

Sensory-Friendly Screenings Factsheet

Why hold Sensory-Friendly Screenings?

Going to see a film can be an overwhelming experience for some people. Screenings are often very loud; they may be highly visually stimulating, with fast-moving images and high contrast lighting; you are expected to sit still and quiet in one place for 1-2 hours, surrounded by people who you don't know; they are an unfamiliar experience when some people need certainty and find change difficult.

One way to make moving image more accessible is holding special sensory-friendly screenings – sometimes called relaxed screenings. These are screenings designed to be accessible for people who normally find moving image inaccessible. They are often helpful for autistic people, or people with ADHD, Tourette's, migraine, epilepsy, sensory processing disorders, learning disabilities, or dementia.

How do you make a screening more sensory-friendly?

- Turn on the house lights on to reduce contrast.
- Turn the volume down.
- Allow people to move around if they need to, and to go in and out of the screening room if necessary.
- If it's in a cinema or screening room with seating, it can be really helpful to allow people to have bookable seats near the door so it's easy for them to slip out if they need to (this is an access requirement that could be built into regular screenings too).
- Also make sure that you have set aside companion seating – that's a seat next to the disabled person for their carer or support worker.
- It can also be helpful to limit numbers so that people aren't overwhelmed by crowds.
- Instruct front of house staff to be accommodating to audience members who don't behave in the "expected" way. At a relaxed screening, people expect to be allowed to make noise and move around.

- Make clear in your advertising, and announce at the beginning of the screening, that this is a relaxed, sensory-friendly screening so that other audience members know what to expect and don't try to "police" other audience members.

One size does not fit all. Some audience members may appreciate some aspects of sensory-friendly screenings but find other aspects difficult. For example, someone with migraines may benefit from the house lights being on, and the volume being lowered, but find it difficult to deal with other audience members making noise. You could accommodate this by having separate "quiet" or "low-sensory" screenings – the most important thing is to be clear about what type of screening you are offering, and what the environment is likely to be, so that people can make their own decisions about whether it will be accessible for them.

Visual Stories and Sensory Packs

Going to a film screening can be a new and unfamiliar experience, and for some people that brings anxiety. There are some things you can do to pre-emptively reduce the anxiety of attending a screening.

Visual Stories

(These may also be called Visual Narratives, Social Narratives, or Social Stories [though Social Stories is a proprietary term], or Neurodivergent Affirming Guides).

Going to a screening can be a new experience and that can be quite stressful if people don't know what to expect. Having a social story can be a good way to put people at ease.

Visual Stories explain step by step a visit or event, taking some of the anxiety out of an unknown and unfamiliar situation. They enable autistic people to feel safe and in control during a visit to a new place.

Ideally these should be tailored to each neurodivergent person who uses them, however that is not generally possible for organisations. It is helpful to make your visual story customisable, however, so that autistic people or their families can tailor them in advance of a trip.

Sensory packs

This is especially relevant for film screenings in gallery spaces. More museums and galleries are now offering sensory backpacks with things like ear defenders, fidget toys, visual timetables, and sensory maps, for people to take around the gallery space. In the past these have tended to be more child-focused, but ND adults would benefit from them too!

Sensory maps are maps of the exhibition space that highlight any particular sensory experiences that people might want to avoid – or seek out. It is important to mark where audio-visual content will be and flag up any films that are particularly loud or visually overwhelming.

We have a separate factsheet available about creating access packs, including more information on Sensory Packs and Visual Stories – please email

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