



**AUTISM FRIENDLY
PERFORMANCES**



PLANNING GUIDE FOR THEATRES

Basic steps on how to offer autism-friendly performances for children and adults on the autism spectrum and their families or caregivers

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OVERVIEW

These performances - whether called autism-friendly, sensory friendly, or relaxed - are dedicated performances with a focus on those individuals on the autism spectrum or with other developmental or cognitive disabilities or sensory sensitivity. Your potential audience may determine the preferred terminology.

To make performances more welcoming to families, you can make technical modifications, provide preparatory materials for the families to read prior to the performance, staff the theatre with volunteers trained for the day, and provide various day-of supports, all to be discussed further in this guide.

As a general rule, there is an overwhelming preference by families who attend autism-friendly performances on Broadway for weekend matinees. They also prefer musicals, especially those with larger performance numbers and less dialogue.

Every step, from the online purchase to the follow-up survey, serves to create a warm and judgment-free environment for the individual on the spectrum and his or her companions. The performance may be a first-in-a-lifetime event for the family, and your goal is to make it a positive one.



THE BASICS

Budget

Below are some expenses you might incur for this production.

Tickets:

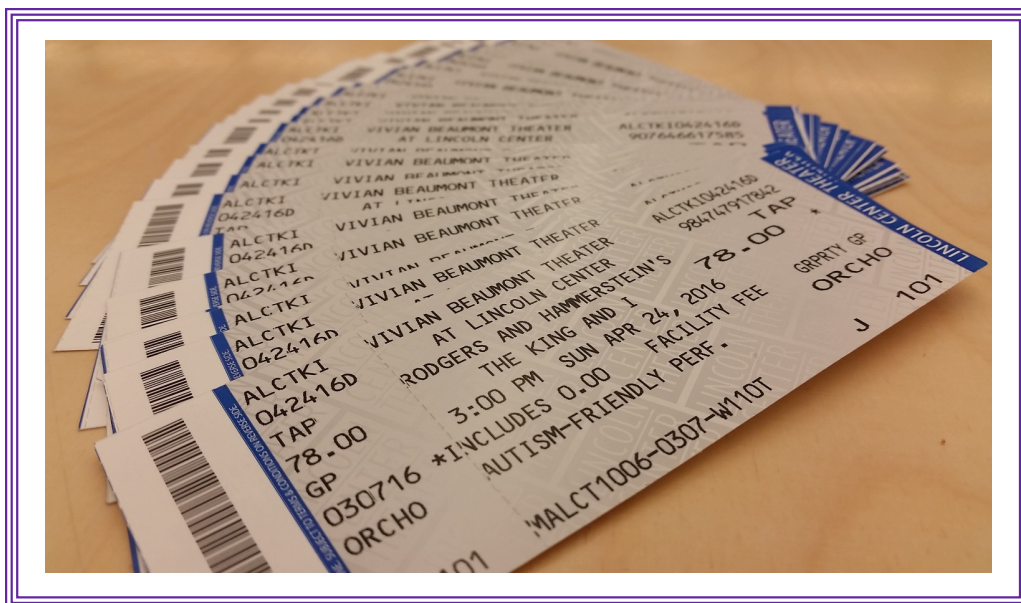
- Plan to sell the entire house for the performance, using all seats for audience members with autism or other cognitive or developmental disabilities and their companions. Do not plan on “splitting the house” by making tickets available to the general public, as well.
- When possible, tickets should be sold at a discount. Remember that this is a community with high cost of living on a daily basis.
- Plan on distributing some tickets free of charge to low income families or organizations that serve that community.
- To help prevent scalpers from abusing discounts, tickets should be printed with “autism-friendly performance” or equivalent terminology that your theatre is using instead.

Fees:

- Plan on paying fees to professional autism consultants who will help with planning and on the day of the performance.

Supplies:

- For the audience, you will need “fidgets,” tactile items that relieve stress. Make sure to have enough fidgets for every audience member. This is an event for the whole family and everyone deserves a fidget!
- For the lobby set up, provide quiet areas and activity areas stocked with games and toys.
- Be sure to budget for printing of character guides and signage.



Timeline

For your **first show** allow for a 6-12 month planning process.

For **future new shows** allow 3-6 months.

For a **repeat show** allow 3 months.

Popular Show Elements Among TDF Audiences

- Visually stimulating
- Music
- Dance
- Clear storyline
- More action, less dialogue

Consultants

Your consultants are a vital piece of planning and implementing these performances. Assemble a team of three to four autism professionals who will be involved from the beginning of the process. If possible, have one of the team be someone on the spectrum. This will give you unique and invaluable insight. Our volunteers regularly report that hearing from a consultant on the spectrum is the most helpful portion of their training.

