



Dining Out with Autism Awareness

What is an Autism Awareness Night?

Grabbing a bite out to eat may be an activity that many families take for granted. But for many families with autism, the prospect of dining out instills fear. So much so, that many families avoid the situation all together. The judgmental glare from other patrons when your child is having a meltdown; the limited menu items for those on a restricted diet; the over stimulation from the noise and chaos. You can see why it might be easier just to stay home. But staying home can also foster feelings of isolation.

Dining out with Autism Awareness is a community-oriented restaurant offering families impacted by autism the chance to feel more comfortable and enjoy dining out with other families that understand their unique situation in a place that is accommodating to their needs.

I think it would be great to bring an autism awareness night to a restaurant in my town. How do I get started?

You already have. This toolkit will give you and the restaurant you approach with all of the information you will need to coordinate your own autism awareness night.

Am I the right person to organize this event?

If you recognize that families in your town might benefit from an enjoyable and comfortable dining out experience, then you are the right person to get the ball rolling.

Will I be able to promote this event if I don't have any background in marketing?

You sure will! That's why we've provided you with all of the tips and tools you will need to get the word out.

How many restaurants should I plan to approach before I get one to say "yes"?

Maybe we're just lucky, but so far, we haven't encountered a restaurant that has declined a chance to host an autism awareness night. And, the restaurants we've worked with have decided to host an autism friendly atmosphere on a regularly scheduled basis. We think you'll find that most restaurants will embrace the opportunity.



Dining Out with Autism Awareness

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex brain-based difference that impacts a person's communication, sensory processing, social interactions, and behavior.

Communication: both verbal and nonverbal

Sensory processing: may have sensitivity to sound, light and touch

Social interactions: may not make eye contact, pick up on social cues or understand personal space

Behavior: may have obsessive tendencies, exhibit outbursts, or wander

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects 1 in 59 US children. Boys are 4 times more likely to be identified with ASD than girls; 1 in 38 boys compared to 1 in 152 girls. The overall rate in Maryland is 1 in 50 children: 1 in 31 boys and 1 in 139 girls.

Each individual's collection of symptoms is unique to that person. In addition, the expression of those symptoms can fall on a spectrum from quite mild to severe. For this reason autism is referred to as a "spectrum disorder"; thus, it is called Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There is no known cure for ASD and no singular cause has been identified at this time, but various treatments and therapies are available.



Dining Out with Autism Awareness

Benefits of Hosting an Autism Awareness Night

Hosting an Autism Awareness Night is a win-win event for everyone.

- **The chance to market to a new audience.** Many families of autism often skip the decision to eat out. It's not unusual for families to experience judgmental eyes on them when their child has a meltdown in public. Some families have even heard the phrase, "Why can't they be better parents?" from another table. You are reaching a segment of the population that is often overlooked.
- **Free publicity.** To advertise your event, local media can be contacted, flyers can be distributed around town, websites and social media can advertise and post a link to your restaurant's site, and emails can be sent to large distribution groups. People spread good news.
- **A packed restaurant on a typically slow night.** We recommend that you set up your autism awareness event on a night when you typically experience low flow. This helps you fill usually empty seats, and can provide less chaos for a group that can easily feel overstimulated.



Dining Out with Autism Awareness

Tips for Promoting Your Autism Awareness Night

Ways to get the word out:

- Send your flyer to a local printer and ask if they would be willing to print, free of charge, flyers for you to distribute. Offer to put the phrase “Printing kindly provided by (name of printer, web address)”
- Distribute flyers in pediatrician offices, medical specialist offices, dentist offices, psychology practices, schools, libraries, local grocery stores, dry cleaners, daycare centers, gyms, etc.
- Email announcement and flyer to your local Autism Society, Arc, and other autism support groups and ask them to please forward the information to their email distribution lists and post information on their social media, websites, include in their newsletters, etc.
- Share on social media; create an event on Facebook where people can respond as well as share on their own pages
- Email the announcement and flyer to everyone in your email address book; those people will most likely forward the information to people they believe will be interested
- List your event on the Pathfinders for Autism Calendar of Events at <https://pathfindersforautism.org/submit-events/>



Dining Out with Autism Awareness

Tips for Restaurant Staff

How to Serve a Guest with Autism:

It is important to note that each person with autism is an individual and should be treated as any other customer would. Individuals with ASD symptoms vary greatly. Many are able to communicate, are extremely intelligent and may not appear to be impacted. That being said, there are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Please do not touch! Even a hand shake or assistance with a coat MAY be too much for some individuals with autism.
2. In the event of a meltdown or tantrum, please do not try to assist or intervene. Ask the caregiver how or if you can help, but let the experienced caregiver handle the situation.
3. Their caregivers will assist you with communication if needed.

Accommodations to Consider:

1. Offer crayons or other sensory stimuli at tables, if it is age appropriate.
2. Turn down music.
3. When seating choices are available, ask the caregiver if they have a preference. A table in a quieter section, a table preferred by the individual, or a booth may be better.
4. Offer a quiet room where parents can calm a child in case of over stimulation – such as coat room, unused private room or area of restaurant.
5. Subtle signage that will inform other customers and promote understanding.
6. Try to ensure proper labeling of food ingredients on the menu for families whose loved ones are on a restricted diet due to allergies and behavioral reactions to certain foods. Many families restrict gluten, milk products (casein), and even corn and soy!
7. We know that you strive to provide efficient service. Individuals with autism may have trouble waiting for their food to arrive. Please let your wait staff know that quick, efficient service is a helpful accommodation for these individuals. Ask the caregiver when they would like the check... with dinner, or at the end of the meal as is customary.

For Maryland residents, Pathfinders for Autism can provide "autism sensitivity training" to restaurant staff. Please call 444.330.5370 to schedule training for your event.