

Together with Gold Coast Airport

A case study
on creating an
inclusive airport
experience



"One of the most worrying things for me when I'm doing anything really is the idea of doing something I've never done before. I'm really afraid – there's always this frame of mind I get into, if I start to feel uncertain about what I'm doing ... where I'm constantly doubting myself. So, then I get into a very negative train of thought and very negative emotionally, I get very anxious at that point."

– Autistic traveller



Aspect Autism Friendly

working in
partnership with
Gold Coast Airport



Gold Coast Airport (GCA) is Australia's 6th busiest airport, having welcomed 6.2 million passengers in 2024. Serving both domestic and international routes, connecting visitors to the region's world-class beaches and hinterland.

Gold Coast Airport is committed to providing facilities that promote inclusivity and accessibility for all members of the community, including passengers and visitors with a disability. They recognise that an airport is a busy and stressful place, especially if you are unsure what to expect on the day. It is even more stressful when you or your travel companion have a disability that is not immediately obvious – a hidden disability such as autism.

Welcome, comfortable, safer. **Together.**



What is the challenge of airports for people with hidden disabilities?

Airports can be stressful and anxious places, especially when you are a new flyer or new to an airport and are unsure of what to expect. Dealing with a busy, noisy, confusing and unfamiliar situation with high expectations can be overwhelming for anybody. It can be even more challenging when you or your travel companion have a disability that is not immediately obvious to airport staff – a hidden disability.

There are many hidden disabilities, including autism, dementia, energy disorders, mental health conditions (e.g. anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder) and sensory impairments, (e.g. hearing or vision). It is estimated that 16% of Australians have a hidden disability.

Gold Coast Airport want to ensure that everyone's journey through their airport is as easy and effective as possible, and so approached Aspect's autism friendly team to support the development of a comprehensive hidden disabilities program.

Working in partnership with Aspect Autism Friendly Team

Gold Coast Airport and Aspect had a shared goal – to develop an inclusive airport culture, where everyone is committed to a welcoming and supportive environment. This means a consistent, comprehensive approach was required rather than a piecemeal or isolated program. For this reason, Aspect suggested Gold Coast Airport adopt the internationally recognised Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard Program, to help make the invisible visible wherever they go.

While the Sunflower Lanyard helps to identify that a person might need extra time or support, Aspect's comprehensive Autism Friendly Framework helps organisations like Gold Coast Airport to develop processes, practices and resources that help people wearing the lanyard to truly get the support they need.

Aspect's Autism Friendly team recognise the importance of working in partnership with businesses and organisations and respects the expertise and capabilities of partners. We aim to build the capacity of these businesses to adapt, develop and implement unique strategies for their environments which helps to sustain strategies over time. Gold Coast Airport has built strong collaborative relationships with all internal airport stakeholders including airlines, security, retail, government agencies and staff.



Aspect's Leadership in autism-friendly Airports

Enhancing accessibility for Autistic travellers

In response to updated autism prevalence estimates in Australia—now indicating that an estimated 1 in 40 individuals are Autistic—Aspect has prioritised improving accessibility in air travel. Research published by Aspect in 2024 highlights the challenges Autistic travelers face, including sensory overload, social demands, and unpredictable environments.

Despite commitments to accessibility in the Australian Government's Aviation White Paper, autism and hidden disabilities were not specifically addressed, reinforcing the need for standard-setting in this space.

Aspect's expertise in autism-friendly airports

Aspect Autism Friendly has significant long-standing experience working with Australian airports, including Gold Coast, Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, and Canberra, to implement autism-friendly initiatives.

This includes:

- Developing key resources such as sensory maps, journey planners, communication boards, and quiet spaces
- Delivering specialised staff training on autism and hidden disabilities
- Co-developing the Australian Airports Association's (AAA) Hidden Disability Guidelines
- Providing ongoing consultation on airport design and accessibility improvements
- On Gold Coast Airports advisory board, All Abilities Reference Group
- Formal partnership with the Hidden Disability Sunflower Lanyard scheme

Gold Coast Airport partnership

At Gold Coast Airport, Aspect has played a key role in supporting the development of a multi-disability accessibility program. This program ensures a more inclusive travel experience for Autistic passengers, as well as individuals with low vision, mobility challenges, and hearing impairments.

