

South West Yorkshire Partnership 

NHS Foundation Trust

Checklist for Autism-Friendly Environments (2016)

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This checklist supports the recommendations on the physical environment in the NICE guidelines on Autism spectrum disorder in adults and Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s.

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With all of us in mind.

Many people with Autism can experience severe difficulties with 'unfriendly' environments. This can mean that a person may have problems with sensory input from the world around them. This can be simplistically hyper, hypo or perception sensitivity.

This may affect them in a variety of different ways, from being distracted, unable to concentrate and having mild discomfort, to symptoms of acute 'pain' and deterioration in functioning. If the environment is distressing for the person this may stop them from accessing it. The result could be that Social, Health, Education and Leisure opportunities become limited.

The incidence of people on the autism spectrum that have sensory difficulties is debatable however; Professor Tony Attwood (2008) stated that:

“...40% of children with autism have some sort of sensory sensitivity...the incidence may be the same for Asperger syndrome”

Other difficulties in the environment include unclear communication and a lack of awareness or understanding of autism. If environments become too stressful it is also important to have the option to escape from any situation. This checklist also seeks to raise this as a factor to be considered.

Everyone with autism is, of course, unique and they have their own specific ways and needs to be considered.

This document was developed for services (or individuals) to review whether they could make environments friendlier and raise awareness of how they might be able to make changes.

An environment can be described as anything from a space or room to a whole building. It is recommended that assessors start with a smaller space at first, for example in a GP surgery it may be useful to begin with the waiting room.

Because this tool is geared for ALL individuals and groups to use it is divided into TWO parts. Each is divided again into areas with specific questions to answer.

Everyone needs to complete part A, which gives a generic view of what core requirements are expected.

Part B is enhanced and also needs to be completed for specialist providers. These are services that are autism specific for example specialist residential or day services

A – Core Requirements

These are essential and are minimum requirements to create an Autism Friendly Environment.

1. Sensory

- Sight/visual
- Smell/olfactory
- Hearing/auditory
- Body awareness/proprioception

2. Communication Systems

3. Escape/ Leave

4. Awareness – Core

B - Enhanced

1. Sensory

- Touch/tactile
- Taste/gustatory
- Balance/vestibular

2. Awareness - Enhanced

3. Theory of Mind /Flexibility of Thought

For each area there are several questions for you to consider, to help you to assess fully whether the environment is autism-friendly Please answer for each Yes, No or n/a (not applicable)

It will be the examination of each category rather than the deficits of the environment that maybe of most benefit.

At the end is a segment named solutions/discussion. This is to be completed to indicate how you aim to change the current environment to address those things you have not considered.

These solutions will always be specific to each area rather than for particular individuals. You will need to give therefore generic solutions rather than those specific to an individual person.

Remember - To begin the process you may want to start with the smallest space then expand to large areas. It is also important to review the checklist at least annually to see how things have changed and what further progress needs to be made.

Note- In this document the term 'autism' refers to 'autism spectrum disorders' encompassing autism, Asperger's syndrome and atypical autism (or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified) in addition different individuals and groups prefer a variety of terms for autism including autistic spectrum condition, autistic spectrum difference and neurodiversity.

Author information

Stephen Simpson works as Autism Pathway Lead for South West Yorkshire Partnership Foundation NHS Trust. He has worked in the field of Autism for over 20 years and qualified with a B.Phil. degree in Autism from the University of Birmingham. Stephen currently works in the specialist Autism service for Adults in Wakefield. His recent work has included consultation on NICE guidance and Quality Standards in Autism.

Thanks to Professor Marios Adamou, Darryl Thompson, my wonderful family and everyone at Manygates Clinic.

Part A

Date:

Environment:

Assessor:

Sight / Visual questions	Answer
1 Have you considered if the colours in the environment are low arousal such as cream and pastel shades rather than vibrant Shades?	Yes No or n/a
2 Have you considered if the environment is too cluttered with furniture? "It has been suggested that people with Autism find it helpful if furniture is kept to the sides of a room and the central space is kept clear"(Nguyen, 2006)	
3 Does the environment have overly patterned shapes and surfaces that could be visually offensive?	
4 Have you also considered any curtains, blinds etc. that could be visually offensive?	
5 Have you considered whether any clothing or jewellery could be visually offensive?	
6 Have you considered if the environment has fluorescent or harsh lighting?	
7 Have you considered the effect of sunlight from windows or skylights, where the light is at different times of the day and reflective surfaces?	

