



SENSORY FRIENDLY EVENT TOOLKIT

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INTRODUCTION

Sensory Friendly Events provide a welcoming and comfortable environment for children and families who would ordinarily find a museum experience to be overstimulating, or inaccessible because of their children's unique needs and abilities.

Children who are neurodivergent, or have additional sensory needs and other exceptionalities, can better enjoy and explore the museum when it is set up specially to meet their needs. Slight modifications to the visual and audible landscape, as well as additional sensory tools, make for a more comfortable environment for these children to enjoy with their siblings, families, and loved ones.



The Children's Museum of Sonoma County (CMOSC) offers monthly Sensory Friendly Afternoons with pre-registration requested, though not required. Offering sensory events on a regular schedule allows for families to create a routine of coming to the museum and builds audience engagement.

The following toolkit offers a framework for planning, marketing, and executing Sensory Friendly Events. Additional resources on creating sensory friendly spaces can be found at:

- <https://www.guggenheim.org/accessibility/guggenheim-for-all/guggenheim-for-all-toolkit/creating-a-sensory-friendly-environment>
- <https://www.sensoryfriendly.net/what-is-a-sensory-friendly-environment/>

Sensory Friendly Events create a more inclusive museum experience for children with exceptionalities or neurodivergence. By implementing these suggested accommodations, staffing adjustments, and community partnerships, your museum can better foster a safe and welcoming environment for all families.

Sensory Adjustments

Lighting

Reduce harsh lighting by dimming or turning off bright overhead lights. Use natural lighting when possible. Avoid flashing or strobe lights. Provide sunglasses at entrance to aid in light reduction.

Sound Levels

Lower background music and exhibit sounds. Provide noise-canceling/reducing headphones at the entrance.

Crowd Control

Limit the number of attendees to reduce crowding and noise. Consider offering pre-registration to manage attendance.

Quiet Spaces

Designate quiet rooms or areas where children can retreat to if they feel overstimulated. Equip these spaces with soft seating, fidget toys, and calming sensory materials. Consider adding a pop-up blackout tent to your set-up.

Exhibit Modifications

Turn Some Exhibits Off

Noisy exhibits can be overstimulating for individuals with sensory processing challenges. Partner with local organizations who understand the unique needs of the children you wish to serve at your sensory friendly event and ask them to do a sensory audit of your museum. This will help determine whether some exhibits need to be turned off due to their loud sound or lighting components, when modifying them is not possible.

Sensory-Friendly Labels/Signage

Use clear signage with icons indicating loud, bright, or potentially overstimulating areas.

Interactive Play

Adapt interactive exhibits to have quieter materials or offer alternatives for children who may be averse to touch or movement. This may mean offering a different interactive element in the space during your sensory friendly event or offering an additional or complimentary experience.

Additional Signage

Add visual cues

Create signage that provides visual cues to visitors (see Additional Resources, pg 8). Signs can warn families of exhibits that use loud noises or flashing lights. They can alert children of when to stop, explain to families why an exhibit is turned off, or where to find the elevator and calm down spaces.



Talk Back Boards

Consider adding handheld or large visual "Talk Back" boards for children who are non-verbal.

- SUGGESTED VENDOR:
Talk To Me Technologies



"Welcome Table"

Adding a table to the entry way at every Sensory Friendly Event will give visitors a home base to access what is available to them that day.

Items can include:

- Visit Story Guide (see Additional Resources, pg 8)
- Museum maps
- Museum rules
- Handheld "talk back" boards or other visual communication tools
- Bins with sensory friendly tools for visitors to use
- Feedback instruments (surveys, comment cards, etc.)



Sensory Friendly Tools

At the Welcome Table

Provide a selection of sensory friendly tools and items at your museum entrance or on your Welcome Table. A list of supplies to provide is listed in the “Tools & Materials List” on pg. 8.



Throughout the Location

Provide additional bins or baskets with tools in locations throughout your museum. Parents who do not feel they need them when they enter, may find themselves needing to access these tools during their visit and will appreciate having them readily available

Additional Special Programming

Therapeutic Add-ons

Outside vendors and partner organizations can be utilized to provide additional support such as art therapy. Occupational Therapists can be brought in to support visitor needs by offering their expertise, tools, and support materials.



Sensory Stations

In addition to offering handheld/portable sensory friendly tools (see the resource guide), sensory tables with materials, such as fine sand or a deep pressure station, allow children to regulate themselves throughout their time at the museum.



