Service Models: Allow longer appointment slots for autistic patients who may need more time for discussions and examinations.

Accrediting clinics as autism-friendly ensures that autistic individuals receive healthcare in environments that respect their needs and reduce barriers to care. By integrating sensory accommodations, clear communication, flexible scheduling, and staff training, clinics can significantly improve health outcomes and accessibility for autistic patients.

This approach not only benefits autistic individuals but also enhances patient-centered care for individuals with sensory sensitivities, anxiety, or communication differences. Creating inclusive healthcare environments is a step toward equitable and accessible medical services for all.

# 2. Hospitals

## The Importance of Autism-Friendly Hospitals

Hospitals are often overwhelming environments, presenting significant barriers to autistic individuals seeking medical care. The combination of sensory overload, unpredictable routines, communication difficulties, and a lack of staff training can make hospital visits distressing and, in some cases, even deter autistic individuals from seeking medical help.

Autistic individuals are more likely to experience multiple chronic conditions, including gastrointestinal, neurological, and autoimmune disorders (Molecular Autism, 2024). However, many face misdiagnosis or neglect due to a lack of awareness among healthcare professionals. Sensory sensitivities, atypical pain responses, and difficulties in verbal communication often result in underestimated symptoms, inappropriate treatments, and a general failure to provide person-centred care.

To ensure autistic individuals receive respectful, effective, and accessible healthcare, hospitals must adopt an inclusive approach, addressing sensory challenges, improving communication, and training staff on autism-specific needs.





## Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Hospitals

### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Quiet, Low-Stimulation Spaces:
  - Provide calm areas with dim lighting, soft pastel-colored walls (e.g., mint green, lavender, soft blue), and minimal visual distractions.
  - Offer sensory materials such as weighted blankets, stress fidgets, and soft seating in waiting areas.
- Lighting Adjustments:
  - Replace harsh fluorescent lights with warmer, non-flickering lighting options.
  - Allow patients to wear sunglasses or use dimmed lighting in examination rooms.
- Sound Management:
  - Reduce machine beeping, intercom announcements, and environmental noise in key patient areas.
  - Provide earplugs or noise-canceling headphones for those sensitive to auditory input.
  - Design soundproof waiting areas using noise-reducing materials to limit sensory distress.
- Olfactory Sensitivity Considerations:
  - Avoid strong-smelling disinfectants, air fresheners, or perfumes in patient areas.
  - Use low-odor cleaning products to minimize discomfort.

### 2. Predictability & Routine Support

- Visual Schedules & Communication Tools:
  - Offer pictograms and step-by-step guides outlining every stage of a hospital visit, from registration to discharge.
  - Provide visual explanations of medical procedures, describing sensations a patient might experience, to help them anticipate what will happen.
- Priority Access & Flexible Appointments:
  - Implement fast-tracked entry and shorter wait times to reduce overstimulation in crowded areas.
  - Provide extended appointment times for autistic individuals who may need more time to process information or require breaks.
  - Offer private examination rooms to minimize sensory triggers.
- Familiarity & Personalization:
  - Whenever possible, assign the same healthcare provider for follow-up visits to create a sense of familiarity.
  - Allow patients to bring comfort items (weighted blankets, fidget toys, sensory aids).

### 3. Communication & Supportive Interactions

- Clear, Direct Language:
  - Avoid metaphors, medical jargon, or ambiguous phrases.
  - Provide written summaries of diagnoses and treatment plans.
- Alternative & Augmentative Communication (AAC):
  - Ensure hospital staff can support non-verbal patients by using communication boards, visual charts, and text-based communication options.
  - Offer digital communication tools for patients who prefer written interactions.

- Trained Patient Advocates:
  - Implement a patient advocate system where autistic individuals can have a trained professional assist them in navigating hospital procedures.
- Meltdown Plans & Emotional Regulation Support:
  - Create de-escalation protocols to help hospital staff handle overwhelming situations with empathy and care.
  - Offer quiet retreat areas for patients experiencing distress.

#### 4. Medical Considerations & Staff Training

- Staff Training on Autism & Sensory Processing:
  - Train all hospital personnel—not just doctors and nurses, but also receptionists, security, and administrative staff—on how to interact with and support autistic patients.
  - Educate staff on co-occurring conditions such as epilepsy, gastrointestinal disorders, and chronic pain syndromes, which are common among autistic individuals (Viscidi et al., 2013).
  - Train security staff on how to recognize and respond appropriately to autistic individuals experiencing sensory distress or a meltdown.
- Pain Perception & Medical Treatment:
  - Acknowledge atypical pain responses in autistic patients—some may have heightened pain sensitivity, while others may not recognize or report pain accurately.
  - Avoid dismissing medical symptoms as “just autism”—ensure thorough medical examinations before attributing symptoms solely to autistic traits.
- Medication Considerations:
  - Recognize that autistic individuals often have atypical reactions to medications, which may require adjusted dosages or alternative treatments.
  - Avoid over-medicalization—ensure medication is prescribed based on thorough medical assessments rather than assumptions about autism-related behaviors.

#### 5. Accessibility Innovations & Best Practices

- Visual Wayfinding & Navigation Support:
  - Use color-coded signs, pictograms, and floor markings to help patients navigate the hospital easily.
  - Offer sensory-friendly waiting rooms with adjustable lighting, quiet seating areas, and personalized accommodations.
- The identification card & Personalized Patient Profiles:
  - Introduce an identification system for autistic individuals such as a card or a lanyard which enables healthcare providers to quickly recognize patients who need accommodations.
  - Implement personalized medical profiles that list sensory preferences, communication needs, and emergency contacts to ensure more tailored care.
- Hospital Autism Programs:
  - Adapt successful models like Vall d’Hebron Hospital’s m’adapTU program, which tailors hospital environments, communication, and medical interactions to autistic individuals.

Accrediting hospitals as autism-friendly is a critical step in ensuring that autistic individuals receive respectful, effective, and equitable healthcare. Without proper accommodations, many autistic individuals avoid medical care altogether, leading to poorer health outcomes and preventable complications.

By implementing sensory-friendly design, staff training, improved communication tools, and medical best practices, hospitals can provide a more inclusive healthcare experience. These changes do not only benefit autistic individuals but also enhance patient-centered care for anyone with sensory sensitivities, anxiety, or cognitive differences.

## 3. Pharmacies

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Pharmacies

Pharmacies play a crucial role in providing healthcare, medication management, and access to essential medical advice. However, for many autistic individuals, pharmacies can be overwhelming environments due to sensory overload, unpredictable interactions, and complex medication instructions. Bright lighting, strong smells, long queues, and social expectations can create distress, making it difficult for autistic individuals to comfortably access their prescriptions.

Additionally, understanding medication instructions can be challenging for autistic individuals, particularly if information is delivered verbally without written or visual support. Some may experience atypical reactions to medications, requiring adjusted dosages or alternative formulations, but pharmacists may not always be trained to recognize these needs.

