

Beyond the Classroom: Educational Visits for Autistic Pupils - Key Findings and Commentary

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Executive Summary

This survey of 487 schools provides crucial insights into the current state of educational visits for autistic pupils across the UK.

Participation and Commitment

The data shows high participation rates, with 89% of schools offering local area walks and 83% providing museum visits to autistic pupils. Only 0.4% of schools reported no activities, indicating widespread commitment to inclusion. When properly supported, these visits prove highly successful across diverse settings, from residential trips and theatre performances to community shopping experiences.

Understanding the Barriers

While participation rates are high, schools navigate complex challenges dominated by sensory issues (80%), behaviour regulation concerns (73%), and staffing constraints (71%). The survey reveals that barriers are predominantly social and attitudinal rather than physical, with public understanding, venue staff awareness, and societal acceptance being critical factors that could determine a successful visit.

Exclusion vs Differentiation

When pupils don't participate in planned activities, the reasons require careful interpretation. Safety concerns account for 41% of non-participation, but this includes both appropriate recognition that social demands may exceed current capacities (reflecting DSM-5 diagnostic understanding for autism spectrum disorder) and sometimes perhaps cautious thinking. The most thoughtful schools demonstrate differentiation rather than exclusion, often providing alternative experiences matched to individual developmental readiness while maintaining educational value.

The "Making It Work" Philosophy

Success stories reveal a fundamental shift from asking "Can this pupil manage this activity?" to "How can we make this activity work for this pupil?" Schools embracing this problem-solving approach successfully support autistic pupils in

activities some might think impossible, from international trips to complex residential experiences, proving that ambition and accessibility can coexist.

Evidence-Based Support

Effective inclusion relies on comprehensive approaches combining 1:1 support (94% of schools), sensory accommodations (90%), and visual preparation (85%). Success depends more on quality of support and preparation than destination choice, with the most valuable adaptations often being surprisingly straightforward: trusted adult availability, thorough preparation, and maintained flexibility.

Creating Autism-Friendly Environments

Venues that excel understand that autism-friendly practices benefit all visitors. The most effective approaches involve proactive sensory management, staff training that recognises autistic behaviour as communication rather than defiance, and partnership approaches that support schools in delivering meaningful educational experiences.

The Path Forward

The survey demonstrates that scaling from individual excellence to standard practice requires coordinated action across funding, professional development, and public understanding. The evidence strongly supports moving from exclusion-based decision-making toward creative inclusion strategies that recognise the life-changing potential of well-supported educational visits.

Looking Forward

While challenges persist, the survey shows inspiring examples of ambitious inclusion, proving that with proper understanding, preparation, and resources, virtually any experience can become accessible to autistic learners when social demands are appropriately matched to individual capacities.

Key Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive survey findings, these twelve evidence-based recommendations represent the most critical factors for creating successful educational visits for autistic pupils:

Ensure Adequate Staffing with 1:1 Support

Provide generous staffing ratios with dedicated 1:1 support for pupils who need it. This was the most frequently cited success factor, reflecting that individualised attention is crucial for managing unfamiliar environments safely and successfully.

Carry out Pre-Visits

Carry out staff visits to venues beforehand. A pre-visit allows for the practical assessment of sensory environments, accessibility, and potential challenges that would not be identified through web-based research alone.

Create Comprehensive Visual Preparation Materials

Develop social stories, visual schedules, and "what to expect" guides with photographs of the venue. Use these materials well in advance to help pupils understand the environment, activities, and expectations.

Address Sensory Needs Proactively

Identify and prepare for sensory challenge using sensory equipment including ear defenders, fidget tools, and comfort items. Seek venues with quiet spaces or arrange for sensory breaks. Creating sensory maps can help with this.

Involve Parents and Families as Partners

Engage parents in planning to gain valuable insights into children's specific needs, triggers, and effective strategies. While parental attendance can enhance visits, schools must ensure they have the confidence and capacity to support all pupils independently. Family involvement should represent genuine partnership rather than compensation for insufficient school staffing or organisational confidence.

Plan for Flexibility and Individual Needs

Recognise that "one size does not fit all" - each autistic pupil has unique requirements. Build flexibility into plans with exit strategies, alternative activities, and the ability to adapt timing or group arrangements.

Communicate Effectively with Venue Staff

Brief venue staff about autism awareness and specific pupil needs before the visit. Ensure venues understand that behaviour is communication, not defiance, and that pupils may need processing time or regulation breaks.

Ensure Access to Quiet, Safe Spaces

Identify or request designated quiet areas where pupils can retreat if overwhelmed. These regulation spaces should be easily accessible throughout the visit and known to all supporting staff.