By working closely with internal airport teams, Aspect has helped establish a comprehensive approach to accessibility, positioning Gold Coast Airport as a leader in disability inclusion.





What is the process of making airports hidden disability friendly?

What is the challenge of airports for people with hidden disabilities?

This involves walking through the environment or activity step-by-step, logging key information (i.e. the sequence, sensory experiences, social expectations etc.) by taking notes and photographs. Aspect has developed a comprehensive Autism Friendly Framework that is used when conducting an assessment, which helps to identify:

- What is unique or positive about the environment or organisation
- What can be changed or adjusted
- What information people need to know before they visit

By considering the autism friendly framework, and conducting an assessment together, Gold Coast Airport and Autism Friendly staff identified opportunities for:

1. Making changes to the environment
2. Resources to help people pre-plan their journey
3. A way of letting staff know that you may need support; Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard program
4. Hidden Disability awareness and staff training



1.

Making changes to the environment

Sensory friendly entrance

Travellers can now find a designated quiet entrance in the middle of the terminal with less people and less noise. When entering there is signage to show people how to find their way around. A sensory friendly bathroom and quiet room are located near this entrance.

Sensory friendly bathroom

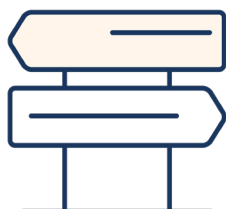
This bathroom can be found near the quiet entrance. The bathroom can be accessed by anyone, although could be a helpful option for anyone who finds the noise of hand dryers overwhelming. Hand-dryers have been removed from these bathrooms, with paper towels provided instead. Automatic air fresheners have also been removed for those who find the smell of chemicals overwhelming.

Quiet room

A Quiet Room is designed for anyone needing a short time away from the stress and stimulation of an environment. Gold Coast Airport's Quiet Room is located near the Sensory friendly entrance, and is labelled on the terminal sensory map. It is also identified by a sunflower symbol on the door.

Visual supports

The Hidden Disability Sunflower theme is evident throughout the airport. Sunflower symbols can be found on sensory maps, sensory friendly bathrooms, quiet room, priority seating and priority screening lanes. Staff who are trained in Hidden Disabilities proudly wear a sunflower pin on their uniform.



2.

Resources to help people pre-plan their journey

Visual Stories

Visual stories have been designed to assist people in understanding how the airport works, what to expect and what is expected of travellers. These stories can help people prepare for their journey. There are visual stories for domestic and international travel, in both written and animated form. Printable versions can be used at the airport, to help complete each step of the journey.

My Airport activity book

An activity book was developed for children traveling through Gold Coast Airport. The activity book has activities that can be completed along each step of the terminal journey, including an 'I-spy' for children to find different things in the airport, as well as colouring and a find-a-word. Checklists are also included for some of the important things that everyone travelling has to do. Children can tick off when they have completed each step, such as check-in, security checks and boarding the plane.

Sensory Map

Airports are often crowded and noisy places. A terminal sensory map was developed, that identifies low, medium and high sensory areas, and what type of challenges travellers may face. This can help people navigate their way through the terminal, and can help to prepare for crowded areas, additional noise, smells and lights. It also identifies areas where people can stop and be in a quieter area if required.

Hidden Disability Guide

A Hidden Disability Guide has been produced for Gold Coast Airport and details the various services and facilities available for passengers with accessibility requirements.

Hidden Disabilities Webpage

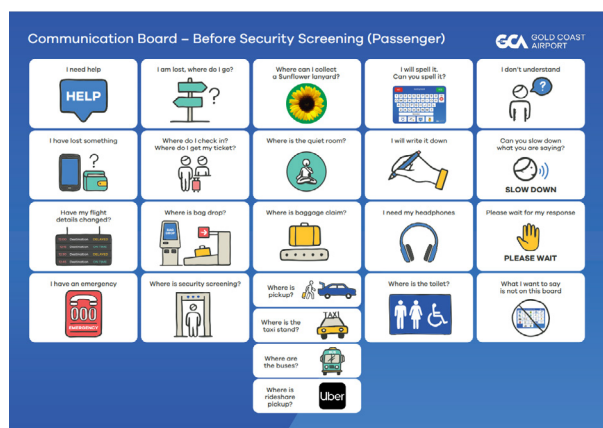
Gold Coast Airport's Hidden Disability webpage provides clear, easily accessible information about the various resources and supports available for guests travelling through the airport.