Before you finalize a show, consult with your specialists. If there is already a production of the show in performance, have them see it. If there isn't, provide them with a script to read. After conferring with each other, have them submit to you a list of suggested production modifications.



Consultant Harry and BCBA Becca Yure

THE SPECIFICS

Production Modifications

Your consultants will give you a list of any necessary show-specific modifications. These should be in addition to some general modifications that will make the day safer and more comfortable for the audience and volunteers.

Cap the sound on the entire show at 90 decibals People on the autism spectrum are often more sensitive to noise, and this will also mitigate some issues of potentially scary sounds.

Cut or steady any flashing or strobe lights There is a high correlation between autism and epilepsy, and it will be safer for all audience members to remove intense lighting stimulus.

Keep house lights at approximately 30 percent By keeping lights up, you make the theatre safer for audience members coming and going, and you also alleviate some of the potential fear of the performance.

Have a brief production meeting to review these changes with all technical staff. It may be possible to use a put in or understudy rehearsal to implement these changes without adding additional work call costs.

Remember, the goal is always to preserve the integrity of the show so that this audience sees as close to the same performance as possible to what their neighbors, classmates, and



The Lion King house with lights at 30%

Ticketing System

Some people have specific requirements for their seat location. They may need to be near an exit for a quick escape or far from a speaker for less aural stimulation. If you are able to use an internal or customizable ticketing system please be sure to include some of the following:

- Speaker locations
- Exits
- Quiet/Activity Area locations
- Any performer traffic
- Family restrooms

If you are using Ticketmaster or Telecharge consider using a purchasing code to protect the tickets for the intended audience. Be aware that a discounted ticket will be appealing to ticket brokers and scalpers. You can work with resale platforms such as Stubhub and Ticketmaster Plus to ensure they know these tickets are not to be resold.

Set up an online sign up for the wait list once the performance is sold out.

Marketing

Your marketing does not only have to target the autism community.

- Expand your scope to include any cognitive or development disabilities or sensory sensitivity.
- Send something tangible for organizations to distribute or post.
- Use flyers or inserts at your typical performances of the show.

Consider outreach to:

- Schools
- Parent organizations
- Medical facilities
- Autism meet up groups
- Adult residences

Send email notifications, including **Save-The-Date** at least a week before tickets go onsale and a **Tickets Onsale** as soon as they go on sale.

PREPARATIONS

You can provide resources for at-home preparations that will make the day go much more smoothly. Post these online or email them to ticket buyers in advance of the performance.

The **social narrative** tells the experience from arriving at the theatre to leaving after the performance. “I will arrive at the theatre. I will wait in line. I will give by ticket to an usher. The audience will clap.” This document is best as a downloadable Word document that families can edit to their specific needs. It should also include photos whenever possible.

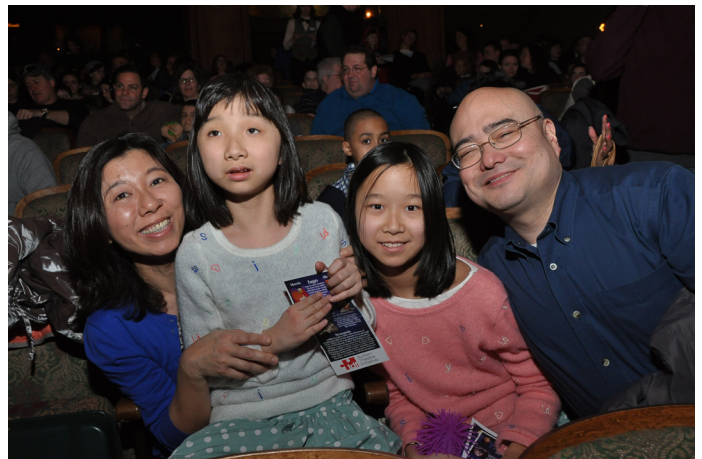
Our audience regularly ranks the **character guide** as our most useful resource. Be sure to print a large number of these cards to hand out in the theatre. The character guide identifies key characters with a picture and a very brief description. It should also include a brief synopsis of the show. If the show is based on a movie, you can have an image of the character from the film and one of the analogous character in the show to help clarify the difference between the two.

The **fact sheet** is guide for parents and caregivers with information about the theatre address, what is and is not permitted in the theatre, and other logistics to prepare for the day of the performance.

For a musical, if music downloads are available, provide a link to them, along with any other



A boy reading a character



A family with their character guides

Training:

It helps to train everyone involved in the production. Volunteers should be prepared for what to do and how to help. Ushers and performers benefit from knowing what they will experience that day. This is where the consultants are very helpful by having one or two of them participate in the training.



Volunteers at *Wicked*

Have roughly the same number of **volunteers** as you do front of house staff. The breakdown should be about 25% people with professional autism experience - social workers, teachers, etc. - and 75% people with hands on experience (parents, siblings) and/or who are just passionate about making theatre accessible.