Use Appropriate Transport Arrangements

Consider using minibuses rather than large coaches, which can be overwhelming. Ensure direct parking where possible and plan for pupils who may need familiar adults or specific seating arrangements.

Focus on Inclusion Rather Than Exclusion

Adopt a "making it work" philosophy rather than automatically excluding venues or pupils. Work creatively to adapt approaches, timing, or activities to ensure all pupils can participate meaningfully.

Shift from Overly Cautious to Thoughtful Approaches

Move beyond exclusion-based decision-making towards creative problem-solving that balances safety with educational entitlement. The survey showed that safety concerns drive 41% of exclusions, in some circumstance possibly reflecting overly cautious approaches.

Address Societal Attitudes and Understanding

Recognise that the greatest barriers are often social rather than physical. Work with venues and the public to understand that autistic behaviour is communication, not defiance, and that minor environmental adjustments benefit all visitors. Venue staff and other visitors can play a valuable role during challenging situations by maintaining a respectful distance and trusting designated staff to provide the appropriate support needed.

Current State of Inclusion

The survey results reveal remarkably high participation rates across all activity categories, demonstrating schools' widespread commitment to providing inclusive educational experiences for autistic pupils. Local area walks emerge as the most accessible activity, with nearly 9 in 10 schools (89.3%) offering these experiences.

Cultural activities show strong participation, with over 8 in 10 schools (83.0%) organising museum and gallery visits, and nearly 6 in 10 (58.9%) attending theatre or music performances. This suggests schools recognise the importance of arts and cultural exposure for autistic pupils' broader development. The high participation rate in residential (56.9%) is particularly encouraging, as overnight trips require significant planning and support, demonstrating schools' capacity for complex planning.

However, beneath these encouraging participation statistics lies a more complex picture. While schools demonstrate remarkable commitment to inclusion, they also navigate significant challenges that shape which pupils participate in which activities, and how these experiences are supported. Understanding these barriers is crucial for moving from good intentions to consistently excellent outcomes for all autistic learners.

Understanding the Barriers

This complex range of challenges becomes apparent when examining what schools report as their primary concerns. While the participation data demonstrates widespread commitment, three major barriers dominate the planning process for educational visits: sensory issues affecting nearly 80% of respondents, behaviour and regulation concerns cited by 73%, and inadequate staffing levels mentioned by 71%. However, beneath these statistics lies a more profound insight about the true nature of inclusion barriers.

The Real Challenge: Social vs. Physical Barriers

Perhaps the most significant finding from this survey is that the greatest obstacles to successful educational visits are not architectural or logistical, but fundamentally social and attitudinal. Nearly 30% of all responses focused specifically on acceptance, inclusion, public understanding, and staff training needs - revealing that many autistic pupils face exclusion not because venues lack appropriate facilities, but because the people within these spaces lack understanding of autism.

This social dimension explains why sensory issues, cited by 80% of schools, prove so challenging to address. Whilst the physical environment matters enormously, the response to sensory differences often depends more on social understanding than environmental modification. A child who needs to move, make noise, or take breaks

may be perfectly manageable in a supportive social environment, but becomes "problematic" when surrounded by impatient or judgmental observers.

Similarly, behaviour and regulation concerns (73% of schools) often reflect not just the complexity of supporting dysregulated pupils, but the social pressure staff might feel when autistic behaviour becomes visible in public spaces. The challenge isn't solely about having strategies to support regulation, it's about having the confidence to implement these strategies without fear of social judgment or complaint.

Staffing: More Than Numbers

The widespread concern about staffing levels (71% of schools) extends beyond simple pupil-to-adult ratios. Whilst schools clearly need adequate numbers of support staff, the deeper issue lies in ensuring these staff members have the confidence, understanding, and organisational backing to support autistic pupils authentically in public spaces.

Most encouragingly, the survey demonstrates that these barriers are far from insurmountable. The high participation rates and inspiring success stories prove that when social understanding combines with practical support, virtually any experience can become accessible to autistic learners.

Yet the reality remains that not all everyone has developed the confidence or capacity to overcome these barriers consistently. Additionally, some autistic pupils may not be ready for particular experiences when social demands would exceed their current limited capacities regardless of available support. When barriers prove overwhelming, support systems are inadequate, or the demands of an experience exceed what a pupil can manage, schools face difficult decisions about participation.

When Exclusion Occurs

The exclusion patterns that emerge from these complex decisions provide important insights into how systemic barriers, individual capacity and developmental readiness interact. Understanding when and why exclusions occur illuminates both the gaps in current provision and the careful judgements schools must make about matching experiences to pupils' current abilities to manage social and environmental demands.