Additional Special Programming Continued

Therapy Animals

Partner with local organizations that offer therapy animal visits. CMOSC invites:

- PALS (Paws As Loving Support) visits with their therapy dogs and provide support to children as they play.
- Lyon Ranch provides a hands-on experience with ambassador rescue animals, which range from reptiles and amphibians to birds and small furry mammals.



Staffing & Training

Sensory Sensitivity Training

All staff and volunteers should undergo training on how to support children with sensory processing differences. This includes using calming techniques and understanding potential triggers. One possible resource for such trainings is Common Ground Society (based in SF Bay Area, virtual trainings available).

Communication Tools

Provide staff with handheld, non-verbal communication tools (e.g., visual communication boards) to aid interactions with non-verbal or minimally verbal children. Available for purchase through Talk To Me Technologies

Marketing & Outreach

Inclusive Messaging

Highlight that the event is designed specifically for children with sensory sensitivities, disabilities, or neurodivergence. Use language that is welcoming and affirming.

Accessible Information

Provide event details in various formats across multiple platforms, including social media, websites, and printed flyers.

Pre-Event Preparation

Offer families the option to download social stories or visual schedules from the museum's website. This helps children prepare for what to expect during the event.

Accessibility Considerations

Physical Accessibility

Ensure exhibits, restrooms, and seating areas are wheelchair accessible. Make adaptive tools (e.g., sensory gloves, reachers) available for children with physical disabilities.

Restrooms

Consider adding sensory-friendly elements like adjustable lighting or quieter hand dryers. Offer paper towels as an alternative to noisy air dryers. Provide a cot (the kind used in childcare centers) to use as a large diaper changing area for larger children and adults. Also consider adding larger and adult size diapers to your stock of supplies offered for parent emergencies.

Dietary Accommodations

If snacks or meals are provided, offer allergy-friendly and dietary-specific options.

Post-Event Reflection & Improvement

Provide families with easy-to-complete feedback forms that allow them to share what worked and what could be improved.

- Be prepared keep an eye on their child while caregivers are completing the feedback form.
- Use feedback to continually refine the sensory-friendly environment. Consider rotating exhibits or adjusting schedules based on attendees' preferences.

TOOLS & MATERIALS LIST

Sensory Stations

- Talk To Me Technologies "Talk Back" boards for children who are non-verbal.
- Sensory Steamroller deep pressure roller
- Lakeshore Learning Sand and Water Table. Fine sand, kinetic sand or other sensory materials can be added to the tables along with tools to explore such as measuring cups, spoons, funnels, etc.
- Sensasoft Ball and Foam Pit options range from deluxe to small and portable



Handheld & Portable Tools

- Weighted shoulder and lap items such as the Manimo Weighted Snake or the Wipe Clean! Weighted Lap Pad
- Form & Function Noise Reduction Headphones
- Fidget Toys:
 - 3D Pin Art
 - Putty Ball
 - Pop-it Fidget ball
 - Stringy Sensory Ball
 - Vive Therapy Putty
- Wellgers OT Sensory Brushes
- Visual Time Timers
- Sunglasses



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- CMOSC Sensory Friendly Afternoons webpage with a Museum Visit Story Guide
 - www.cmosc.org/educate/sensory-friendly-afternoons
- Day Of Event Checklist (see pg 9)
- Download CMOSC's Printable Sensory Friendly Signage (available via the FAQs at the CMOSC SFA page listed above)
- Download CMOSC's Sample Set-Up Guide for Team Members (also available via the SFA webpage FAQs)

SENSORY FRIENDLY EVENT DAY OF CHECKLIST

Pre-Event

- Staff trained in sensory-friendly techniques
- Pre-registration system active
- Confirm participation details with any participating partner organizations
- Promote event in your community (e-blast, social media, website, local calendar listings, etc.)

Day Of

- Welcome table set up
- Sensory Friendly Tools
 - (headphones, fidget toys)
- Lighting adjusted
- Sound levels reduced
- Quiet space/s set up
- Signage posted with sensory warnings
- Additional accessibility modes for exhibits and restrooms in place
- Event feedback methods ready
- Registration List printed out/accessible for staff

Post-Event

- Review feedback and make any necessary adjustments
- Share feedback with participating partner organizations as necessary