



How to Make Your Event Sensory-Friendly

A guide to planning, developing and implementing a sensory-friendly environment at your local event, state fair or county fair.

OVERVIEW *What does the term “sensory-friendly” mean?*

Sensory refers to any of the senses (i.e., sight, sound, taste, touch, smell). *Sensory-friendly* refers to the idea of creating an experience or environment that is less intense or extreme in relation to the senses. For example, decreasing sounds, motion or lights to create a calmer environment. Modifications can be made for all of the senses as well. Individuals with a sensory processing disorder may become overwhelmed by an atmosphere that others would find fun and exciting. Sensory-friendly programming can help provide an inclusive environment for individuals with autism spectrum disorder or sensory processing disorder to join in on all of the event’s fun!

PRODUCTION *Setting up the environment and providing education.*

PROGRAMMING

1. When thinking about implementing a sensory-friendly program, the first step is to analyze your *current* activities and environment.
2. Then, consider how the current activities/environment can be *modified* to make it more sensory-friendly. (*Example: Can you modify the amount of sounds, lights or crowd for this activity?*)
3. If you cannot accommodate a specific activity, consider providing a designated quiet area or sensory room for families, children and individuals to take a break from the action. (*Example: Are there areas at your event that are naturally less crowded or quieter?*)

FINDING COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- Reach out to local school districts, college programs or businesses to assist with programming.
- Be on the lookout for organizations who possess experience and knowledge of individuals with sensory needs. (*Example: Local outpatient pediatric therapy facilities, special education teachers and local colleges with related majors*)

PRE-VISIT MATERIALS

- *Social Stories* are short descriptions of a particular situation that provide information about what to expect and why. They are a great tool for children to visualize and prepare for a new or unfamiliar activity.
 - Review ChildServe’s Social Story “A Day at the Iowa State Fair”: bit.ly/IAStateFairSocialStory
 - Review Ohio State Fair’s Social Story: bit.ly/OHStateFairSocialStory
- Provide a video of the event grounds, parking and restrooms (family, accessible, adult changing stations).
- The more prepared a family feels, the more likely they can plan a fun, successful visit to your event.

EDUCATE VOLUNTEERS AND EMPLOYEES

- It is important to educate volunteers and employees about what *sensory-friendly* means along with how they can best serve the event attendees.
- Provide tips on how to interact with kids/adults and what to expect during these events.
- Work with event staff (ticket admissions, ride operators, food vendors and volunteers) to educate and prepare them for the event.

PROVIDE TIPS FOR VOLUNTEERS

- Some individuals may be sensitive to strong scents. Avoid wearing perfume or cologne.
- Some individuals may be sensitive to touch. Make sure to ask permission and explain what you are doing prior to doing so.
- Kids/adults may avoid eye contact when communicating. This does not mean they are not listening — continue interacting with them and respect their way of communication.



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CONSIDERATIONS *Assembling the logistics of the event and sensory-friendly environment.*

CONSIDER DAY(S) TO HOLD EVENT

- Low attendance days = less crowds, commotion and sounds.
- Time of day where it is naturally less busy. *(Example: In the mornings or close to event opening)*

PARKING

- Are there accessible parking spots near the entrance?
- Stay aware of potential wheelchair and mobility device users/attendees. *(Example: Is the lot or walkway grassy, gravel or paved?)* Communicate this information with visitors.
- Consider parking passes for closer parking spots for certain attendees.
- Provide maps and detailed directions prior to the event on where to park, cost/admission and accessible parking spots.

MAP/VISUAL OF EVENT GROUNDS

- Providing a map or visual of the event grounds, parking, event locations, accessible restrooms and rest areas make attending the event easier for all attendees. Providing this before the event can help families get a preview of the event and plan ahead.
- Note any areas used for sensory-friendly programming. *(Example: Stations, games, sensory rooms)*
- Review the Iowa State Fair's Visual Guide for reference: bit.ly/ISF-VisualGuide

CREATE SENSORY ROOMS AND CALMING AREAS

- Having a space where kids/adults can take a break from the event action is a great way to create an inclusive environment.
- Find a quiet, air-conditioned and accessible space.
- Consider dimming the lighting or utilizing blackout curtains in the space.
- Provide a variety of seating. *(ex. Bean bags or floor mats*)*
- Have a variety of sensory fidget toys available. *(ex. Pop-it fidget toy, stress balls, fidget spinner*)*
- Turn on calming music.
- Print out deep-breathing handouts.
- Provide weighted lap socks/blankets.*
- Consider having space for more gross-motor movement activities *(ex. Obstacle course)*



**Most of these items or materials can be found on Amazon.com*

SENSORY CRAFT IDEAS

1. Create a Sensory Bag: A simple and fun way for an individual to explore their tactile and visual senses. It requires minimal materials such as a plastic bag, hair gel, food coloring and glitter!
2. Create a Sensory Bottle: A fun craft to create at a sensory-friendly event. A sensory bottle can be used to help regulate an individual who may be experiencing feelings of stress, anger, sadness, excitement or any feelings on an elevated level. It requires simple materials such as a plastic bottle, super glue, water, oil, food coloring and glitter.



To find more simple and easy sensory crafts like these, Pinterest.com has many great ideas to explore!