The Safety-First Mindset

When pupils don't participate in planned activities, safety concerns account for over 40% of decisions. However, this data requires careful interpretation, as not all safety-related non-participation represents problematic exclusion. Some reflects

appropriate educational judgement about matching experiences to pupils' current developmental capacity.

The crucial distinction lies between exclusionary thinking that denies opportunities and thoughtful assessment that recognises when social or sensory demands would exceed a pupil's current ability to cope. Several survey respondents described providing alternative experiences more suited to individual pupils' needs, demonstrating differentiation rather than exclusion.

Differentiation vs. Exclusion

Some of the most thoughtful responses in the survey described providing alternative experiences when mainstream visits weren't suitable for particular pupils. These schools recognised that inclusion doesn't always mean identical participation, sometimes it means ensuring every pupil has access to equally valuable educational experiences matched to their current abilities.

This approach acknowledges the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorders in DSM-5, notably understanding that difficulties may emerge 'when social demands exceed limited capacities.' Rather than forcing participation in potentially overwhelming experiences, thoughtful schools develop alternative approaches that provide meaningful learning while respecting developmental readiness.

For example, instead of excluding a pupil from a noisy museum visit, a school might arrange a quieter behind-the-scenes tour, or visit during off-peak hours, or focus on outdoor elements of the same venue. The educational value remains high, but the experience is tailored to what the pupil can genuinely manage successfully.

The Success Stories

The survey data powerfully demonstrates that inclusion for autistic pupils is not only possible but highly successful when approached thoughtfully. The sheer volume and diversity of positive experiences shared, from residential skiing trips to international exchanges, from complex theatre productions to simple community shopping excursions, challenges any assumption that certain activities are inherently unsuitable for autistic learners. All these visits serve to build confidence in staff, parents and ultimately for the young person themselves.

The "Making It Work" Philosophy

What emerges most clearly from these success stories is a fundamental shift in thinking from "Can this pupil manage this activity?" to "How can we make this activity work for this pupil?" Leading schools reporting the most ambitious and successful experiences consistently demonstrate this problem-solving approach rather than exclusion-based decision-making.

The difference lies not in the destinations chosen but in the mindset applied. Schools embracing "making it work" approaches start from the assumption that participation is possible and work backwards to identify the support needed, rather than starting from barriers and working toward exclusion.

Evidence-Based Support

Educational settings have developed mature, evidence-informed practices for inclusive educational visits. The overwhelming reliance on 1:1 or key adult support (94% of schools) demonstrates recognition that individualised attention is crucial for managing the complexities of unfamiliar environments. This isn't about dependency but about providing the scaffolding that enables authentic participation.

The near-universal use of sensory equipment (90% of schools) reflects sophisticated understanding of sensory processing differences common in autism. Visual preparation emerges as equally critical, with 85% of schools using visual guides and 71% employing social stories. (Visual guides are designed to support everyone, whilst Social Stories™ are created for a specific person.)

The most effective schools combine these evidence-based strategies with broader approaches that address the complexity of individual needs. Central to this is family partnership, with parents and carers possessing invaluable insights into their children's needs, triggers, and motivations.

The survey shows that pre-visits are vital for successful inclusive experiences. These may be exploratory (to help decide whether to book) or preparatory (after booking to plan the visit). Pre-visits allow schools to identify potential challenges and opportunities, take photographs for visual guides, identify quiet areas and

sensory considerations, and meet venue staff in ways that cannot be replicated through desk-based research. To help schools make informed booking decisions, venues can provide detailed accessibility information and visual stories on their websites, reducing the need for exploratory visits.

Creating Autism-Friendly Environments

Building on the evidence that successful inclusion depends on understanding individual differences and embracing the "making it work" philosophy, venues have a crucial role in creating environments where autistic pupils can thrive. The survey responses reveal what truly matters when supporting educational visits, insights that can transform any venue from merely accessible to genuinely welcoming.

Understanding Sensory Environments

The dominance of sensory needs in survey responses underscores how fundamental the physical environment is to meaningful participation. Venues that excel in supporting autistic visitors proactively address sensory challenges rather than simply reacting to difficulties as they arise.

Successful environmental modifications often involve surprisingly straightforward adjustments. Temperature control, lighting management, and noise reduction can transform experiences from overwhelming to enriching. Venues that designate quiet retreat spaces, offer flexible timing, and adapt their environments to reduce sensory overload demonstrate sophisticated understanding of how environmental factors impact learning and engagement.