Resources to help people at the airport

Communication Boards

Communication and Sequencing Boards were designed to assist travelers who may have difficulty communicating, including those who are non-verbal, have speech difficulties, or speak languages other than English. These boards use pictures, icons, and text to help identify key locations and information, ensuring that all passengers can easily get the help they need.



AmbassaPAW Therapy Dog Program

Travel can be stressful, but the Gold Coast Airport AmbassaPAW therapy dogs are here to offer some much-needed comfort. These trained therapy dogs are available throughout the week to help alleviate travel-related anxiety for all passengers, including those with hidden disabilities.

When you request a Sunflower Lanyard Pack from Gold Coast Airport, you'll receive:

- The Sunflower Lanyard
- An AmbassaPAWS card, so you can know all about our therapy dogs
- A Terminal Sensory Map to help you navigate quieter areas of the airport
- A Fidget Wristband to help with calming and focus during the journey





3.

A way of letting staff know that you may need support

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard Program

A consistent approach provides passengers with hidden disabilities increased choice in how they identify themselves, and how they can access supports in the airport environment. Anyone who has a hidden disability, or is travelling with someone with a hidden disability can request a free lanyard.

Wearing a sunflower lanyard when you are at Gold Coast Airport is a discreet way to indicate to staff that you may need a little extra help, guidance or time with the airport processes. The team have been trained to recognise the lanyard and provide the assistance and support customers may need.

"I have used the Hidden Disability Sunflower Lanyard at Gold Coast Airport. It was helpful because staff identified that I might need extra time and support, so directed me to a special security lane."

4.

Hidden Disability awareness

The Hidden Disability Lanyard Program only works if staff are aware of what it means, and what they can do to help. Staff training has been ongoing since 2018 and is achieved by a 8 minute video with the core principles of communication, kindness, respect and understanding.





How are we making lasting change?

Almost 100 staff from a variety of areas within the airport attended an Autism Friendly training session upon launching the program in 2018. Training included information on Hidden Disabilities, autism and good practice principles for supporting people.

Training was co-presented with people on the autism spectrum who provided examples of:

- their own life experiences, challenges and capabilities
- experiences travelling as an autistic person
- professional experiences in supporting people

Gold Coast Airport staff who participated in the training shared that having the information presented by someone with lived experience of Autism made the content not only easier to understand but also more relatable and impactful.

"Provided great insight into exactly how a person with autism sees the world. Excellent to see the world through an Autistic person's eyes and the tools to cope with it." – Airport staff member

On completion of the training 99% of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

- they had a better knowledge of the characteristics that could help them identify an individual on the autism spectrum
- it had helped build confidence to be able to communicate effectively with individuals on the autism spectrum
- it had built confidence in their capacity to assist customers experiencing sensory overwhelm
- they will be able to use the information provided in the training session in the future

"I did not know I needed this workshop but am grateful I had the opportunity to attend" – Airport staff member

An ongoing relationship and continuous improvement

Both the Gold Coast Airport and the Aspect Autism Friendly team know that an inclusive culture is not just a one-time thing – environments change, and so do people. The partnership approach means that there can be continuous improvement. For instance, after initially partnering on developing Visual Stories, the Gold Coast Airport team were able to develop a Covid-19 Visual Story, which the Autism Friendly team were happy to provide feedback on, so that everyone knows what to expect when travelling through the airport as changes arise.

The work with Gold Coast Airport was also instrumental in developing a consistent set of guidelines, including the Hidden Disability Sunflower lanyard, which have been adopted by all airports in Australia. Watch out for more Hidden Disabilities programs in other airports too!

The Autism Friendly team will be back to complete another environmental assessment when the new terminals are built, and will provide ongoing training to ensure that the Hidden Disabilities program keeps being meaningful for both staff and travellers.



"Gold Coast Airport is focused on making its terminal and precinct welcoming and inclusive for people of all abilities. Ultimately, we want to empower and encourage everyone to travel."

– Brian McGuckin, Queensland Airports Limited Chief Property and Planning Officer

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

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
Gold Coast Airport, please visit
**[www.goldcoastairport.com.au/
at-the-airport/hidden-disabilities](http://www.goldcoastairport.com.au/at-the-airport/hidden-disabilities)**



Autism Friendly

