

Autism friendly Screenings (AFS) in cinema during the Covid-19 pandemic

Some people with autism, and their families, might have been at home for the first 6 months of the COVID19 pandemic. Some who are higher on the autism spectrum might have also been shielding. Everyone has felt the impact of changes to routine and a completely different way of life across the world, but for people with autism they may have felt this even more because:

- People with autism rely on routine and it's important to help them feel grounded. This sudden change to routine and life as they know it will have been a shock.
- People with autism can feel empathy more strongly than other people. This means that the news of people suffering and dying may have upset them more.

For some, getting back to the cinema might be a brave step, as leaving the safety of home and doing something they have not experienced for many months can be stressful and daunting. For others this will be a necessary and welcome respite away from the stresses of home. It is often said in our surveys that going to the cinema is one of the few "normal" things they can do in an autism friendly environment.

When thinking about hosting autism friendly screenings and welcoming back guests with autism at your cinema again, please remember that some guests will find any new changes intimidating and may need friendly support to enjoy the screening/visit to the cinema. But you might also find that some prefer the cinema with these new changes because there are clear instructions about what to do and where to go. Therefore, please consider how any new Covid-19 safety measures might affect guests with autism and the adjustments involved in making their visit accessible and friendly.

We've provided some short guidance and things to consider when putting on an autism friendly screening during this pandemic.

The most important adjustments are:

1. **Clear communication in as many forms as possible:** provide social stories, videos and information about what safety adjustments are in place and what guests can expect. Publish this information on your website, in guest communications and have staff explain things on arrival and during a visit.
2. **Patient and understanding staff:** the second most important adjustment for guests (second to venue cleanliness protecting against Covid-19) was ensuring that staff are trained in all relevant Covid-19 safety measures and how this may affect guests with autism. Ensure all staff are patient and understanding of guest concerns, queries or any reasonable adjustments they might need.
3. **Engaging and identifiable customer service:** make it clear who guests can talk to and make sure staff are available throughout the cinema, including the auditorium. Remember, carers might not be able to leave the person they are accompanying alone in the auditorium.

Adjustments to improve the autism friendly experience

Communication

- As mentioned before, provide as much information as possible. You can watch the short autism awareness video and download a social story template at www.dimensions-uk.org/afstraining - Please consider taking the training
- Have someone in the screen at the beginning to make sure guests are seated properly and to remind them that; they must remain in their allocated seats and to not move around during the film, but they can leave/take breaks outside of the auditorium.
- Have a member of staff check in every 15 minutes to make sure everyone is ok, socially distanced, and available to answer any queries.
- If a guest has to leave early for a particular reason such as not being able to stay in their allocated seat and maintain social distancing throughout the film, please consider offering a partial refund or a credit note so they can come back another time.

Changes to the venue

- The sinks in the bathrooms might be busier than usual due to extra hand washing – where possible and safe please turn off the hand dryers and provide paper towels instead.
- Let guests know in advance what refreshments are available, offer alternatives to those not available (e.g. bagged sweets instead of self-service pick a mix), make sure all intolerances are still catered for and remind them they can bring their own. But they must not share with people outside of their bubble.

Face coverings

- Make sure guests know that they do not have to wear a face covering if they are not comfortable. Children under 11 years are exempt from the legal requirement, as are people who find wearing a face covering distressing and/or have a disability/health condition. This can apply to people with autism, you can find out more information at www.dimensions-uk.org/icantwearamask
- Staff are required to wear a face covering, but it is acceptable to temporarily remove the covering to speak with customers who will benefit from seeing facial expressions and read lips.
- Please remember that those who do want to wear a face covering should be encouraged to do so, but they're free to take them off when they eat and drink.
- If your cinema has screens/barriers separating staff from customers at key contact points like a kiosk or ticket desk, then you do not have to wear a face covering. This will help with communication, but it also feels more friendly and inviting when a customer can see your whole face.

Changes to autism friendly adjustments

- Make it clear at all stages of the customer journey that guests cannot change seats, but they can still leave or take a break if they wish to. Let them know they must return back to the same seat.
- Let guests know that if they do sit in a different vacant seat away from other guests, they must notify a member of staff to ensure this is safe.

- All trailers and adverts are removed from AFS, therefore if you intend to play a COVID19 safety infomercial prior to the film screening, please make guests aware of this in advance so they can prepare and manage their visit leading up to the film.

Take the autism friendly cinema screenings training for free

The Autism Friendly Screenings training takes around 15 minutes to complete and is available online and free to access at:

www.dimensions-uk.org/takeafstraining

Please watch the video and the 'Communication' section of the written guidance to refresh your autism awareness and understanding. The written guidance can be found at the bottom of this page:

www.dimensions-uk.org/takeafstraining

There are also templates for signs and social stories free and available to use.

Any questions?

If you have any queries please email:

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