

Shopping and leisure

Tips for Autistic individuals and families

Visiting retail, dining and leisure environments can sometimes feel overwhelming, but preparing yourself and letting people know what you need can make the experience more enjoyable. Here are practical tips to help you plan, manage sensory input and communicate your needs:



**Our purpose
a different brilliant®**

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

Planning your visit

Preparation can reduce stress and make visits more predictable.

Check accessibility details in advance

Visit store or venue websites or apps for:

- quiet hours or sensory-friendly sessions
- sensory maps, like [this one from Stockland shopping centre](#), highlighting busy and sensory-heavy areas (e.g. kitchens, food courts or noisy stores)
- customer service initiatives like the [Hidden Disability Sunflower](#) initiative
- quiet rooms or spaces in case you feel overwhelmed
- visual stories that help explain how to get to the store and how the space is organised.

Choose quieter times

Plan visits during off-peak hours to avoid noise and crowds (e.g. weekday mornings, mid-afternoons or evenings).

Look for sensory-friendly options

Some stores, cafés or entertainment venues offer private shopping appointments (e.g. Athletes Foot), quieter dining slots or sensory-friendly session venues.

Explore virtual resources

Use online tools such as Google maps, virtual store tours, table maps or menus to familiarise yourself before your visit.

Consider click-and-collect or delivery

Minimise in-store time by pre-ordering items for pick-up or delivery. Some retailers even provide “direct-to-boot” services for added convenience e.g. IKEA and Woolworths.



Organise and plan ahead

- Prepare a detailed shopping list or dining order aligned with store sections or menu categories to streamline your visit.
- Stick to familiar venues with consistent layouts to reduce stress. If visiting a new location or encountering changes, allow extra time to adjust and explore.
- Make a schedule for the trip, share this before the trip and tick off each step along the way. Finish on a positive activity.



Managing sensory inputs

Once you've planned your visit, managing sensory input can help you or your child stay comfortable and in control.

Bring sensory tools

Pack items that help manage sensory overwhelm, such as:

- noise-cancelling headphones
- sunglasses for bright lighting
- fidget tools or calming items
- Engaging items (music, games or activities)

Dress comfortably and in layers

Prepare for temperature changes when moving through spaces like refrigerated aisles or kitchens.

Take breaks

Consider visiting designated quiet spaces, waiting areas or outdoor zones if you need to recharge. For children, consider using nearby seating areas, outdoor spaces or taking short breaks in the car.

Familiarise with exits

When you arrive, note the entry and exit points in case you or a family member need to step out quickly to take a break.

Limit exposure

Skip areas with strong smells or overwhelming noise. For dining, review menus online to order quickly and reduce decision fatigue.



Communicating your needs

Communicating your needs can help you access support during your visit.

Prepare a script or card

If speaking to staff feels challenging, write a note explaining your needs, such as: "I find loud sounds overwhelming. Could you lower the volume here, please?" Tools like [Aspect's Autism Alert Card](#) could help explain your needs without having to speak.

Request adjustments

Ask for accommodations, like quieter checkouts, dimmer lighting or assistance navigating crowded areas.

Look for accessible programs

Some stores use initiatives like the [Sunflower Lanyard](#) to support hidden disabilities. Ask if these programs are available during your visit (if you cannot find it on their website beforehand).

Aspect Autism Friendly has worked with multiple retailers to create environments that genuinely support and include Autistic people. Find out more about organisations we have worked with, and how Autism

Friendly could support you
aspect.org.au/autism-friendly.



Based on the idea of a different brilliant[®], Aspect's approach:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.