

Neurodiversity, Community, and the Museum Experience



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Download the session handout

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A Note on Language

- Person-First Language: “person with autism”
 - Often used by educators, medical professionals, therapists
- Identity-First Language: “autistic person”
 - 87% of autistic adults prefer identity-first language
- Follow the lead of each person you work with or meet
- Ask them what they prefer and **respect their preference**

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Agenda

- Introductions
- Neurodiversity 101
- Sensory Processing and Executive Functioning
- Creating Inclusive Spaces
- Q&A

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Neurodiversity 101



Why Neurodiversity Matters in Cultural Institutions

"The museum ensures that programs are accessible and encourage participation of the widest possible audience consistent with its mission and resources" - *American Alliance for Museums Code of Ethics*

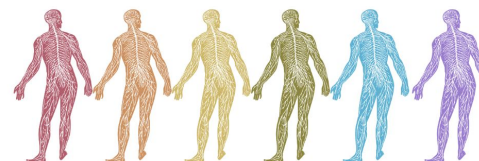


"Not every mind or body will experience art the same way. But every mind and body is entitled to the experience."
- *National Endowment for the Arts*

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Defining Neurodiversity

- Neurodiversity – neurological diversity
 - The limitless variability of human cognition and the uniqueness of each human mind, brain, and nervous system

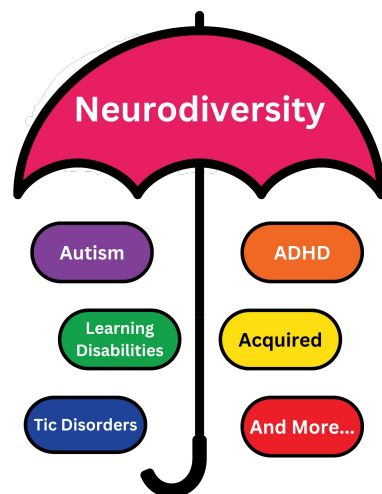


"Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits." (Baumer & Freuh, Harvard Medical School)

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Neurodivergence

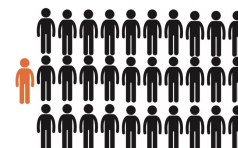
- Autism
- ADHD
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- Dyslexia
- Dysgraphia
- Tourette Syndrome
- Acquired Neurodivergence
- & more



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Prevalence of Neurodivergence

1 in every 31 children in the US is autistic.



1 in 13 has a learning disability.



1 in 11 has ADHD.



1 in 4 Americans is neurodivergent.



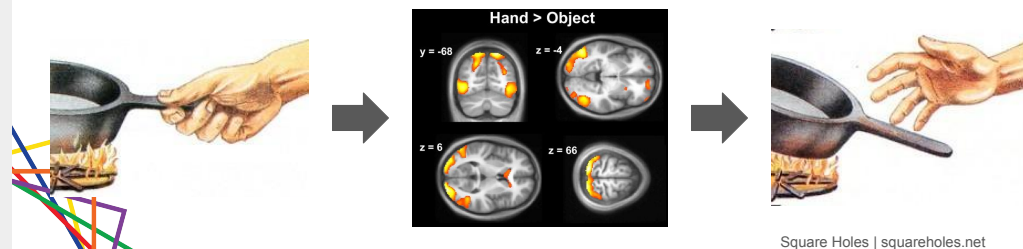
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Sensory Processing and Executive Functioning



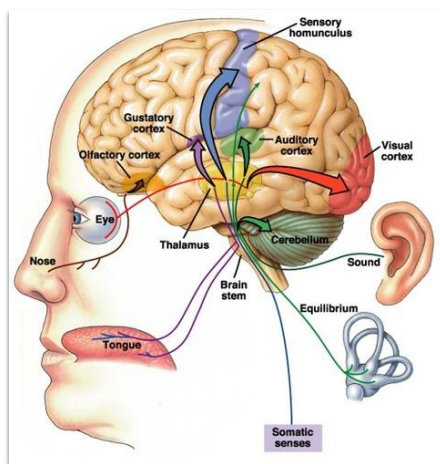
Sensory Processing

A constant process in which receptors in our bodies register sensory information and send that information to the brain where it is processed and interpreted to produce a chemical, motor, or emotional response.