Creating autism-friendly pharmacies ensures that autistic individuals can access medication and healthcare support in a way that is predictable, sensory-friendly, and inclusive.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Pharmacies

#### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Quiet & Low-Stimulation Environments:
  - Reduce fluorescent lighting and replace it with softer, non-flickering lighting.
  - Provide a quiet waiting area with spaced-out seating to reduce sensory overload.
  - Avoid playing background music or excessive announcements.
- Sound Management:
  - Minimize loud conversations and intercom use.
  - Allow autistic customers to use noise-canceling headphones while waiting.
- Olfactory Considerations:
  - Avoid using strong air fresheners or perfumes in the pharmacy.
  - Ensure good ventilation to reduce overwhelming chemical or medication smells.
- Tactile Sensitivity:
  - Provide sensory-friendly waiting areas with soft seating or fidget items for those who need sensory regulation.

#### 2. Predictability & Routine Support

- Clear Navigation & Signage:
  - Use visual guides and pictograms to help customers locate prescription counters, over-the-counter medication sections, and consultation areas.
  - Implement color-coded sections for easy navigation.



- ⦿ Queue & Appointment Options:
  - Offer priority or fast-track service for autistic customers to reduce waiting times.
  - Allow pre-scheduled prescription pick-ups to minimize stress.
  - Provide an option to wait outside or in a designated quiet space rather than in a crowded queue.
- ⦿ Familiarity & Personalized Support:
  - Where possible, assign a consistent pharmacist to autistic customers to build familiarity and trust.
  - Allow customers to pre-select a preferred method of communication (verbal, written, or text-based).

### 3. Communication & Supportive Interactions

- ⦿ Clear & Direct Communication:
  - Avoid using medical jargon and ensure instructions are clear and easy to understand.
  - Provide step-by-step written instructions for medications, including visual guides where possible.
- ⦿ Alternative Communication Methods:
  - Offer communication boards or digital text-based systems for individuals who prefer non-verbal interactions.
  - Allow autistic customers to send prescription requests via app, email, or text messaging instead of requiring phone calls.

Becoming an autism-friendly pharmacy ensures that autistic individuals can access healthcare and medication support in a way that respects their needs. Without proper accommodations, many autistic individuals struggle with medication management, which can negatively impact their health and well-being.

By implementing sensory-friendly design, staff training, clear communication tools, and flexible pharmacy services, pharmacies can provide a more inclusive, accessible, and stress-free experience for autistic customers. These changes do not only benefit autistic individuals but also support individuals with sensory sensitivities, anxiety, or other neurodiverse needs, ultimately creating a better healthcare experience for everyone.





SECTION  
04

# Cultural & Recreational Spaces

## 1. Museums

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Museums

Museums serve as cultural, historical, and educational spaces that provide visitors with immersive experiences. However, many autistic individuals face barriers that can limit their participation in museum visits. Sensory overload, unclear navigation, social anxiety, and complex communication methods can make museums overwhelming.

Research by Sass (2016) highlights that a universal design approach benefits all visitors, not just those with disabilities. Similarly, Tuschen (2015) emphasizes that social stories can enhance accessibility in museums by providing clear expectations before and during a visit. The *Museums & Social Issues* journal (2016) also underscores how the environment plays a key role in either facilitating or restricting social participation for autistic individuals.

By implementing inclusive design, clear communication tools, and flexible visitor accommodations, museums can enhance accessibility and engagement for autistic individuals while improving the experience for all visitors.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Museums

#### 1. Sensory Accommodations & Physical Environment

- ⦿ Adjustable Lighting & Visual Comfort:
  - Offer dimmed lighting or non-fluorescent lights to reduce harsh brightness.
  - Provide sunglasses or visors at reception for visitors sensitive to light.
  - Use pastel or neutral color schemes to create a visually calming space.

- Sound Management:
  - Reduce background noise where possible (e.g., limit audio exhibits in quiet areas).
  - Provide headphones or noise-canceling earmuffs for visitors to borrow.
  - Offer guided tours with personal headsets to allow volume control.
- Quiet & Sensory-Friendly Spaces:
  - Designate a quiet room or relaxation area where visitors can take a break from sensory stimuli.
  - Ensure museum seating areas are spaced out and include comfortable options such as bean bags or rocking chairs.
- Sensory Maps:
  - Provide maps that indicate sensory-friendly areas, quiet spaces, and high-stimulation zones.
  - Clearly mark accessible routes and elevators for ease of navigation.

## 2. Clear Communication & Wayfinding

- Social Stories & Visual Guides:
  - Offer social stories with visuals explaining what to expect at the museum.
  - Develop video guides or online previews of the museum's layout and exhibits.
  - Create a sensory map outlining the layout of the space, highlighting areas with natural light, uneven or textured flooring, strong smells, high-noise zones, and quiet areas to help autistic visitors navigate comfortably.
- Clear Signage & Directional Aids:
  - Use simple, high-contrast signage with symbols to indicate key areas (restrooms, exits, quiet zones, exhibit halls).
  - Provide color-coded sections to help visitors easily navigate the space.
- Pre-Visit Preparation:
  - Create an online accessibility guide detailing museum accommodations.
  - Offer sensory-friendly visit schedules where visitors can book lower-traffic times.

## 3. Guided Experiences & Social Support

- Specialized Guided Tours:
  - Offer guided tours with headphones to allow for volume control and minimize distractions.
  - Train museum guides in autism-friendly engagement techniques, ensuring patience and clear explanations.
- Staff Training & Awareness:
  - Educate museum staff on autism awareness, communication techniques, and how to support visitors with different needs.
  - Ensure staff can provide alternative communication methods such as visual supports or text-based assistance.
- Flexible Social Interaction Expectations:
  - Allow visitors to opt out of social interaction without feeling pressured.
  - Encourage a judgment-free approach to stimming behaviors (e.g., rocking, hand-flapping).



#### 4. Interactive & Inclusive Activities

- ◎ Hands-On & Multi-Sensory Exhibits:
  - Incorporate interactive, touch-friendly exhibits for visitors who learn best through tactile experiences.
  - Offer alternative engagement methods such as silent video guides or touch-sensitive panels instead of only auditory instructions.
- ◎ Customizable Museum Experience:
  - Provide colouring books, fidget items, or sensory kits for visitors to borrow.
  - Allow visitors to choose between structured guided tours or independent exploration.
- ◎ Sensory-Friendly Events:
  - Host dedicated autism-friendly museum days with low lighting, minimal noise, and smaller crowds.
  - Create workshops designed for neurodiverse visitors, focusing on art, storytelling, and creative expression.

### Why Accreditation Matters

Museums should be welcoming and accessible spaces for all visitors. By making accommodations for autistic individuals, museums become more inclusive and engaging, allowing more people to connect with history, art, and culture in a way that suits their needs.

