

Neurodiversity In Museums; The current state for provisions for Autistic Adults.

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(A Very Rapid note on Terminology)

We live in an age of ever changing language and nuances of language, and so it is important to attempt to get the terminology correct.

How this condition is referred to is from a point of view; people who regard Autism as a problem use negative language, - **Someone with Autism**.

But now Autistic people themselves are now making themselves heard. They are saying clearly that this isn't Ok and that Autism is really a different way of being.

They use person first language – **Autistic People – the Person is Autistic**.

Introduction; Potential barriers to Autistic people attending the Museum.

“Support for families with autistic children is also slowly becoming a feature, although there is a lack of thought for autistic adults. This is particularly disappointing as museums have so much to offer in terms of work experience and volunteering opportunities, and autistic individuals in return have much to offer museums.” (NAS)

Autism is a spectrum based disorder which means that people are affected by it to a greater or lesser degree. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world in a different way to other people. (af)

No two people are the same.

Barriers to Museum access for Autistic people.

- Getting there; public transport can be nerve wracking for people with sensory and anxiety problems

- Navigating unknown spaces; No idea of what to expect, and difficulty in finding exits or toilets, crowded spaces and queues.
- Sensory overloading; variations in lighting, noises from strange or sudden places, flickering screens.
- Intimidating staff who may be untrained in Autism awareness, pushy shops.

Common solutions to these problems

Not every solution is appropriate for every museum, nor is every solution expensive or complicated to implement. Most important is to consult with local Autism groups for ideas, testing and above all, feedback.

- Improved websites; pre visit information, -opening times, ticket prices, where you are located, a good easily read map and downloadable sensory maps.
- Early openings/relaxed openings; if the museum is blessed by many visitors, early openings for autistic visitors can be useful. (An alternative might be late openings).
- Train all staff; this doesn't have to be expensive, time consuming or complicated, it could start with showing the National Autistic Society video "What is autism?" This is an area in which examining what other museums have done and involvement with a local autism group can be especially helpful. Certification is available from the NAS. (ac) (aw)
- Pre visit support; sensory maps can show quiet and noisy areas and times of day. Visual stories that feature what the entrance looks like, what the staff wear and what activities might take place in the museum.
- Chill out area; a dedicated quiet space for the sensory overwhelmed.

At the present moment most of the adaptations in place are aimed at children (and by extension, their families) This is not to say that these ideas are not helpful for the older individual; Children are often better at engaging with a museum; they are active rather than passive participants, and they are unafraid to tell you I there is something they don't like/understand/see the relevance of.

The organisation Kids in Museums (kim) has written a short guide.

The National Autistic Society(nas) has also a very basic guide.

But what is there for the adult? There doesn't seem to be much, the Autism in the Museums website claims

"Previews, small group programs, multisensory teaching tools, fewer gratuitous sights and sounds, clear structure, and predictable schedules work for a huge range of children, teens, and adults."(opp)

The science museum offer (NAS)

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Claire Madge is an experienced museum volunteer who runs Autism in Museums (aim)(af)

Elizabeth Blake has done a dedicated study of Autistic adults and museums. (blake)

Lydia Shacklock has written a paper on Autism in Museums and the New Normal. (Shak).

Case studies

Subway Sleuths

This series of workshops is run by the New York Transit Museum (nytm) and is aimed at children with an interest in transport

The specific aim of this scheme is to help children with AS with their social skills. In my experience, Social skills development is probably the most life changing thing that can be done with Autistic people.

This is done by;

Eight weekly online sessions are facilitated by a contracted professional trained in ASD support and a Transit Museum Educator. For accepted students, the 2nd-3rd grade group meets online on Tuesdays at 4:15 pm, and the 4th-5th grade group meets online on Wednesdays at 4:15 pm. Subway Sleuths will be presented via the Zoom platform during the months of March and April.

At the moment this programme is run via Zoom. (The New York Transit Museum have adapted very well to current conditions and have many things available for the online visitor).

The project has been running since 2012 and has won several awards such as the 2016 National Arts and Humanities Youth Programme award and the AAM 2016 Ed Com for excellence in Programming.

Disadvantages

- Aimed at a very targeted audience. (*"All interested candidates must submit an application, and potential candidates are screened to ensure that the accepted children show similar social and communication profiles and have a strong interest in transit."*)(nytm)
- For Kids only. (They have two groups, 2nd-3rd Graders and 4th – 5th Graders -7-8 year olds and 9-10 year olds).
- Limited number of places.
- It costs money, -\$150(£108 in a March 2021 exchange rate), though limited partial scholarships are available.

The Subway Sleuths project could be easily adapted by any specialised museum and could also be adapted to older visitors, or, given that AS runs in families, intergenerational groups.