	Smell / Olfactory questions	
	If you have ever walked through a perfume department in a store, then you may have experienced the effect on your senses. It can be offensive if you are hypersensitive to smell and can have significant physical responses such as headache and nausea. It is therefore important to minimize this distress.	
1	Have you considered the toxicity/acute smells of paint or wallpaper pastes used to decorate the environment?	
2	Have you considered the smells of cleaning materials used? E.g. polish, air fresheners, bleach	
3	Have you considered the smells of individuals (including pets) using the environment? (E.g. Deodorants, perfumes and aftershave)	
4	Do 'offensive' smells drift around the building from room to room and have you considered how you might isolate them?	

	Hearing / Auditory questions	
	Many people with autism seem to be hypersensitive to acute or high-pitched noise that they cannot control. This can feel like sharp pain and people either cover their ears with fingers or earphones/defenders. The other alternative is to hide the offensive sound by masking it with 'white noise'. Sometimes the slightest inconspicuous sound can be irritating and distracting such as a 'hum' or a 'ticking'	
1	Have you considered the general noise level in the environment?	
2	Have you considered hypersensitive hearing and looked at specific noises that may irritate such as clocks ticking, humming from lights, road noises or building/gardening work in the distance?	
3	Is there noise from flooring and can this be deadened if needed?	
4	Have you considered noise levels at different times of the day?	
5	Have you thought about when people are in the environment at the same and the possible mix of sensory needs?	
6	Have you any specific quiet and louder areas that people can choose from?	
7	Have you considered the pitch of noises as well as the level?	

	Body Awareness / Proprioception questions	
	Some people with autism can have problems with perception and body awareness and find navigating, particularly in unfamiliar settings difficult. Some have additional 'movement' challenges that they will struggle with.	
1	Is the environment free of unnecessary obstructions?	
2	Have rooms been made easier to navigate? E.g. using colours to distinguish floors, walls and furniture, as well as from room to room)	
3	Have you considered differing heights that individuals may need to navigate such as steps, stairs and kerbs?	
4	Have you considered adjustments for those people who have fine motor difficulties? (E.g. locks, cutlery, door handles)	

	<p>Communication questions</p> <p>In all walks of life effective communication is vital. For people on the autism spectrum this is perhaps essential. Clear unambiguous indicators in all forms can prevent stress. Like much of the general population there is a definite preference for sameness, for appropriate language and for an absence of sudden change.</p>	
1	Does the environment have clear signs to indicate the use of each room?	
2	If appropriate, are there directional signs to each area?	
3	Have you considered to what extent are communication systems supported by the use of symbols, pictures, photos or objects?	
4	If rooms do not have one purpose only can you indicate when it is used for different functions to avoid confusion?	
5	Are there photographs used to aid recognition of people (Staff/unfamiliar) if needed?	
6	Do you plan for changes e.g. to routines, staff leaving and building work?	
7	Have you considered the use of 'literal' meanings when designing your environment?	

	Escape/leave questions	
	This is particularly important when there is an unfriendly environment that is difficult to change. People on the autism spectrum are thought to suffer higher levels of stress than the general population due to the condition. It is important therefore to indicate to someone that they can leave a stressful situation and where they can go that is calmer.	
1	Is there a system to know when a person with autism needs to escape/leave from an environment?	
2	Is there a space / room to escape to?	
3	Is this room /space used solely for this purpose?	
4	Have you considered to what extent is this room/space low stimuli and safe?	
5	Is there an alternative to the escape room/space (E.g. the garden)	

	Awareness questions-Core	
	It is important that everyone in an organisation has some basic knowledge of autism and is up to date with their training needs. To be aware of the barriers to change can also be a catalyst for effective problem solving and solutions.	
1	Are you able to make changes to the Core sensory environment? (E.g. are there practical or financial restraints.)	
2	Have you considered to what extent is the environment primarily 'safe' for people with autism?	
3	Are you up to date with Autism Awareness training to support this checklist?	

