



12 Tips for Interacting with People with Autism

1. Autism is a broad-spectrum disorder. Some people with autism are unable to verbalize. If a person does not respond to a verbal question, assume they understood you, but may not be able to speak. If possible, offer another means of communication, such as pen/paper, or a tablet.
2. Many people with autism have auditory processing difficulties. Do not give multi-step commands or use run-on sentences. Straightforward, clear remarks are best.
3. Some people with autism are sensitive to touch, and some may react with intensity when touched. Museum and security staff should be aware of this and act accordingly. For instance, if the person with autism does not appear to welcome physical contact, do not try to shake hands.
4. Many people with autism appear disconnected, may not make eye contact, and may have stereotypy (stims) such as handclapping or rocking (and some have verbal stims). Do not assume that they are not taking everything in.
5. People may stim for a variety of reasons (e.g., they are in an unfamiliar place or are excited). Stimming may be how a person with autism regulates incoming sensory stimulation to avoid being overwhelmed by stimuli. Do not discourage them, unless it presents a danger.
6. People with autism may have visual processing difficulties. In particular, sudden and unexpected movement can be disturbing to them. Security staff should avoid rushing up to someone who, for instance, is stimming.
7. Crowds can be challenging for people with autism. Museum personnel should know where there are quiet spaces to which they can direct families of people with autism, if they request or require such quiet areas.
8. Loud noises can be disturbing and, conversely, low-level noises, such as buzzing from fluorescent lights (which also might flicker) can be bothersome. Be aware that something most people might not react to could be an issue for a person with autism whose sensory system is very sensitive.

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9. If providing programs for groups of children or adults with autism, develop a social story about a visit to the museum that can be made available before the visit to the group or families with members with autism.
10. Previewing an experience and having a sense of what to expect is important to people on the autism spectrum. At the beginning of a group visit, set clear parameters and explain how long you will be doing certain activities.
11. Reminders and alert are important. For many people with autism, transitions can be difficult, so letting them know that a transition is coming up is important. Alert people in advance if you are entering a space with films or videos that include bright lights, loud noises, or abrupt actions.
12. Have a system in place to assist a person with autism who is lost in the museum. (This is particularly important for someone who is non-verbal or has limited verbal skills.) Consider providing special nametags or badges to families/groups that include a person or persons with autism. This would help reunite someone who is lost with his/her group.