

Exploring Autism-Friendly Initiatives in Australian Airports: Insights from Autistic Travelers and Families

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Background

Airports can be overwhelming for Autistic travelers due to sensory overload, unpredictable procedures, and limited accessible support. While autism-friendly initiatives have been introduced in airports, little is known about how well they actually meet the needs of Autistic people.

Research Aim

We explored how Autistic adults and parents of Autistic people experienced two Australian airports (Sydney & Gold Coast) that had been implementing autism-friendly initiatives for over five years.

Autism-Friendly Initiatives

- **Walkthrough environmental assessment with Autistic staff informed recommendations including:**
 - Hidden Disability Sunflower program
 - Extensive face-to-face training
 - Developed visual resources and sensory maps
 - Adjustments to sensory environment
 - Improve wayfinding and signage (including assistance lane at security).

Method

- Participants were informed about available autism-friendly initiatives before travel (airport websites).
- Interviewed 13 participants (8 Autistic adults and 5 parents of Autistic people) after their travel.
- Reflexive thematic analysis led by an Autistic researcher with air travel experience.



Results

Theme 1: Airports need to be more accessible

1.1: "Another lot of sensory overload"

1.2: "For me, it's all about planning"

1.3: "Provide me with a quiet space"

1.4: "Good starting point for them [airport]"

Theme 2: "Those Sunflower lanyards are magic"

2.1: "Everyone was just nice, patient and understanding"

2.2: "Have the Sunflower more prominent"

2.3: "I kind of need someone to come to me"

Theme 3: "A greater awareness within the whole industry of hidden disabilities"

Recommendations for Airports and Airlines

- Take responsibility—accessibility should be proactive, not dependent on travelers to ask for support.
- Improve visibility of autism-friendly resources.
- Standardized staff training across airports.
- Clearer signage and dedicated quiet spaces.
- Increase recognition of the Hidden Disability Sunflower program.

Conclusion

- Air travel should be **accessible for all**.
- Airports are improving, but **more needs to be done** to ensure consistency, visibility and staff training.
- Autistic travelers should not have to navigate accessibility challenges alone – **the industry must step up** to ensure equity in air travel.

Paper



Poster



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