In-Theatre Resources:

Stock volunteers with supplies to distribute as audience members enter the theatre.

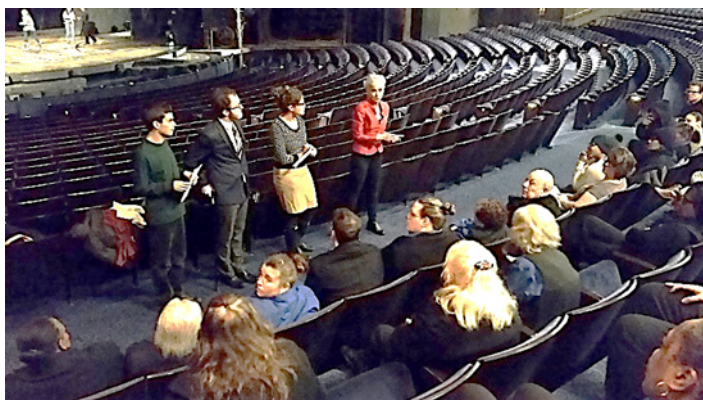
Character Guides As mentioned, these guides are a reference for the audience throughout the performance.

Fidgets Hand out stress balls or other manipulatives. This will help the audience channel some of their energy and help curb meltdowns.

Earplugs Both in-ear earplugs and over the ear noise cancelling headphones are good to have on hand. For headphones you may want to treat them like assisted listening devices and requires an ID as collateral.



Fidgets



A front of house training session

DAY OF THE SHOW

Set Up

Timeline

- Begin set up 90 minutes before the show
- Open the house 60 minutes before the show
- Begin clean up 30 minutes before final curtain

What to Set Up

- Quiet and activity areas
- Signage identifying family restrooms, quiet areas, and activity areas.
- Will call table for people who lost or didn't receive their tickets or walk up sales.



Quiet and Activity Areas:

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| • Floor mats | • Toys |
| • Bean bags | • Stuffed animals |
| • Coloring | • Draping (if it's a stimulating area) |



A quiet area with draping at *The Lion King*



A family using an activity area

Volunteer duties:

Greeters at the door Provide greeters with lots of fidgets and character guides. They are the first point of contact and first to create the welcoming environment.

Inside the theatre Make sure volunteers inside the theatre have fidgets, character guides, and ear plugs. Before the show they can hand out fidgets and answer questions. During the show they should watch the audience for potential meltdowns or issues and have supplies ready, if needed.

Quiet and Activity Areas Assign volunteers with more autism experience at the quiet and activity areas through the whole show.

Greeter Volunteers



Quiet/Activity Area Volunteers



FOLLOW UP

It is important to get feedback after the show to help improve programming for next time.

Audience feedback Email the audience to ask about usefulness of various supports and suggestions for future resources and ways to improve. This data is useful for fundraising and grants. It is helpful to raffle off free tickets to the next production as an incentive.

Volunteer feedback Email the volunteers and ask for feedback about their training and the overall event. Offer a gift certificate or a similar kind of incentive to maximize responses.

Consultant feedback Schedule a debriefing with your consultants as soon as conveniently possible. Request a brief written report from the lead consultant.

TDF PARTNERSHIPS

AUTISM FRIENDLY PERFORMANCES

TDF

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www.tdf.org/autism

NATIONAL AUTISM FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE TRAINING PROGRAM

TDF'S Autism Friendly Performances offers a limited number of advisory partnerships each year to professional theatres around the country seeking guidance on how to implement their own autism-friendly performances in their communities. Please contact us for more information.

CHECK LIST

<input type="checkbox"/>	Select the production
<input type="checkbox"/>	Assemble an advisory group of consultants
<input type="checkbox"/>	Choose your ticketing process
<input type="checkbox"/>	Discuss the marketing plan for web content and print materials
<input type="checkbox"/>	Convene as an advisory group to develop the plan
<input type="checkbox"/>	Preview the show for production modifications
<input type="checkbox"/>	Discuss show modifications in a production meeting
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make resources: character guide
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make resources: fact sheet
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make resources: social narrative
<input type="checkbox"/>	Create program insert
<input type="checkbox"/>	Purchase fidgets and earplugs
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decide on volunteer uniform
<input type="checkbox"/>	Schedule house staff training
<input type="checkbox"/>	Schedule cast and crew training
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recruit volunteers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Extend offer of tickets to low income families or organizations
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set up online waiting list
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mail tickets
<input type="checkbox"/>	Order snack bars and water for volunteers during the show
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conduct house staff training
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conduct cast and crew training
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conduct volunteer training
<input type="checkbox"/>	Create volunteer assignments and nametags
<input type="checkbox"/>	Send post-show surveys
<input type="checkbox"/>	Schedule follow up meeting with consultants