An autism-friendly accreditation ensures that museums:

- ◎ Remove sensory barriers through adjustable lighting, quiet spaces, and sensory-friendly maps.
- ◎ Improve communication with visual guides, social stories, and clear signage.
- ◎ Train staff to provide supportive, informed interactions.
- ◎ Offer flexible experiences with guided tours, hands-on activities, and alternative engagement methods.

By implementing these strategies, museums can foster an inclusive cultural environment, ensuring that all visitors—regardless of sensory sensitivities or communication styles—feel comfortable and welcome.





## 2. Theatres

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Theatres

Theatre performances are an essential part of cultural life, education, and entertainment. However, many autistic individuals face barriers that limit their ability to attend and enjoy live performances. Bright lights, loud sounds, crowded spaces, and unpredictable social interactions can create significant challenges, leading to anxiety, sensory overload, or avoidance of these experiences altogether.

Research by the Imago Foundation highlights that:

- Theatre environments often lack sensory accommodations, making them overwhelming for autistic individuals.
- Rigid social expectations—such as remaining seated, staying silent, or avoiding movement—can create stress and discomfort.
- A lack of accessibility information and trained staff means that many autistic individuals do not receive the support they need.

While some theatres have introduced sensory-friendly performances, these are often infrequent or require pre-booking, limiting accessibility. To make theatre truly inclusive, venues must integrate permanent accessibility features, ensuring that all individuals, including autistic patrons, can enjoy performances comfortably.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Theaters

#### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Adjustable Lighting:
  - Avoid sudden light changes that may cause discomfort; if you need to have sudden light changes as part of the performance; advise at the start of the performance about this.
  - Offer dimmed lighting or keep house lights on at a low level during sensory-friendly performances.
- Sound Adjustments:
  - Reduce excessively loud or high-pitched sounds.
  - Provide advance warnings before intense sound effects (e.g., explosions, sirens, or sudden music shifts).
  - Offer noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs for patrons who need them; or encourage to bring their own devices.
- Calm & Sensory-Friendly Spaces:
  - Provide designated quiet rooms for visitors who may need a break from sensory stimulation.
  - Ensure these spaces are dimly lit, quiet, and equipped with comfortable seating, weighted blankets, and fidget tools.
- Flexible Seating Arrangements:
  - Allow patrons to choose their seats in advance, prioritizing aisle seating for easy exits.
  - Offer spaced-out seating to reduce proximity to others and minimize accidental touch.
  - If possible, leave the door open for easy exit.

## 2. Clear Communication & Pre-Visit Support

- ⦿ Pre-Visit Social Stories & Guides:
  - Offer step-by-step social stories explaining what to expect from arrival to departure.
  - Provide virtual tours or pre-visit video guides to familiarize autistic patrons with the venue.
  - Encourage actors to go on stage prior to the performance and explain who they are and which character they will be performing.
- ⦿ Clear Signage & Wayfinding:
  - Use high-contrast, easy-to-read signage to indicate:
    - Restrooms
    - Exits
    - Quiet areas
    - Sensory-friendly seating sections
- ⦿ Provide color-coded maps to help visitors navigate the space easily.

## 3. Inclusive Performance Adjustments

- ⦿ Relaxed Performances:
  - Allow audience members to move, fidget, or quietly vocalize without social pressure.
  - Permit late arrivals and mid-show exits without restriction.
- ⦿ Interactive & Contextual Support:
  - Provide pre-show workshops for neurodiverse groups to introduce the storyline, characters, and sensory elements of a performance.
  - Offer touch tours before performances for individuals who prefer tactile engagement.
  - Offer opportunities for autistic individuals to interact with props, costumes, or performers before a show to increase familiarity and reduce anxiety.
- ⦿ Background Sensory Considerations:
  - Avoid strong artificial scents (e.g., air fresheners, perfumes, or smoke machines) in theatres.
  - Start on time.

## 4. Staff Training & Audience Awareness

- ⦿ Autism Awareness Training for Theater Staff:
  - Train ushers, box office staff, performers, and security personnel on how to support autistic patrons.
  - Educate staff on sensory sensitivities, communication preferences, and de-escalation strategies for sensory overload.
- ⦿ Flexible Social Interaction Expectations:
  - Encourage a judgment-free environment, where stimming (rocking, hand-flapping, fidgeting, or verbalizations) is accepted.
  - Provide digital or written alternatives for audience interaction.

By adopting autism-friendly accreditation, theaters can:

- Remove sensory barriers with adjustable lighting, sound management, and quiet spaces.
- Improve accessibility through clear signage, pre-show materials, and flexible seating arrangements.
- Train staff to provide supportive, inclusive interactions.
- Offer relaxed performances that accommodate different engagement styles.

Making theater more inclusive means that autistic individuals, their families, and their communities can fully participate in cultural life—an essential aspect of social inclusion and well-being.

## 3. Cinema

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Cinemas

Going to the cinema is a widely enjoyed cultural and social experience, yet many autistic individuals face barriers that make it stressful or inaccessible. Bright and flashing lights, loud sound effects, unpredictable social interactions, lengthy trailers, and rigid seating arrangements often create sensory overload and anxiety, making the experience overwhelming.

In 2019, the UK Cinema Association, in collaboration with Dimensions (an autism organization) and the BFI Film Audience Network, launched training resources for cinemas wishing to offer autism-friendly screenings. These guidelines, developed with autistic individuals and experts, focused on reducing sensory stressors, improving accessibility, and creating a welcoming experience for neurodiverse audiences.

Additionally, research by Fundacja Imago highlights that infrequent and restrictive sensory-friendly screenings, along with limited film choices and complex booking processes, further exclude autistic individuals from the full cinema experience.

A structured accreditation system ensures that cinemas integrate permanent accessibility features, making film experiences inclusive, predictable, and enjoyable for all audiences.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Cinemas

#### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Adjustable Lighting & Visual Comfort:
  - Keep the house lights dimmed instead of fully turning them off.
  - Allow sunglasses or visors for those sensitive to light.
  - Switch off any screens in the lobby that are too bright.
- Sound Management:
  - Lower sound volume to reduce auditory distress.
  - Provide noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs for customers who need them.
- Flexible Seating & Movement:
  - Allow customers to move around, change seats, or leave if needed – leave the door half open for those who wish to exit.
  - Ensure easy access to aisle seats for those who may need to step out.

⦿ Quiet & Sensory-Friendly Areas:

- Provide a quiet waiting area or sensory retreat space outside the screening room.
- Ensure the lobby and common areas have low background noise.

## 2. Pre-Visit Support & Clear Communication

⦿ Pre-Screening Preparation:

- Offer social stories or video guides to help autistic individuals understand what to expect before arriving.

⦿ Booking & Ticketing Accessibility:

- Simplify the booking process, allowing online reservations with seat selection.
- Implement priority seating options for autistic individuals and their caregivers.
- Allow flexible cancellation or rescheduling policies to accommodate sensory needs.

