




Autism Friendly

# A sensory friendly space, **together** **with the MCG**

A case study on creating an  
inclusive space in a stadium







*"I am a music lover, and regularly attend concerts and performances at stadiums. While I use many of my own strategies to cope, sometimes I need a private space to calm myself down if I am overwhelmed.*

*Having a Quiet Room available is the difference between me being able to attend and stay throughout the whole concert, or have to leave when I become overwhelmed" –  
AUTISTIC INDIVIDUAL*



# Aspect Autism Friendly

working in  
partnership with  
Melbourne Cricket  
Ground



The Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) with a capacity of 100,024 is Australia's largest venue. The 'G' is considered to be the beating heart of Melbourne and is managed by the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC). The venue hosts a range of diverse sporting events and entertainment, including domestic and international cricket fixtures, AFL matches including the AFL Grand Final, plus concerts, conferences, functions and charity events. The 'G' is open 365 days a year and in 2024 welcomed over 4 million visitors through its doors.

The Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) is a private club tasked with the public responsibility of managing the MCG. The MCC has up to 160 permanent staff, more than 1000 casual event staff and 300 volunteers who contribute to the successful operations of the venue and the Club's membership base of more than 155,000 people.

# Welcome, comfortable, safer. Together.



## The why: Understanding a need for inclusion

Stadiums can be exciting and high-energy environments, but for some visitors, they can also be overwhelming and difficult to navigate. The large crowds, unpredictable noise, bright lights, strong smells, queues and unfamiliar routines can make attending an event at a major venue like the MCG a stressful experience—particularly for individuals with hidden disabilities like Autism.

It's estimated that one in six Australians live with a disability, and a significant proportion of these are hidden. For Autistic people, environments like the MCG can present a mix of joy and challenge—especially when the sensory demands of the space become overwhelming. Without a safe place to step away and regulate, attending or staying at an event may become unmanageable.

Recognising this, the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) made a commitment to improving the experience for all patrons by creating a space where people can take a break, manage sensory overwhelm, and return when they feel ready.

**In 2022, the MCC introduced the MCG's first semi-permanent sensory room—the Sensory Friendly Space—supported by the MCC Foundation and developed in partnership with Aspect.**

The decision to create the Sensory Friendly Space was driven by several key factors:

- **Customer feedback** revealed that patrons with access needs were consistently reporting poor experiences.
- **Independent disability audits** highlighted the need for more inclusive environments and practical supports within the stadium.
- The **success of the Hawthorn Football Club's temporary sensory room** during home games at the MCG demonstrated the positive impact such spaces can have.
- The MCC also drew on learnings from other organisations, including **Melbourne Airport**, which had implemented a sensory room and adopted the **Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard program** to support travellers with invisible disabilities.
- Most importantly, the initiative aligned with a core commitment in the **MCC Strategic Plan 2021–2026** to deliver '**Access for Everyone**', placing inclusion at the centre of the club's vision for the future.

The creation of the Sensory Friendly Space reflects the MCC's understanding that meaningful inclusion requires intentional design, collaboration with people with lived experience, and a willingness to adapt. It also shows how major venues can lead by example—making events more accessible and welcoming for all.



## Background



# Working in partnership with Aspect Autism Friendly

The Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) partnered with Aspect Autism Friendly to ensure the development of the MCG's Sensory Friendly Space was grounded in evidence-informed, lived experience practice.

This partnership was built on a shared goal: to make one of Australia's largest and busiest venues more inclusive and accessible for people with hidden disabilities, including Autistic individuals and their families. From the earliest stages of planning, Aspect worked closely with MCC staff to guide the strategy, assess potential spaces, and provide training and support for implementation.

## Expert guidance every step of the way

Aspect Autism Friendly was engaged to support the development, assessment, and implementation of the space, providing both strategic guidance and practical expertise at every stage of the process. This partnership focused on ensuring that the space would meet the needs of Autistic patrons and others with hidden disabilities, while also being sustainable for MCC to operate on an ongoing basis.

Aspect's role included:

- Environmental Audit – A walkthrough assessment of the Australian Sports Museum to identify the best locations for quiet and sensory spaces.
- Recommendations – Advice on room modifications, layout, lighting, furniture, signage, and staffing needs.
- Training and awareness – Specialist training for MCC staff and security staff on supporting Autistic patrons and those with hidden disabilities.
- Quiet Room Accreditation – Ongoing collaboration to ensure best practice and sustainability.