Staff Training That Makes a Difference

The survey's emphasis on staff understanding reveals that autism awareness training alone is insufficient, venues need staff who understand that autistic behaviour represents communication rather than defiance. The most praised venues demonstrate this understanding through empathetic interactions, patient communication, and flexible responses to individual needs.

Practical Implementation

Drawing on successful school practices, venues can implement specific strategies: provide detailed advance information that enables thorough preparation; offer environmental flexibility including quieter times and alternative routes; establish clear communication protocols with schools; and identify accessible quiet areas for regulation opportunities.

The survey demonstrates that when venues embrace autism inclusion thoughtfully, they become partners in the educational process rather than merely providers of facilities. However, these excellent venues remain the exception rather than the rule.

Moving from scattered good practice to consistent autism-friendly approaches across all educational destinations requires broader changes in how the sector operates.

The Path Forward

This transformation is already underway, evidenced by the remarkable participation rates and inspiring success stories documented throughout this survey. However, scaling these achievements from individual excellence to standard practice requires systematic change across multiple levels.

Building Systemic Change

Given the social nature of inclusion barriers identified earlier, sustainable progress requires changes that extend well beyond individual school policies. The sector needs coordinated approaches addressing venue partnerships, professional development, and public understanding.

The survey's findings about staffing challenges (71% of schools) and the universal reliance on 1:1 support (94% of schools) highlight a fundamental resource question. Current funding models often fail to recognise the intensive support required for successful inclusion, sometimes forcing schools to choose between ambitious educational experiences and financial sustainability.

Scaling Excellence

The survey reveals numerous examples of outstanding practice, from venues providing sensory bags to schools developing sophisticated preparation protocols. The challenge lies in ensuring these innovations spread systematically rather than remaining isolated examples of excellence.

The path forward builds on the survey's most encouraging finding: that with proper understanding, preparation, and support, virtually any experience can become accessible to autistic learners. This isn't about lowering expectations or creating separate provision, but about recognising that inclusive practices often enhance experiences for everyone.

Conclusion

This comprehensive survey of 487 schools provides compelling evidence that inclusive off-site learning for autistic pupils is not only achievable but transformative when approached with understanding, adequate resources, and genuine commitment to participation. The data challenges assumptions about what's possible whilst offering a clear roadmap for sector-wide improvement.

Key Insights for Action

Three critical insights emerge from this research that should shape future practice:

Social understanding trumps physical modification

The most significant barriers stem from attitudes and awareness rather than architectural limitations. Venues that embrace neurodiversity and staff who understand communication differences create accessible environments regardless of sensory complexity.

Quality support enables ambitious experiences

The universal reliance on 1:1 support and comprehensive preparation demonstrates that intensive, individualised approaches work. Schools taking autistic pupils skiing, to international destinations, and on complex residencies prove that no experience is inherently off-limits when properly supported.

Systemic change requires coordinated action

Individual school excellence, whilst valuable, cannot address sector-wide challenges around funding, training, and social acceptance. Sustainable inclusion requires collective commitment across educational institutions, venues, and society.

The Vision Realised

The survey's most powerful message lies not in its statistics but in its stories, accounts of autistic pupils gaining confidence through successful adventures, developing independence through supported challenges, and experiencing belonging through inclusive communities. These outcomes represent more than educational benefits; they build foundations for lifelong participation and citizenship.

When this change occurs, when every autistic pupil can expect access to rich, challenging educational experiences supported by understanding communities, we will have achieved more than inclusion. We will have created educational environments that recognise and celebrate the full spectrum of human learning differences, benefiting every child and enriching society as a whole.

Appendix 1: Key Survey Data

(Note that only the top results are included in the tables and so percentages will not total 100%. In addition, in some questions, more than one response could be made.)

Participation in Activities

Based on 487 schools surveyed

Activity Type	Percentage
Local area walks or geography fieldwork	89.3%
Day trips to museums, galleries, or heritage sites	83.0%
Sporting events or competitions	73.7%
Swimming	65.3%
Theatre or music performances	58.9%
Residentials	56.9%

Main Barriers to Planning Visits

Barrier Type	Percentage
Sensory issues (e.g. noise, lighting, crowds)	79.7%
Behaviour or regulation concerns	73.1%
Staffing levels	70.6%
Parental concerns or reluctance	38.8%
Risk assessment complexity	29.2%
Venue accessibility	29.2%
Cost or funding limitations	19.1%
Lack of training or staff confidence	16.6%

Reasons for Exclusion

When exclusions occur (194 responses)