⦿ Clear & Inclusive Listings:

- Ensure cinema websites clearly label autism-friendly screenings.
- Include icons or descriptions indicating:
  - Sound levels
  - Lighting conditions
  - Expected duration
  - Any sensory triggers in the movie

## 3. Programming & Film Choices

⦿ Curated Film Selection:

- Expand sensory-friendly screenings beyond just children's movies—offer a diverse selection, including family films, action, and drama.

⦿ Avoid Excessive Advertising & Trailers:

- Reduce pre-screening adverts and trailers, which can prolong waiting time and contribute to sensory overload.

## 4. Staff Training & Audience Awareness

⦿ Flexible Social Expectations:

- Encourage an understanding atmosphere where patrons are allowed to:
  - Make noise, react to the film, or engage with the experience.
  - Move seats or leave without judgment.
- Display awareness signage at entrances, informing all audiences that the cinema is autism friendly.

Accrediting cinemas as autism-friendly ensures that autistic individuals can enjoy films in a welcoming, accessible environment. By implementing these changes, cinemas can make cinemas more inclusive and predictable creates a better movie-going experience for autistic individuals, their families, and the broader community.



## 4. Sports Activities

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Sports & Leisure Activities

Engaging in sports and leisure activities is essential for physical health, mental well-being, and social inclusion. However, autistic individuals often face significant barriers in accessing and participating in sports, recreational activities, and fitness programs. These barriers include sensory overload, social communication challenges, lack of staff training, financial constraints, and unpredictable schedules.

Research by Autism-Europe highlights the following common obstacles:

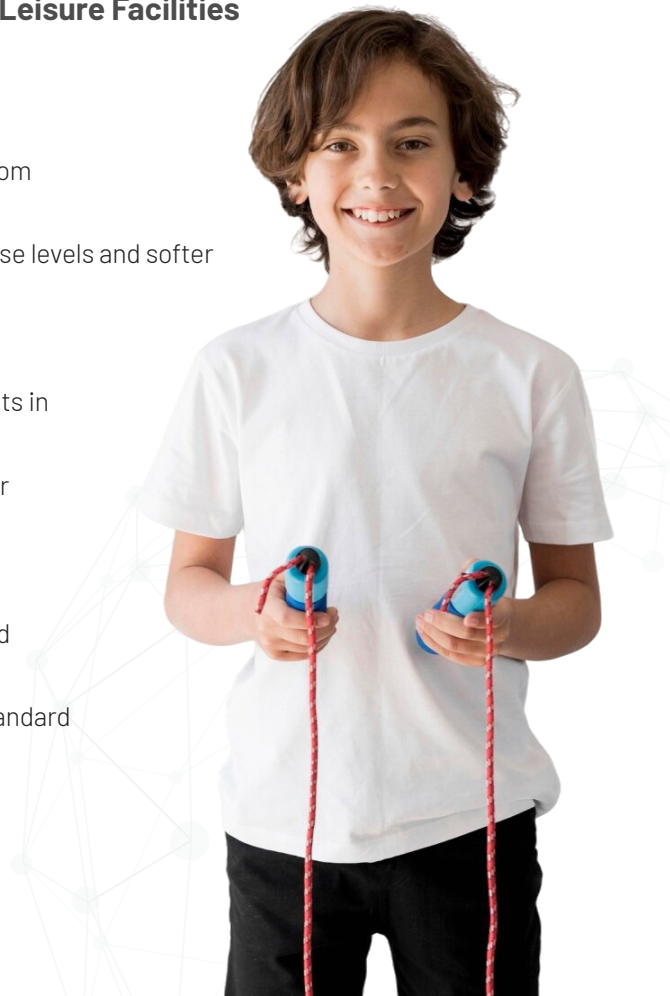
- Sensory sensitivities to loud noises, bright lights, and strong smells found in gyms, swimming pools, and sports arenas.
- Unstructured environments that lack predictability, routine, and visual support.
- Social challenges in team sports or group activities, where rules, non-verbal cues, and social dynamics may be difficult to navigate.
- Limited autism-specific training among coaches, trainers, and recreation staff, leading to misunderstandings or exclusion.
- Inaccessibility of facilities, with unclear pathways, overstimulating locker rooms, and a lack of sensory-friendly spaces.

A structured accreditation system ensures that sports facilities, gyms, swimming pools, and leisure programs are inclusive, predictable, and welcoming for autistic individuals.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Sports & Leisure Facilities

#### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Quiet & Sensory-Friendly Zones:
  - Provide quiet areas where participants can take breaks from overwhelming stimuli.
  - Create sensory-friendly changing rooms with reduced noise levels and softer lighting.
- Noise & Visual Adjustments:
  - Reduce or eliminate loudspeakers, alarms, or flashing lights in training areas.
  - Offer noise-cancelling headphones or sensory earplugs for those sensitive to sound.
- Adapted Equipment & Materials:
  - Provide sensory-friendly uniforms and sports gear to avoid discomfort from scratchy textures or strong smells.
  - Allow athletes to wear their preferred sportswear if the standard uniform is uncomfortable.



## 2. Predictability & Routine Support

- Visual Schedules & Social Stories:
  - Offer visual timetables or pictograms to help autistic individuals understand the sequence of activities.
  - Provide step-by-step social stories explaining what to expect in sports sessions.
- Familiarization Visits & Trial Sessions:
  - Allow participants to visit the facility in advance to become familiar with the space before joining activities.
  - Offer smaller, reduced-capacity sessions to ease transitions.
- Consistent Coaching & Training Staff:
  - Maintain the same coach or trainer throughout the season to build trust and stability.
  - If a change in trainer is necessary, inform the participant in advance and introduce them to the new coach gradually.

## 3. Staff Training & Inclusive Coaching Practices

- Flexible & Adaptive Coaching:
  - Provide step-by-step guidance using direct, literal language.
  - Adapt activities based on individual comfort levels and sensory preferences.
- Positive Reinforcement & Individualized Support:
  - Use positive encouragement rather than competitive pressure.
  - Allow participants to opt-out of activities that cause distress without penalty.

## 4. Social Support & Inclusion Strategies

- Buddy System for Support:
  - Pair autistic participants with a teammate or staff member to help them navigate social interactions and group dynamics.
  - Ensure all team members understand autism and are encouraged to be inclusive.
- Peer Awareness & Training:
  - Promote acceptance and understanding through inclusive team-building activities through peer awareness training.
- Non-Competitive & Adaptive Sports Options:
  - Provide non-competitive sports programs for individuals who may struggle with the pressure of competition.
  - Offer adaptive physical activities, such as yoga, swimming, or individual sports that can be tailored to different ability levels.

## 5. Facility Accessibility & Structural Adjustments

- Physical Accessibility of Spaces:
  - Ensure clear, well-marked pathways and accessible entry points.
  - Provide spacious changing areas with quiet sections for those who need sensory regulation.
- Trial Sessions & Flexible Participation:
  - Offer reduced group sizes to create a calmer, more structured environment.
  - Allow participants to gradually transition into activities at their own pace.