Part B

Sensory-Touch/tactile questions		
	Some people with autism have sensory differences with regards to touch. This can be complicated with wanting and seeking touch to avoiding it completely. This touch can vary in pressure and to different parts of the body. Whilst some can prefer only light or no touch others will be calmed by firm pressure even being squeezed tightly into clothes or a corner of a room. Getting it wrong and being touched incorrectly can cause great stress and acute reactions.	
1	Are there sensory materials available for individuals to explore touch in the environment? E.g. sand, water play, textiles	
2	Do you have a variety of materials and enough needed for each individual who seeks sensory stimulation?	
3	Are there opportunities for soft play/rough and tumble for individuals to access if appropriate and needed?	
4	Is there massage available to individuals, if needed? (Consider how often, by whom)	
5	Have you considered using a body map where individuals can indicate areas they like/dislike to be touched?	
6	If no body map can you determine where someone likes/dislikes to be touched?	
7	Are there small tight spaces where individuals can squeeze into if they wish to calm using firm pressure?	
8	Are there indicators to point out where hot surfaces are?	
9	Have you considered safety for people who are hypo sensitive to touch and how to manage this?	

	Taste / Gustatory questions	
1	Do you have a wide range of foods available of different textures and temperatures?	
2	Are there options to intensify the flavour of foods by adding seasoning or spices?	
3	Is there clear guidance on what to do when someone is mouthing or eating inedible food?	
4	Have you considered whether people prefer any foodstuffs not to touch each other?	
5	Have you considered whether people prefer certain coloured foods or acute tastes?	

People with autism can be 'fussy eaters'? This may be unfair as it indicates that it is always a conscious choice. However, if your taste sensations are affected for example you are hypersensitive to flavours or under sensitive i.e. cannot taste any bland food then you are limited. For those who cannot communicate this such as people with a learning disability it may be important to understand this better.

	Balance / Vestibular questions Certain movements that cause a self-soothing effect can help stress levels. Many children (and adults) with autism will use a trampoline to calm themselves. To restrict movement especially for people who are used to it can itself cause anxiety.	
1	Is the environment suitable for people who seek movement for example needing lots of space, soft play areas, swings or a trampoline?	
2	Are there opportunities for people to move from indoors to out?	
3	Have you considered how restrictions on movement effect individuals?	
4	Is the environment suitable for people who are oversensitive to movement for example using support equipment to help with balance?	
5	Are routines flexible to those who struggle with movement disorders for example enough time given for movement in the day?	
	Awareness questions- Enhanced	
	If you are filling in this section, you work in a specialist service and need to consider whether all staff are trained to a high quality and are aware of both individual and environmental considerations.	
1	Have you considered to what extent are you fully aware of each individuals' sensory difficulties? (See the sensory profile devised by Bogdashina, 2016)	
2	Are you able to make changes to the sensory environment for example are there practical or financial restraints?	
3	Have you considered to what extent is the environment 'safe' for people with autism?	
4	Are you up to date with enhanced Autism training to support this checklist?	

	Flexibility of Thought /Theory of Mind questions	
	The rigidity of thought patterns is part of the autism condition. Some people cannot always generalise and it is important not to presume this to be the case. Sometimes it can seem that a person shows a lack of empathy however it may be because they show a lack of theory of mind and cannot put themselves into 'others shoes'	
1	Are you aware of the absorbing interests of people in the environment and how to facilitate and manage differences?	
2	Are you/staff aware of the concept of Flexibility of Thought?	
3	Have you considered that because there has been a good/bad response in one environment this cannot be generalised to a similar environment?	
4	Have you considered that people with Autism may have difficulty understanding or interpreting others by not being able to empathize and put themselves in to someone else's consciousness?	
5	Have you considered how will this affect your approaches in the environments they live?	
6	Are you aware of the coping mechanisms for individuals in the environment?	

Date to review and repeat the checklist-

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Solutions / Discussions