Reason	Percentage
Safety concerns	41.2%
Parental choice/request	12.9%
Flight risk/absconding	8.2%
Behavioural concerns	6.7%
Staffing/resource limitations	6.2%
Trip suitability/appropriateness	5.7%

Support Strategies Used During Visits

Support Type	Percentage
1:1 or key adult support	93.9%
Sensory equipment (ear defenders, fidgets, etc.)	90.2%
Visual preparation guides	85.5%
Social narratives or stories	71.3%
Adjusted group sizes or off-peak visit times	61.5%
Briefings with venue staff	53.3%

What Venues Should Understand Better

Priority Area	Percentage
Sensory needs	20.6%
Quiet/safe spaces needed	11.2%
Staff training & understanding	9.4%
Individual differences	8.7%
Not judging as 'naughty'	7.7%
Processing time needs	5.7%

Single Most Important Improvement

Priority	Percentage
Acceptance/inclusion culture	10.2%
Public understanding/acceptance	9.9%
Funding/staffing support	9.3%
Quiet spaces/sensory regulation	8.5%
Staff training/awareness at venues	6.6%
Venue accessibility	6.3%

Survey conducted in June 2025 with 487 schools across the UK

Appendix 2: Recommended Autism-Friendly Venues

Note: Venues listed were specifically recommended by schools in the survey for their autism-friendly approaches, though individual experiences may vary.

Venues with Specific Autism Accommodations

Swimming & Sports Facilities

Splash Swimming Pool, Stockton - Provided dedicated changing room and understanding staff who accommodated timing flexibility

Summit Up (Clip & Climb), Oldham - Excellent for social skills development with well-trained staff and great facilities

Theme Parks & Attractions

West Midlands Safari Park - Provides free additional tickets to support proper ratios

Legoland - Features dedicated sensory area

Harry Potter Studios - Offers quiet room for overwhelmed children plus sensory needs information

Woburn Safari Park - Allows free advance trip for staff planning and adjustments

Cinemas & Theatres

Cineworld - Runs autism-friendly screenings with reduced volume and smaller audiences

Chelmsford Civic Theatre - Allows pupils to watch pantomime on screen in the bar area

Kings Theatre, Portsmouth - Runs ASD-specific performances

Wicked production, London - Provides detailed timing information for all sounds and effects

Museums & Educational Venues

London Transport Museum - Provides sensory bags with ear defenders and polite notices for interactive exhibits

Natural History Museum - Arranges disabled parking and recommends quiet spaces

British Library - Includes additional needs questions on booking forms and offers social stories

Jodrell Bank - Runs "Mucky kids" sessions specifically designed for ASD pupils

Beamish Museum - Flexible indoor/outdoor options with sensory toys and designated spaces

Birmingham Botanical Gardens - Provides designated rooms, separate facilities, and regulation space

Outdoor Activity Centres

Iver Environment Centre - Offers adaptable hands-on activities, secure site, and single-class visits

Norfolk Lakes Residential Centre - Takes detailed information and ensures staff awareness before arrival

PGL Isle of Wight - Little Canada - Made significant improvements following feedback

Hampton Court Palace - Delivers excellent autism-friendly workshops with full sensory consideration

Residential & Activity Providers

PGL - Offers "fussy eater guarantee" making residential more accessible

CAWSANDS - Wilder Me in Devon - Residential centre specifically for children with ASD and learning needs

Farms & Animal Attractions

White Post Farm, Mansfield - Excellent communication systems and family support

Whirlow Farm - Features breakout/classroom spaces with autism-experienced staff

Transport & Tourism

London City Airport - Provides exceptional pre-visit briefings and listens to pupil needs

Thames Clipper - Staff described as exceptional and supportive

Additional Recommended Venues

Adventure Parks & Theme Parks Alton Towers, Chessington World of Adventures, Drayton Manor, Thorpe Park

Museums & Galleries Black Country Living Museum, British Museum, Science Museum, Tate Modern, V&A/Young V&A, Winchester Science Centre

Outdoor Activity Centres & Residential Centre Parcs, PGL centres (multiple locations), Outward Bound, various residential centres

Farms & Animal Attractions London Zoo, Whipsnade Zoo, Colchester Zoo, various city farms and therapy farms

Theatres & Entertainment Royal Albert Hall, The Globe London Bridge, RSC Stratford, various regional theatres

Swimming & Sports Facilities Manchester Velodrome, various local leisure centres

Historic Houses & Castles Warwick Castle, Leeds Castle, Hampton Court Palace

Gardens & Outdoor Spaces RHS Wisley, Kew Gardens, Alnwick Gardens, various country parks

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