- ⦿ Adaptive Scheduling:
  - Implement predictable, fixed schedules with advance notice of any changes.
  - Offer early-morning or low-traffic sessions for those who struggle with crowded spaces.

## 5. Gyms

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Gyms

Gyms play a crucial role in promoting physical fitness, mental well-being, and social interaction. However, many autistic individuals face significant barriers in accessing and using gym facilities, making it difficult for them to participate in regular exercise. Sensory overload, unclear gym layouts, unpredictable social interactions, and a lack of autism-aware staff can create an intimidating and unwelcoming experience.

For autistic individuals, gym environments can be overwhelming due to loud background music, bright fluorescent lights, strong smells from cleaning products or sweat, and crowded spaces. The lack of structured routines, visual guides, or clear instructions can add further challenges, making workouts feel confusing or stressful. Additionally, social interactions with staff or other gym-goers, as well as the pressure to follow unwritten gym etiquette, can create further anxiety.

An autism-friendly accreditation system ensures that gyms take active steps to make their facilities more predictable, accessible, and comfortable for autistic individuals, allowing them to exercise with confidence.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Gyms

#### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- ⦿ Adjust lighting to avoid bright fluorescent lights; offer dimmable lighting options.
- ⦿ Reduce background music and limit sudden or loud announcements.
- ⦿ Allow the use of noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs.
- ⦿ Eliminate strong artificial scents, including air fresheners and scented cleaning products.
- ⦿ Provide sensory-friendly gym equipment with adjustable textures and pressure settings.
- ⦿ Offer quiet workout areas or designated sensory-friendly rooms.

#### 2. Structured and Predictable Environments

- ⦿ Provide clear signage and visual instructions on equipment use and gym rules.
- ⦿ Offer visual schedules, social stories, and video guides for gym-goers.
- ⦿ Implement scheduled quiet hours or sensory-friendly workout sessions.
- ⦿ Give advance notice of schedule changes or maintenance
- ⦿ Provide personalized workout plans that follow predictable

#### 3. Facility Accessibility & Physical Adjustments

- ⦿ Ensure wide, unobstructed pathways for easy navigation.
- ⦿ Use color-coded zones or marked workout areas.



Accrediting gyms as autism-friendly ensures that autistic individuals can engage in fitness activities without unnecessary stress or barriers. By making these changes, gyms can significantly enhance accessibility and inclusivity. Reducing sensory barriers by offering quiet spaces, adjustable lighting, and sensory-friendly workout environments creates a more comfortable setting. Establishing structured and predictable experiences through visual guides, social stories, and scheduled quiet hours helps autistic individuals feel more at ease and confident in their routines.

By adopting these accessibility measures, gyms become inclusive spaces where autistic individuals can exercise comfortably, improve their physical health, and build confidence in a supportive and understanding environment.

## 6. Dance studio

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Dance Studios

Dance is a powerful form of self-expression, physical exercise, and social interaction, but many autistic individuals face significant barriers when accessing dance classes and studios. Sensory overload, unpredictable social dynamics, lack of structured routines, and instructors unfamiliar with autism-specific needs can make participation challenging.

For autistic individuals, dance environments can be overwhelming due to loud music, bright lights, crowded spaces, and complex movement sequences that require quick adaptability. Unclear verbal instructions, unstructured class formats, and the expectation of spontaneous social interaction may further contribute to anxiety and discomfort. Additionally, dance mirrors, sudden physical contact, and unpredictable choreography changes can create stress for individuals who thrive on routine and predictability.

An autism-friendly accreditation system ensures that dance studios implement accommodations that make movement, rhythm, and expression accessible for all individuals, providing a structured, predictable, and inclusive environment.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Dance Studios

#### 1. Sensory Accommodations

- Adjust lighting to reduce harsh fluorescent or strobe lights, providing dimmable lighting options when possible.
- Manage sound levels by lowering background music and reducing sudden loud sounds.
- Offer noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs for students sensitive to sound.
- Use unscented or minimally scented cleaning products to avoid strong artificial smells.
- Provide sensory-friendly flooring and equipment to avoid uncomfortable textures.
- Offer quiet spaces where students can take breaks if feeling overwhelmed.

#### 2. Structured and Predictable Environments

- Provide visual schedules, pictograms, or step-by-step guides to outline class structure and activities.
- Offer pre-class orientation sessions to allow students to familiarize themselves with the studio space before their first lesson.
- Provide advance notice of routine changes, such as different instructors or guest teachers.
- Assign designated seating or waiting areas to reduce anxiety before classes begin.



### 3. Autism-Specific Training for Dance Instructors

- ☉ Train instructors on autism awareness, sensory sensitivities, and communication preferences.
- ☉ Use clear, literal, and direct language to provide step-by-step instructions.
- ☉ Demonstrate movements visually rather than relying solely on verbal instructions.
- ☉ Avoid unexpected physical contact and instead ask for consent before offering hands-on corrections.
- ☉ Encourage self-expression through movement, allowing students to adapt choreography to their comfort levels.

### 4. Social Inclusion & Accessibility

- ☉ Implement a “dance buddy” system, pairing autistic students with supportive peers or instructors.
- ☉ Foster a non-judgmental and accepting atmosphere, where stimming (such as rocking, hand-flapping, or bouncing) is allowed as part of self-expression.
- ☉ Offer alternative participation options, such as small group sessions, one-on-one classes, or virtual lessons, when possible.
- ☉ Provide alternative forms of social interaction, such as using hand signals instead of verbal commands for participation and feedback.

Accrediting dance studios as autism-friendly ensures that autistic individuals can engage in movement and self-expression in an environment that meets their sensory, social, and structural needs. By making these changes, dance studios can create a more inclusive and accessible space. Reducing sensory barriers through adjusted lighting, reduced noise levels, and sensory-friendly movement spaces allows individuals to participate comfortably without overwhelming stimuli. Establishing structured and predictable class environments with visual guides, step-by-step choreography, and routine-based instruction provides a sense of stability and familiarity.

By adopting these accessibility measures, dance studios become welcoming spaces where autistic individuals can experience the joy of movement, build confidence, and express themselves freely in a supportive and understanding environment.





# Educational Settings & Work Spaces

## 1. Educational Settings

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Educational Spaces

Creating autism-friendly educational spaces is essential for fostering genuine social inclusion for autistic students. These spaces are not just about modifying physical environments but involve a deliberate design approach that addresses sensory, social, and learning needs, allowing autistic students to engage fully in school life.

For many autistic individuals, typical school environments can be overwhelming. Bright fluorescent lights, loud noises, crowded hallways, and constant transitions between classrooms often lead to sensory overload, anxiety, and disengagement. Autism-friendly educational settings minimize these triggers by incorporating soft lighting, neutral colors, sound-dampening materials, and structured layouts to create low-stimulation spaces. These adjustments help reduce distractions, alleviate stress, and enhance focus, allowing autistic students to feel more comfortable and engaged in their learning.

