

Quiet Room vs Sensory Room: What's the difference?

Autistic people experience the sensory world differently. Whilst this can bring great joy, it can also lead to sensory stress and overwhelm.

Aspect Autism Friendly advises organisations to reduce overwhelm by:

- Developing more sensory-friendly environments
- Communicating potential sensory stressors beforehand (e.g. with visual stories and sensory maps)
- Supporting coping strategies with tools such as noise-cancelling headphones
- Providing Quiet Rooms or similar safe spaces.

Quiet Rooms and Sensory Rooms can increase a person's confidence in attending an environment.

Data from the case study developed in partnership with the Melbourne Cricket Ground shows that Autistic people often check if a venue has a Quiet or Sensory Room before attending an event. They also commonly check out the space before needing it. This helps provide a greater sense of support and security.

**Our purpose
a different brilliant®**

Understanding, engaging
& celebrating the strengths,
interests & aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.

**The terms Quiet Room
and Sensory Room are
often used interchangeably,
but are these spaces
really the same thing?**



Quiet Room vs Sensory Room

Aspect Autism Friendly has a guide for the development of Quiet Rooms and Sensory Rooms based on the support we provide.

We describe these rooms as follows:



Quiet Room

- A Quiet Room is a purpose-designed room or area set aside for people who feel overwhelmed, anxious or distressed.
- It is a private, low-sensory place where people can go to settle themselves for as long that is needed for the person to be able to return to their event or environment. It is not a space for playing or socialising.
- These rooms typically feature dim indirect lighting, blinds or curtains, minimal noise, comfortable seating and cushions, air conditioning, privacy, and coping tools such as noise cancelling headphones or stim items.
- A Quiet Space can be permanent or temporary. Temporary spaces are often used for single events (like a festival) or in buildings that have many uses.



Purpose-built Quiet Room at Aspect Adult Community Service site in Heatherton, Victoria.



Sensory Room

- A Sensory Room is a leisure and learning environment designed to help individuals with sensory processing issues regulate by calming, engaging or exciting the senses.
- Sensory rooms are often used in a planned or scheduled way (booked in advance) and people can stay for longer periods of time, enjoying the equipment and materials.
- These experiences may include visual features (such as bubble towers, fibreoptic lights, or projector displays), gentle sounds (like music or white noise), and tactile or physical activities (such as squishy or soft textures, soft mats, or exercise balls).
- Sensory Rooms are more likely to be permanent due to the need for equipment. People who use Sensory Rooms move around, explore, interact and engage with equipment.



Purpose-built Sensory Room at Aspect Adult Community Service site in Heatherton, Victoria.

Understanding the difference between Quiet Rooms and Sensory Rooms



While the terms Sensory Room and Quiet Room are sometimes used interchangeably, their purposes are quite different.



Understanding this distinction is essential to ensure both spaces are effective, accessible, and meet the needs of the people who use them.

1. Different sensory needs

Most people who need to recover from overwhelm seek an absence of sensory stimulation. Because Quiet Rooms are often shared spaces, there is a risk that one person's use of sensory lights or tools can increase another person's overwhelm, making regulation more difficult.

2. Perceived as a play space

The presence of sensory equipment such as gym mats, exercise balls, or swings can give the impression that the room is designed for play. Associated noises — laughter, squeals, bouncing — can contribute to further overwhelm.

3. Cost and accessibility

Sensory equipment can be expensive, and even the perception of high cost may deter organisations from creating calming spaces. In environments where space is limited and priorities compete, affordability and practicality are key. Quiet Rooms should prioritise simplicity, accessibility, and low-cost design features that minimise sensory load.

What does the research say?

A recent research paper, 'Insights into Sensory and Relaxation Preferences to Inform the Design of Calming Spaces and Sensory Rooms for Autistic Adults' 2025 explored Autistic people's preferences for calming environments.

When asked what kind of environment they would seek if they began to feel overwhelmed, 62 of 96 participants (65%) selected "quiet or silent."

One participant described their ideal environment as "a dark, quiet environment with nobody else around."

The study highlights controllability and individualisation as key design principles. However, achieving these in a shared public Quiet Room can be challenging, as the needs and preferences of all users must be balanced.

Aspect's own research^{1 2}, including studies with Sydney Airport, also emphasises the importance of providing quiet spaces for travellers.

"Given the overwhelming sensory environment of the airports, participants expressed a need for 'a quiet room or quiet area ... just out of the way somewhere'"

— EVENLYN, AUTISTIC ADULT

"I use Quiet Rooms when I can feel a meltdown coming on. In these moments, I need to remove all outside stimulation to come back to a sense of feeling grounded. Personal space and privacy are important. I will typically lie down to reduce anxiety and reconnect back into my body. I will listen to music with noise-cancelling headphones or game quietly on my device. It is very important that I do this peacefully, alone."

— REBECCA (AUTISTIC PERSON)

Summary

Sensory Rooms are great leisure spaces for many Autistic people and are to be encouraged. However, Quiet Rooms differ in both design and purpose, and there are risks in confusing the two.

Quiet Rooms are not a 'nice to have' – they are an essential accessibility feature that support Autistic attendees.

Quiet Rooms do not require expensive sensory equipment. In fact, they are defined by the absence of sensory input.

Quiet Rooms are used reactively as a place to recover from sensory or emotional overwhelm. While bookings can be useful when overwhelm is predictable (such as at airports or large events), people should never be turned away for not having one.

Ultimately, Quiet Rooms are shared spaces that must balance the needs of all users, prioritising reduction of overwhelm and support for emotional regulation.

References

Creating A Sensory Friendly Space Together, With The MCG – A Case Study On Creating An Inclusive Space In A Stadium. www.aspect.org.au/uploads/documents/AutismFriendlyCaseStudy_MelbourneCricketGround_web.pdf

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We are committed to making life better for people on the spectrum.



For more information

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