## A partnership built on trust and shared values

The success of the partnership lies in the shared commitment to listening, learning, and responding to the real-world needs of people with disability. The MCC has continued to consult with Aspect beyond the launch of the Sensory Friendly Space, recognising the value of having expert guidance on hand to support staff, refine procedures, and ensure the space remains welcoming and effective.

This collaborative approach has not only enhanced the visitor experience at the MCG—it has also helped set a new standard for inclusive practice at major venues across Australia.







## The how: Implementing a Sensory Friendly space at the MCG

### What are Quiet and Sensory Friendly Spaces?

Autistic people and individuals with hidden disabilities may experience sensory overload, which can cause stress, anxiety, or meltdowns. Having a dedicated low-sensory space within a stadium or venue allows people to regulate their environment and manage their experience independently.

- **Quiet Rooms** (or low-sensory rooms) are calm, low-stimulation areas. They are ideal for anyone who needs a moment away from the noise and activity. These rooms have soft lighting, minimal sound, and comfortable seating to help reduce stress or overwhelm
- **Sensory Friendly Spaces** allow individuals to engage with sensory-friendly tools that support regulation and relaxation. These might include soft lights, fidget tools, sensory toys, or movement-based options like rocking chairs.

Both types of rooms are important. Quiet Spaces are especially helpful during overwhelming moments, while Sensory Spaces offer people a choice in how they manage their experience.

By offering these spaces, venues like the MCG make it easier for everyone to attend and enjoy live events—safely, comfortably and with confidence.





# 1.

## Location selection

The first step was identifying a suitable space at the MCG that would:

- Be available for all events (AFL, cricket, concerts, etc.)
- Be easily found and accessed by patrons
- Be somewhat removed from noise and high foot traffic
- Allow for sensory modifications (lighting, sound, etc.)
- Not conflict with other operational or commercial uses
- After reviewing options, the Australian Sports Museum at Gate 3 was selected for its accessibility, quieter atmosphere, and availability on event days.

# 2.

## Environmental audit

The MCC partnered with Aspect Autism Friendly to assess the suitability of the location.

- Two consultants completed a walkthrough audit of the museum
- The audit identified ideal zones for both a Quiet Room and Sensory Room
- Recommendations included adjustments to lighting, signage, layout and furnishings
- Staff were educated throughout the audit on environmental accessibility
- Feedback from the audit guided the design and layout
- Environmental assessments help develop resources like sensory maps and visual stories

# 3.

## Business case and resourcing

To move forward, the MCC prepared a business case that included:

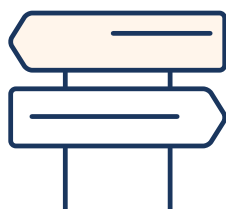
- The rationale, benefits, and risks of introducing the Sensory Friendly Space
- A trial phase to test the concept before investing long term
- Minimal budget for setup (approx. \$2,000)
- Use of loaned equipment and staff support
- An additional \$3,000 was later invested after early success
- Key purchases included Bluetooth noise-cancelling headphones and storage solutions

# 4.

## Procedures and staffing

MCC developed detailed Standard Operating Procedures, covering:

- Meltdowns, escalations, and safeguarding practices
- Modified lighting and sound procedures
- Emergency protocols and child safety
- Roles, staffing ratios, and supervision requirements
- Radio communication and CCTV oversight
- Coordination across departments including Security, People & Culture, and Events







### 5.

#### Training and staff support

The success of the Sensory Friendly Space relies heavily on the confidence, capability and empathy of the staff who operate it. From the outset, the MCC recognised the importance of training and invested in building staff knowledge and awareness.

All staff working in the Sensory Friendly Space received training developed and delivered by Aspect, including Autistic co-presenters. Topics include:

- Autism and hidden disabilities
- Recognising and responding to sensory overload
- The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program

### 6.

#### Trial and continuous improvement

The Sensory Friendly Space was launched as a five-event trial in early 2022. The purpose was to test demand, assess the operational model, and capture real-time feedback from users.