Beyond sensory adjustments, social inclusion strategies play a crucial role. Many autistic students process social cues differently and may struggle in unstructured social settings. Providing quiet zones, small group interactions, and structured social spaces allows autistic students to engage at their own pace in a supportive environment. These spaces not only provide opportunities to develop peer relationships and social confidence but also create an inclusive culture that fosters mutual understanding and acceptance.

Additionally, autism-friendly schools promote independence by offering clear visual aids, structured routines, and intuitive layouts that help students navigate their surroundings confidently and independently. Tools such as visual schedules, labeled spaces, and step-by-step instructions empower students to follow routines without excessive assistance, fostering autonomy and preparing them for life beyond school.

Inclusive educational spaces also benefit neurotypical students, fostering awareness, empathy, and respect for neurodiversity. Integrating autism-friendly design principles helps all students and staff appreciate the diverse needs of individuals, cultivating a school culture rooted in acceptance and inclusion. Moreover, when autistic students feel safe, understood, and accommodated, they are better equipped to engage academically, participate in group projects, and thrive in the classroom environment.

Ultimately, autism-friendly educational spaces lay the foundation for a more inclusive society, empowering autistic individuals to learn, grow, and confidently participate in academic and social settings.

## Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Educational Settings

- Sensory Considerations
  - Maximize natural light and minimize harsh fluorescent lighting.
  - Use soft, neutral colors instead of bright, complex patterns.
  - Implement noise-dampening materials in classrooms, cafeterias, and common areas.
  - Encourage noise-canceling headphones and replace harsh school bells with softer auditory signals.
  - Control odours by avoiding strong scents from cleaning products or air fresheners.
  - Provide multisensory rooms or quiet areas for sensory regulation.
  - Offer alternative seating options, such as swivel chairs, weighted lap pads, or movement-friendly desks.
- Structure and Predictability
  - Provide clear physical and visual boundaries to define spaces.
  - Use color-coded areas, signage, and pictograms to facilitate navigation.
  - Ensure intuitive classroom organization with easy-to-access materials.
  - Offer a pre-guidebook with pictures, maps, and easy-to-read descriptions before the school year starts.
  - Implement gradual exposure strategies when changes occur in schedules or routines.
- Personal Space and Safety
  - Ensure classrooms are spacious and reduce overcrowding.
  - Provide quiet, private areas where students can take breaks and self-regulate.
  - Design classrooms with secure fixtures and durable materials for safety.
  - Offer sensory-friendly materials such as soft textiles, weighted blankets, or calming pillows.
  - Encourage and support students in using sensory aids without stigma.
- Communication Support
  - Integrate visual communication aids such as pictograms, visual schedules, and alternative communication devices.
  - Provide varied communication methods, allowing spoken, written, or visual responses.
  - Use clear, direct, and literal language when giving instructions.
  - Adapt assessments by offering multiple-choice questions, visual aids, or written explanations.
  - Maintain a low and calm speaking tone in classrooms to improve comprehension.
- Flexibility and Adaptability
  - Design adaptable classrooms and learning areas that accommodate diverse learning and sensory needs.



- Allow flexible seating arrangements and alternative learning spaces.
- Provide structured transitions between tasks with visual or written prompts.
- Offer flexible curriculum management, such as focusing on one subject per day to reduce transitions.
  
- Social Inclusion & Support
  - Facilitate structured peer engagement through small-group activities and quiet social zones.
  - Educate neurotypical students about neurodiversity to foster acceptance and inclusion.
  - Implement strong bullying prevention policies and ensure active enforcement.
  - Provide access to trained counselors or support workers to assist with social challenges.
  
- Professional Awareness and Training
  - Require mandatory autism-awareness training for teachers, staff, and administrators.
  - Provide ongoing professional development on autism, sensory regulation, and communication strategies.
  - Train educators in emotional regulation techniques and conflict resolution.
  - Ensure staff members are equipped to handle challenging behaviors and classroom dynamics effectively.

Accrediting educational spaces as autism-friendly ensures that autistic students can thrive in a supportive and accessible learning environment. Reducing sensory barriers through lighting adjustments, noise reduction, and sensory-friendly materials helps minimize overstimulation, while structured routines and visual aids create predictability and ease transitions. Equipping staff with autism-specific teaching methods fosters effective communication and understanding, ensuring students receive the support they need. Promoting social inclusion through peer education, anti-bullying initiatives, and dedicated support staff cultivates a welcoming and respectful school culture. By implementing these measures, educational institutions become truly inclusive spaces where autistic students can learn, grow, and succeed both academically and socially.

## 2. Offices

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly Workspaces

Creating autism-friendly workplaces is essential for ensuring equal employment opportunities, productivity, and overall well-being for autistic employees. Offices are traditionally designed with neurotypical workstyles in mind, often overlooking the sensory, communication, and organizational needs of autistic individuals. Work environments that lack necessary accommodations can lead to stress, reduced efficiency, and difficulties in career progression for autistic employees.

To foster an inclusive and supportive workplace, offices must adopt sensory-friendly modifications, structured routines, alternative communication methods, and flexible work arrangements that allow autistic employees to perform their best without unnecessary barriers. Adjustments such as alternative lighting, noise reduction strategies, quiet workspaces, and clear task structures create an environment where autistic employees can work comfortably and efficiently.

Beyond physical accommodations, training for managers and colleagues is crucial to fostering understanding, acceptance, and respectful communication in the workplace. Ensuring flexible and structured work routines, along with offering alternative forms of interviews, makes workplaces more accessible from the recruitment phase to long-term employment.

Autism-friendly offices benefit all employees, promoting greater focus, well-being, and efficiency through thoughtful workplace design and inclusive policies. Implementing these adjustments ensures that autistic employees can fully contribute to their roles, experience job satisfaction, and thrive in their professional careers.

Prisms has been in a project and various resources were created that can be found here:

<https://www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu/employability>



## Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in Offices

- Sensory Accommodations
  - Use alternative lighting by replacing fluorescent lights with softer, adjustable lighting options.
  - Offer noise reduction strategies, including quiet rooms, noise-cancelling headphones, and soundproofed workspaces.
  - Provide fidget tools and sensory-friendly materials to help with focus and self-regulation.
  - Reduce strong smells from cleaning products, perfumes, and food areas.
  - Allow flexible workspace arrangements, including personalized seating preferences for employees sensitive to crowded or busy areas of the office.
  - Follow this checklist with autistic employees to see how best to accommodate, where possible. <https://www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu/attachments/Autism%20Friendly%20Spaces/1/MenuPages/9/09559cfb-f20c-4e93-8d4e-93015a76ed3c.pdf>
- Structured and Predictable Work Environment
  - Implement clear task structures using written, digital, or visual task lists to reduce ambiguity.
  - Provide wall calendars, planners, and deadline reminders to help employees track their work schedules.
  - Offer predictable routines and gradual changes, ensuring clear communication about upcoming modifications to workload or office settings.
  - Allow autistic employees to take short, scheduled breaks when needed to regulate sensory input and refocus.
- Alternative Communication and Recruitment Practices
  - Adapt interview processes to include working interviews, structured questions, or written responses instead of relying solely on traditional verbal interviews.
  - Use clear, concise, and direct communication in all work-related discussions and expectations.
  - Offer alternative feedback formats, such as written, visual, or one-on-one sessions, tailored to the employee's communication preferences.
  - Train managers and team members on neurodiversity awareness, including how to accommodate different work styles and foster an inclusive environment.
- Flexibility and Work Accommodations
  - Implement flexible scheduling options, allowing for adjusted start times, remote work opportunities, or modified workloads.
  - Encourage task-based work instead of rigid hour-based structures, allowing employees to complete work in ways that align with their strengths.
  - Provide autonomy in workspace customization, allowing employees to adjust desk arrangements, lighting, or seating preferences.
- Social Inclusion and Support
  - Foster a supportive work culture where autistic employees feel comfortable discussing accommodations without stigma.
  - Create quiet social spaces or alternative networking events that cater to different social comfort levels.
  - Implement mentorship or peer-support programs to help autistic employees navigate workplace dynamics.
  - Ensure regular check-ins with employees to evaluate the effectiveness of accommodations and make necessary adjustments.

Accrediting offices as autism-friendly ensures that autistic employees can work in an environment tailored to their sensory, communication, and structural needs. By making these changes, workplaces can foster higher job satisfaction, increased productivity, and improved well-being for autistic employees. Creating a workspace that minimizes sensory overload, provides clear structures, and offers flexible work accommodations ensures that employees can perform at their

best. Equipping staff with neurodiversity training and fostering an inclusive work culture allows for a more accepting and collaborative workplace.

By implementing these measures, offices become truly inclusive spaces where autistic employees can thrive, contribute meaningfully, and develop successful careers without unnecessary barriers.

## 3. NGOs & Organisations

### The Importance of Autism-Friendly NGOs & Organisations

NGOs play a critical role in fostering inclusion, social engagement, and equal opportunities for autistic individuals. However, many traditional NGO environments pose sensory, communication, and social barriers that can limit participation. An autism-friendly NGO is one that actively works to reduce these barriers by implementing inclusive policies, sensory-conscious designs, and structured interactions that enable autistic individuals to participate comfortably.

Autism-friendly NGOs recognize the social model of disability, which emphasizes that it is the environment—not the individual—that creates barriers to inclusion. By minimizing sensory stressors, providing clear communication methods, and offering structured, predictable activities, NGOs can empower autistic individuals to engage fully, contribute meaningfully, and thrive within their communities.

Beyond environmental adjustments, training for staff and volunteers is essential to ensure a culture of acceptance, understanding, and respect. NGOs must prioritize awareness-raising initiatives, accessibility-focused programming, and direct engagement with autistic individuals and their families to create spaces that are truly inclusive and welcoming.

By implementing these accommodations and inclusive practices, NGOs become leaders in social accessibility, actively promoting the rights, well-being, and active participation of autistic individuals in community life.

### Key Criteria for Autism-Friendly Accreditation in NGOs & Organisations

#### 1. Awareness and Training

- Provide autism awareness sessions for all staff and volunteers to enhance understanding and respectful interactions.
- Train staff on sensory needs, communication strategies, and proactive, empathetic behaviour to foster an inclusive environment.
- Implement peer training workshops that raise awareness and educate target groups about autism.

#### 2. Environment Adjustments and Inclusive Design

- Use non-fluorescent, dimmable lights and prioritize natural lighting where possible.
- Avoid bright neon colours and visually overwhelming décor to create a calming environment.
- Limit loud background noise by reducing music volume and installing soundproofing where possible.
- Maintain clear, simple signage with color-coded directions to reduce confusion.
- Provide quiet zones and sensory-friendly seating options, such as beanbags or designated retreat areas.
- Offer sensory kits with stress balls, noise-canceling headphones, and other regulation tools.

### 3. Predictability and Structure

- Communicate schedules in advance using visual timetables, written guides, or social stories to reduce uncertainty.
- Ensure activities begin and end on time to minimize anxiety caused by unpredictability.
- Develop mitigation plans and behavioral protocols that help navigate unexpected challenges or sensory overloads.

### 4. Accessible Communication

- Use clear, direct, and straightforward language in verbal and written communication, avoiding metaphors and ambiguity.
- Incorporate visual aids, diagrams, and interactive elements to support comprehension.
- Ensure the mission statement of the NGO reflects diversity and inclusion, promoting a culture of belonging.
- Make registration and membership processes as accessible as possible, ensuring they are straightforward and easy to navigate.
- Use visual diagrams to illustrate the structure or hierarchy of the NGO, helping autistic individuals understand roles and processes.

### 5. Collaboration and Feedback

- Actively involve autistic individuals and their families in program design and evaluation to ensure relevance and accessibility.
- Establish regular feedback channels, allowing autistic participants to share insights on spaces, staff interactions, and activities.
- Continuously update practices based on feedback to ensure ongoing inclusivity and support.
- Recognize that autistic individuals should not feel pressured to attend every event and that social participation should be flexible.

Accrediting NGOs as autism-friendly ensures that autistic individuals can fully participate in community-based programs, social initiatives, and advocacy efforts without unnecessary barriers. By creating sensory-conscious environments, structured and predictable interactions, and staff training programs, NGOs foster a space where autistic individuals feel welcomed, understood, and empowered.

Beyond benefiting autistic individuals, autism-friendly NGOs promote broader inclusivity, ensuring that all members of the community—regardless of neurodiversity—feel supported and valued. By committing to these principles, NGOs set a standard for accessibility, leading by example and demonstrating the importance of adaptive, inclusive community engagement.





# 04

## WAY FORWARD – HOW TO BECOME ACCREDITED










Achieving autism-friendly accreditation ensures that your organization, business, or public space meets the necessary standards to support and accommodate autistic individuals. The process involves working closely with professionals, making physical and operational adjustments, and demonstrating a commitment to inclusion. Follow these steps to gain accreditation:

## Step 1:

### Connect with Your Country's Accreditation Body

The accreditation process begins by reaching out to the designated organization in your country. These NGOs are responsible for guiding you through the accreditation process, providing support, and ensuring compliance with autism-friendly standards.