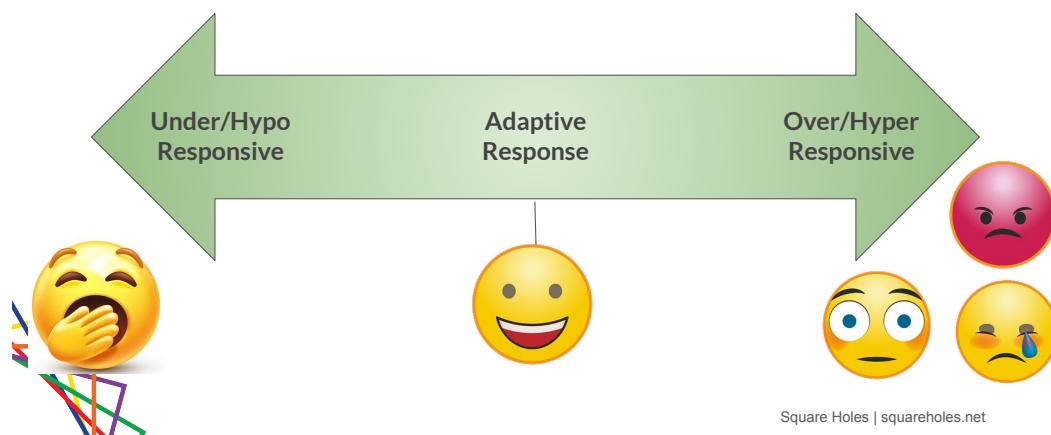
The 7 Senses

- Vision
- Olfaction (smell)
- Gustation (taste)
- Audition (hearing)
- Somatosensory (touch)
- Vestibular (balance, position in space)
- Proprioception (body positioning, smooth movement)



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Sensory Processing Patterns



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Meltdowns and Shutdowns



Looks Like:

- **Escalating frustration**
 - Rapid speech, irritability, emotional outbursts, repeating questions
- **Shutdown or freeze response**
 - Non-responsiveness, inability to continue the conversation, staring blankly
- **Fight-or-flight response**
 - Leaving abruptly, raised voice, pacing, defensive body language

Most often caused by:

- Sensory overload
- Executive functioning struggles

Is NOT...

- A tantrum
- Just for kids
- Attention-seeking behavior

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Sensory Seeking

While some people avoid certain sensory input, others crave it and may actively seek out loud, bright, or highly textured environments.

- Sensory seeking is a valid and important part of self-regulation for many neurodivergent people
- Sensory input can be joyful, energizing, or calming (e.g., movement, lights, textures, or sounds)
- Sensory seeking doesn't mean "misbehaving"



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Reducing Sensory Demands of Public Places & Events

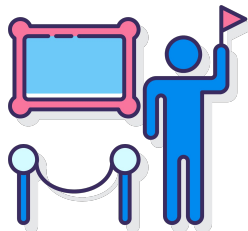
- Use warm or natural lighting
- Minimize sudden or loud noises
- Minimize smells (e.g. air fresheners, candles, colognes/perfumes)
- Offer / welcome the use of sensory accommodations
 - Headphones/earplugs
 - Sunglasses
 - Hats
 - Fidgets
- Offer quiet or sensory-friendly times
- Offer quiet / break spaces



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Reducing Sensory Demands of Public Places & Events

- Remain aware of your environment
- Offer choices ("Would you like to stay in this room or move on to the next?")
- Use a calm tone of voice
- Offer autonomy ("You're welcome to step out and rejoin at any time.")
- Avoid rushing or crowding visitors
- Be mindful of background noise when speaking
- Face the group while speaking
- Use visual supports for verbal communication
- Preview any changes to the sensory environment ("The next room will be a little darker")