During the trial phase:

- Invitations and complimentary tickets were sent to disability organisations including Aspect's Adult Support Team and Bayley House
- There was no public promotion to manage visitor flow and test natural discovery
- A full-time observer was present during each trial to monitor staff, visitor behaviour and room usage
- Data was recorded for each session, including: number of visitors, time spent in the room, items used, and feedback provided



**For the safety of everyone, children must always be in the same space as their responsible adult.**



**This space is for people with hidden disabilities and sensory processing challenges. If you don't need sensory regulation, please be respectful of others and return to the event.**







## How are we making lasting change?

Since launching in 2022, the MCG's Sensory Friendly Space has supported over 10,000 patrons\*—and counting.

Visitor data and feedback show the space is not only well used, but deeply valued by individuals and families who may otherwise be excluded from the event-day experience.

Key outcomes:

- Average of 63 visitors per event in 2025—a significant increase from 16 in 2022
- High usage during concerts, family days and high-attendance sporting matches
- Strong engagement from Autistic adults and families with children with disability
- Clear evidence that the space enables patrons to stay longer and feel safer
- Repeat visits and word-of-mouth referrals from visitors who had positive experiences

Visitors often share that the space made the difference between having to leave early—or not being able to attend at all—and enjoying the event with confidence.

*"Without the Sensory Room, neither of us would have been able to enjoy the concert. It's given me confidence to do more things at the MCG." – Parent of Autistic child*

The MCG's approach has become a benchmark for inclusion at major Australian venues. The impact is not just measured in numbers—it's felt in the stories, smiles and moments of participation now possible for people with hidden disabilities.

*"The staff were amazing—kind, calm and understanding. You made a very stressful day manageable for my niece." – Carer feedback*

\*as of May 2025

### An ongoing relationship and continuous improvement

The creation of the Sensory Friendly Space at the MCG is more than a one-off initiative—it's part of a broader cultural shift toward long-term inclusion.

From the outset, the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) committed to embedding inclusive practice into core operations. This meant not only building a physical space but also rethinking how the venue supports people with hidden disabilities—before, during and after their visit.

Through an ongoing partnership with Aspect, the MCC continues to review, adapt and expand the Sensory Friendly Space offering. This includes refining procedures, upskilling staff, and using real-time feedback to guide continuous improvements.

Key areas of lasting change include:

- Integrating accessibility into strategic planning, including a long-term vision for a second Sensory Friendly Space
- Developing resources like visual stories, sensory maps, and pre-visit information to reduce uncertainty
- Maintaining a trained workforce, supported by refreshers, scenario planning and access to lived experience perspectives
- Consulting with visitors and listening to feedback to ensure the space meets real needs
- Contributing to sector-wide knowledge sharing, with other venues and organisations now reaching out to the MCC for advice

The MCC's ongoing commitment shows that with leadership, collaboration and expert guidance, stadiums and large venues can be designed to work for everyone—now and into the future.



*"My ASD child was overwhelmed with the noise today—first real big game—and we had so many wonderful staff helping us to the sensory room and looking after our well-being. You made the whole experience so much better and helped a child feel calm."*

— PARENT AT AN AFL MATCH

*"I wanted to pass on my sincere thanks to the staff in the Sensory Room space and the MCC for creating an amazing support to enable everyone to participate in events. My son was incredibly overwhelmed by the noise and fortunately we found the sensory room. From the moment we stepped through the door he instantly started relaxing as the staff welcomed us so kindly at every point.. Without it neither of us would have been able to enjoy the concert as it would have been too much for him and we would have had to leave. It has given me confidence to try and do more things at the MCG. I cannot thank you enough."*

— PARENT OF AN AUTISTIC CHILD



# Together we can create an autism-friendly Australia.

**Want to learn more  
about how to partner with us?**

Contact us today on  
**[autismfriendly@aspect.org.au](mailto:autismfriendly@aspect.org.au)**

To find out more about  
Aspect Autism Friendly and our  
scope of work, please visit  
**[www.aspect.org.au/our-services  
/autism-friendly](http://www.aspect.org.au/our-services/autism-friendly)**

To find out more about  
Melbourne Cricket Ground, please visit  
**[www.mcg.org.au/the-stadium/access  
-and-inclusion](http://www.mcg.org.au/the-stadium/access-and-inclusion)**



Autism Friendly