Volunteering

"Too often, schools focus on remediation at the expense of talents and interests: Children with autism spend their school days learning to be as "typical "as possible. Museums, though, are all about passions and unique abilities. The child whose fascination with outer space sabotages his English grades could thrive and even take a leadership role in a planetarium setting. The youngster

whose artistic abilities far outshine her ability to converse with peers could develop her talents, interests and understanding of visual media in an art museum setting. The possibilities are endless, given the right supports, opportunities, training and willingness to learn on all sides.”(musorg)

There are many advantages of Autism in a museum setting.

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- Good organisers
- People with often very narrow but all encompassing specialist interests
- How many people already working in the museum environment are `on the spectrum`? We are familiar with people who do not always fit a neurotypical mould.

Supporting Transitions is an American (trans)

My personal experience with volunteering

From 2016 to 2020 I volunteered at Newquay Museum. (NQ)

Newquay museum is the town museum dedicated to Newquay and the surrounding parishes. It also contains the local archive. It is a small museum, just two rooms and an interconnecting corridor. There is an eclectic collection, prehistoric finds, mining artefacts, local art and folk potteries and surfing memorabilia.

Len is retired and counts pretty much as full time staffing. He is very much an ideas man, always willing to try some new way of promoting his museum. Len is a particular enemy of static museums, he says that displays should be changing constantly in order to give the visitor something new to see...Anyhow, how else do we get alternative items out of storage? Len is highly enthusiastic and always willing to give visitors a guided tour, even if he is (invariably) busy with another project.

My work was varied. I helped catalogue old publications, took part in the Piran's Day parade and put on a mini exhibition of my Horn ware collection Life Before Plastic to enhance the exhibition on beach pollution.

Len has another Autistic volunteer, Ben, who is in his early twenties. Ben has a good knowledge of IT and he is also interested in photography. So the work he does is tailored to making the most of these useful skills while giving him experience in areas he is not so confident with. For Ben, museum work is a great confidence builder.

Len too care to make us both welcomed and valued, an gave us tasks which drew on our strengths while giving us a chance to overcome our weaknesses.

My Personal Experience with Education

I found teaching you.... "instructive", also inspiring and exasperating on occasion. Looking back I think you taught me far more about Asperger's syndrome as I taught you about academic language and punctuation. My understanding is based on Simon Baron-Cohen's concept of the theory of mind.

this has major implications for how student's with Asperger's Syndrome learn and how to support them with the challenges that mainstream Education presents.

Louise Gray

#My role engaging with someone with AS:

- Student focused support*
- Academic support towards goals and aspirations*
- Hassle-free arrangements*
- Student choice and empowerment*
- Flexibility in delivery*
- Adaptable support for changing needs*

The Role:

As Mentor (ASD) a support worker needs to:

- Provide effective support to students in a higher education setting*
- Work with individuals who may face barriers to learning due to autistic spectrum characteristics and associated difficulties*
- Work with your student to identify strategies to help address barriers*
- Provide support that is student specific and could include activities such as time management, planning, coping with anxiety and stress situations, prioritising workload, and creating a suitable work-life balance*
- Work to enhance your student's autonomy, to monitor the effectiveness of strategies, and to help students recognise the barriers to learning created by their impairment*
- Be responsible for organising sessions with your assigned students in a flexible needs led way*
- Offer support on campus, in-home, or remotely as agreed with your student*
- Be required to complete Amano administration promptly and accurately*
- Personal boundaries*

Alison Sheward

Conclusion

"In short, museum professionals have the tools and capability to provide people with autism with extraordinary experiences available nowhere else in the world. These are people for whom museums,

in many cases, are a natural destination. But neither they nor the museum community necessarily know it yet.”(musorg)

Can museums adapt to this audience? An audience that is academically stimulating and passionate? One that will come again and again?

Many of the changes that will help Autistic people enjoy the museum setting will also benefit other groups; Do we really, truly need loud sounds and flashing lights in the museum? An improved website is essential in the modern museum, doubly so now they are closed due to Covid-19.

Lastly, we must never forget;

INCLUSIVITY IN THE MUSEUM MEANS MORE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES ()

Advisory-

To sum up;

Websites-better navigation, more information and guides

Guides-Better quality

Sensory-Tone it down

Crowds-Give advice as to quietest time to visit; organise early mornings

Staff-train them A lot of my best museum memories involve good curators.

Local Groups-Liase with them; see what works and what does not.

Vested Interests;

The author of this report has Aspergers Syndrome herself, -she volunteered at Newquay Museum from June 2016 to March 2020

Thank you to;

Sara Thompson from the New York Transit Museum ()

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Bibliography