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Executive Functioning

- The mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully
 - Working memory
 - Mental flexibility
 - Self-control
 - Emotion regulation
 - Organizing, planning, and prioritizing

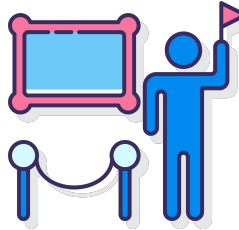


- Being very distractible or having trouble focusing on just one thing
- Focusing too much on just one thing
- Struggling to move from one task to another
- Trouble planning or carrying out a task because you can't visualize the finished product or goal
- Getting distracted or interrupted partway through a task, causing you to misplace items or lose your train of thought

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Reducing Executive Functioning Demands of Public Spaces and Events

- Set expectations and provide info about important rules to follow
- Preview what is coming
- Provide simple instructions
- Point out restrooms and accessibility features (e.g., ramps, elevators, lifts)
- Use visual supports
- Be patient and allow processing time
- Regularly invite questions
- Normalize taking a break and rejoining later, if needed



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Creating Inclusive Spaces



Components of a Sensory Inclusive Experience

Provide visitors with as much _____ as possible.

Preparation	Choice	Control
Let visitors know what to expect Provide enough information to allow planning ahead	Provide options so visitors can experience the space or event in the way that works best for them	Allow visitors to control their own sensory experience

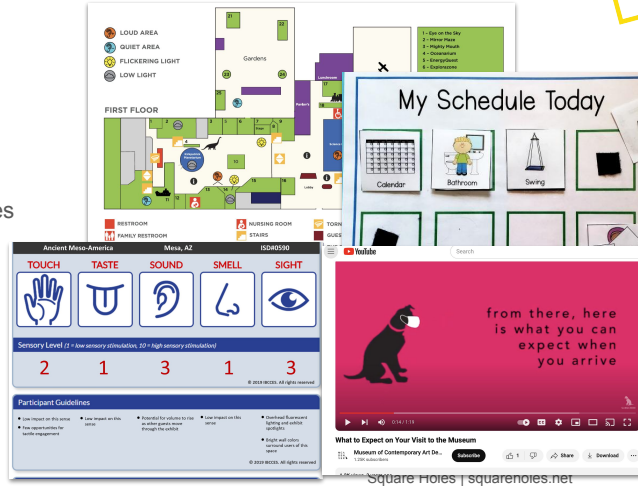
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Preparation

Preparation begins before the visitor arrives

Pre-Visit Toolkit should be available online and may include:

- Maps, schedules, and guides
- Photos and descriptions of the space
- Social Narratives
- Sensory Guides
- Visual Schedules
- Checklists
- Video walkthroughs



Essential First Step: Accessibility Page

Every museum should have an accessibility page on their website.

Accessibility Pages should:

- Be EASY to find
 - Don't bury the page deep in menus
 - Use the 3-Click Rule
- Collect ALL accessibility info in one location
 - Provide information about parking, navigating, and available resources

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What is a Social Narrative?

A brief descriptive story designed to help a person prepare for a social situation, learn a skill, or feel comfortable in a new environment.



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The Pre-Visit Toolkit

The Pre-Visit Toolkit should be available before visitors arrive.

- Posted online
- Downloadable/Printable PDF on website
- Social Media
- Printed Copies available on day of show

If visitors do not know you have Pre-Visit Resources, you may as well not have them.



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Preparation During the Visit

Staff and volunteers can help visitors prepare for upcoming events and transitions

Make announcements or tell visitors before:

- Scheduled events & schedule changes
- Closing times
- Loud noises and flashing lights
- Expected crowds (school groups, summer camps, etc.)