Accreditation bodies in different countries:

	<p><b>Prisms – Malta</b></p> <p>Website: <a href="https://www.prismsmalta.com/">https://www.prismsmalta.com/</a></p>
	<p><b>Fundacja Imago – Poland</b></p> <p>Website: <a href="https://fundacijaimago.pl/">https://fundacijaimago.pl/</a></p>
	<p><b>Federació Catalana d'Autisme – Spain</b></p> <p>Website: <a href="https://www.federaciocatalanaautisme.org/">https://www.federaciocatalanaautisme.org/</a></p>
	<p><b>PLOES – Greece</b></p> <p>Website: <a href="https://www.ploes.gr/">https://www.ploes.gr/</a></p>
	<p><b>Macedonian Scientific Society for Autism (MSSA) – North Macedonia</b></p> <p>Website: <a href="https://mssa.org.mk/">https://mssa.org.mk/</a></p>
	<p><b>Voz do Autista – Portugal</b></p> <p>Website: <a href="https://www.vozdoautista.pt/">https://www.vozdoautista.pt/</a></p>
	<p><b>Autism-Europe (AE) – Belgium</b></p> <p>Website: <a href="https://www.autismeurope.org/">https://www.autismeurope.org/</a></p>

These organizations will provide the necessary resources, assessments, and expert guidance to help you implement the required accommodations and achieve autism-friendly accreditation.

These organizations will provide resources, assessments, and expert guidance to help you successfully implement the necessary accommodations.

## Step 2

### Staff Training:

Select at least two employees per service to undergo autism awareness training. This can be completed via online modules at [www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu/online](http://www.autismfriendlyspaces.eu/online) or through live training sessions (available at an additional cost). Upon completion, participants receive a certificate, making them the main reference points within your organization to provide guidance and support for autistic individuals.

## Step 3

### Adjust the Physical Space

Your accreditation-supporting NGO will provide expert advice on how to modify your physical space to better cater to autistic individuals. These adjustments may include:

- Reducing sensory overload by controlling lighting, noise, and visual stimuli
- Creating quiet spaces for individuals needing sensory breaks
- Using clear signage and visual supports to aid navigation
- Offering sensory-friendly materials or accommodations specific to your service

Depending on the nature of your service, an on-site visit may be conducted to assess and guide the necessary modifications.

## Step 4

### Commitment to Raising Awareness

Accredited organizations play a key role in raising public awareness about autism and inclusion. Your organization should:

- Participate in autism awareness campaigns
- Be included in the official mobile app and website that lists accredited autism-friendly spaces
- Promote your accreditation through social media, marketing materials, or events, helping to spread awareness within the community

By publicly embracing your accreditation, you contribute to a more inclusive society and encourage others to follow suit.

## Step 5

# Receive Accreditation and Join the Autism-Friendly Network

Once your organization has completed the necessary training, physical modifications, and awareness initiatives, you will receive an official Autism-Friendly Accreditation Certificate.

### Benefits of Being an Autism-Friendly Space

Achieving autism-friendly accreditation comes with numerous benefits, including:

- ⦿ Increased accessibility for autistic individuals and their families, fostering a welcoming environment for all.
- ⦿ Positive recognition as an inclusive and socially responsible organization.
- ⦿ Stronger community engagement by promoting autism awareness and inclusivity.
- ⦿ Enhanced staff awareness and skills, leading to improved customer service and workplace culture.
- ⦿ Networking opportunities with other accredited organizations, sharing best practices for inclusion and accessibility.

By obtaining this accreditation, your organization becomes part of a growing movement that prioritizes inclusion, respect, and accessibility for autistic individuals.



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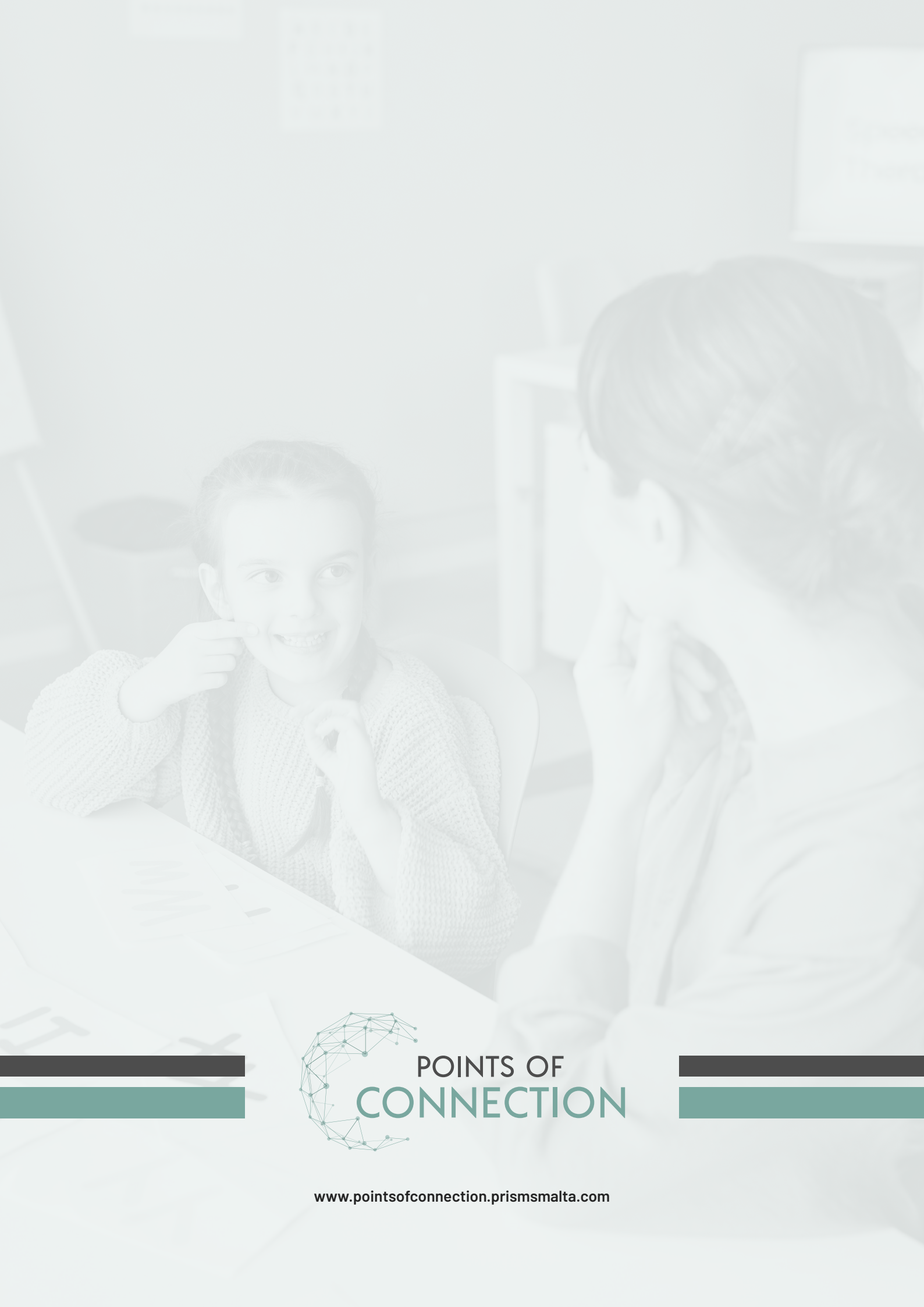
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