Have the information to answer questions about:

- The sensory environment of an exhibit, activity, or performance
- Available accommodations (sensory bags, quiet spaces, etc.)
- Nearby exits, restrooms, and seating areas



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Offering Choice and Control

Two complimentary routes of supporting visitors with sensory processing & executive functioning differences:

- Offer separate environments and/or programming
 - Sensory-Friendly Hours
 - Quiet Areas
- Offer resources to give visitors choice and control over their experience in your typical environments
 - Social Narratives
 - Sensory Maps
 - Headphones
 - Sunglasses

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Choice

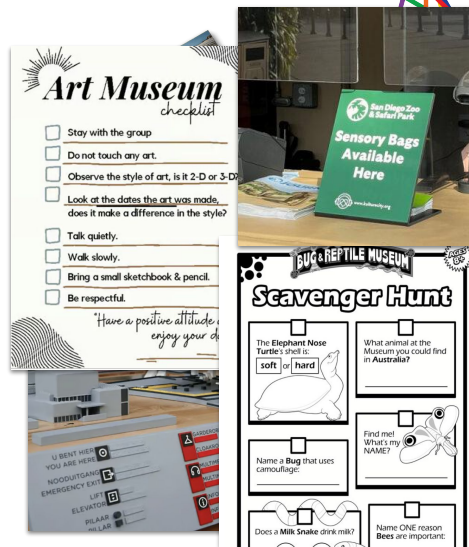
When possible, provide options

Printed materials that allow independent navigation of the space and available activities

- Maps
- Schedule of events
- Activity checklists
- Scavenger hunts

It should be clear to visitors where they are, where they can go, and who can help them

- Adequate signage
- Easily identifiable staff or volunteers
- Clear instructions to access sensory accommodations
- Greet folks, identify yourself, offer assistance
- Point out maps, signage, and other resources



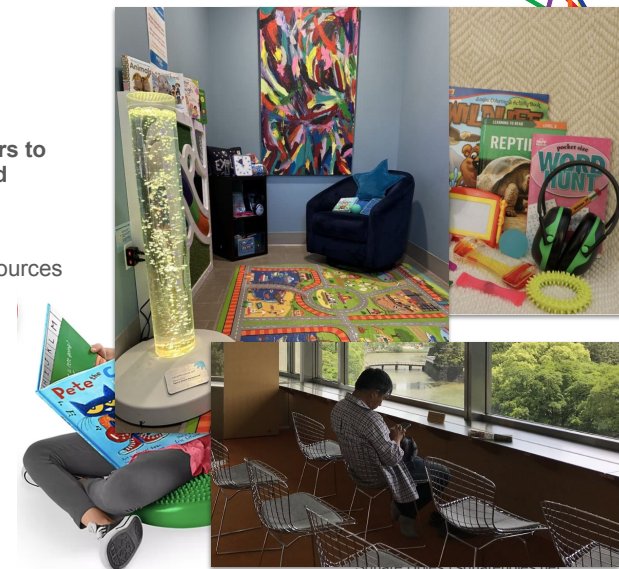
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Control

As much as possible, allow visitors to control their own engagement and sensory experience

Allow for the use of sensory accommodations and make any resources apparent and accessible

- Noise-canceling headphones
- Fidget toys
- Hats
- Glasses
- Alternative seating options
- Breaks in quiet areas



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Providing a Break Area

When possible designate a calm and quiet area for visitors to take a break if they are feeling overwhelmed.

A quiet space should include:

- Seating
- Fidgets
- Hands on activity (eg, coloring pages, word search)
- Soft, indirect lighting
- White noise



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Key Components of a Sensory Inclusive Experience

Preparation

Choice

Control

If providing opportunities for preparation, choice, and control, the guest will craft their own optimal experience – taking the pressure off you to always know what to do.

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When in doubt, just ask!

- How can I support you?
- What do you need?
- Which would you prefer?



Positive, welcoming interactions with others are the most important element for feeling safe and included.

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