

Safer Visits for Autistic Children

Andrew Hall

Introduction

Educational visits are a valuable part of the curriculum and provide enriching experiences that support personal development, social learning and wellbeing. Autistic children and young people have the same entitlement to these opportunities as their peers.

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental difference that affects communication, social understanding, and sensory processing. For many autistic pupils, the unfamiliar nature of off-site environments can present barriers that, if not recognised and addressed, may lead to distress, exclusion or missed opportunities. However, with appropriate planning and reasonable adjustments, almost all visits can be made inclusive and successful.

Effective planning not only increases participation, it also supports safety. When autistic pupils feel secure and well-prepared, they are far less likely to experience distress that could lead to shutdowns, meltdowns or attempts to leave the area. Anticipating and reducing stressors is part of ensuring a safe visit for all participants.

This guidance offers advice on how to plan and manage educational visits that meet the needs of autistic children and young people. It does not prescribe set procedures but supports leaders in applying professional judgement to enable safe, inclusive and meaningful participation.

1. Understanding Autism in the Context of Visits

Autism presents differently in each individual. While some autistic pupils may require minimal support, others may need considerable preparation, adjustments and adult assistance to participate safely and comfortably. Leaders should avoid assumptions based on diagnosis and instead focus on the child's known profile of strengths, needs and coping strategies.

Visits can present particular challenges for autistic participants, including:

- Unpredictability or changes to routine
- Sensory stimuli such as noise, smells, lighting or crowding
- Social complexity and unfamiliar people
- Anxiety about transitions, transport or timing
- Limited access to regulation or recovery space

However, these same experiences can also offer autistic children the opportunity to build confidence, independence and real-world skills, provided the environment is adapted and support is in place.

2. Planning for Inclusion

Inclusion should be considered from the earliest stages of planning. A commitment to inclusion means working creatively to remove or reduce barriers, not making decisions based on assumptions or risk aversion.

Where pupils are known to be autistic, good practice includes:

- Consulting with parents, carers and relevant staff (such as the SENDCo) about the child's needs and past experiences
- Checking whether the venue has autism-friendly features, staff awareness or flexible entry policies
- Carrying out pre-visits to identify potential challenges and adjustments
- Building flexibility into plans (e.g. options for early exit, quiet space, alternate activity or shortened duration)
- Ensuring there is adequate adult supervision, especially during transitions or high-demand periods
- Establishing clear roles and expectations for any supporting adults

Avoid treating autism as a barrier in itself. It is the interaction between the individual's profile and the visit environment that may create difficulty. The goal of planning is to reduce unnecessary stress and increase participation, not to eliminate all challenge.

3. Preparing Pupils for the Visit

Preparation is especially important for autistic pupils. Many benefit from additional time to process new information and understand what will happen.

Preparation strategies may include:

- Reviewing the venue's website, looking at their accessibility information
- Creating a visual story or "what to expect" guide, using photos of the venue, staff, transport and key locations (e.g. entrance, toilets, lunch space)
- Providing a clear timeline of the day, including start and end points, breaks and transitions
- Rehearsing elements of the visit in school, such as coach boarding or using a lunch token
- Allowing time for questions or checking details more than once

Some pupils may need a familiar adult to talk through the visit with them several times, or to see photos and videos more than once before they feel ready. These are a part of how many autistic learners process information.

Sensory maps can also support preparation. These visual tools show where sensory features such as noise, smells, lighting, or busy areas are likely to be encountered. If the venue provides a sensory map, it can be shared with the pupil in advance to

help identify preferred routes, safe spaces, or areas to avoid. If no map is available, leaders may choose to create a simple version based on a pre-visit.

4. Managing Sensory Needs

Many autistic children experience differences in how they process sensory input. What is comfortable or unremarkable for one person may be overwhelming for another. Managing sensory factors is key to preventing distress and enabling pupils to stay regulated.

Good practice includes:

- Allowing and encouraging the use of personal sensory supports such as ear defenders, sunglasses, fidget tools or comfort items, rather than relying on unfamiliar or venue-provided alternatives
- Identifying quieter areas where pupils can go if they need to regulate or recover
- Scheduling in sensory regulation breaks as part of the plan
- Choosing quieter times for visits, or arranging private or reduced-capacity access where available
- Planning for the possibility that a pupil may need to leave the venue temporarily and then return
 - Some venues do not permit re-entry on the same ticket or booking
 - Leaders should check this in advance and, where necessary, request flexible access arrangements
 - Pupils should know that stepping outside and coming back in is acceptable and supported

Food and mealtimes:

- Eating areas are often noisy, brightly lit or crowded. Leaders should consider quieter alternatives or adjusted timings if this supports regulation.
- Unfamiliar food and smells can also be a source of distress. Pupils should be supported to bring food and drink they know is acceptable to them.

Toilets and hand dryers:

Toilets are a common source of sensory difficulty for autistic pupils. Noisy hand dryers, harsh lighting, and echoes can cause distress or avoidance. Where possible:

- Identify toilets in advance and include them in visual preparation materials
- Ask venues whether hand dryers can be turned off or avoided
- Consider carrying paper towels or wet wipes if hand dryers are overwhelming
- Let pupils know where toilets are and how they can discreetly request to use them

Anticipating and planning for these details can make a significant difference to a pupil's comfort and ability to stay regulated during the visit.

Some venues will accommodate adjustments if asked in advance, even if these are not part of their standard offer. It is good practice to make enquiries during the planning phase.

5. Supervision and Staffing

Autistic children may require additional adult support during visits. This should be factored into supervision plans from the start.

Key considerations:

- Where a pupil usually receives 1:1 support in school, the same level should be assumed unless assessed otherwise
- Consistency matters. If possible, assign a familiar adult to support the pupil throughout the visit
- The supporting adult should not be included in general supervision ratios if their primary responsibility is individual support
- Staff must be briefed on what to do if the pupil becomes overwhelmed, non-verbal, or seeks to leave an area suddenly

If a child is known to be at risk of absconding, appropriate supervision arrangements should be agreed in advance and clearly communicated to all involved.

6. Communication with Venue Staff

Good communication with venues helps ensure autistic pupils are welcomed and supported rather than misunderstood. It can also help avoid unnecessary escalation.

Leaders may wish to:

- Inform venues in advance that the group includes autistic pupils
- Clarify any support needs or likely adjustments
- Ask if staff have autism awareness training or can offer flexibility with timing, queueing or space
- Share a one-page pupil support summary if appropriate and agreed with parents
- Ask for visual guides and sensory maps

Venue staff should be reminded that certain behaviours may reflect communication needs or regulation efforts, not rudeness or non-compliance.

7. Travel and the Journey

The journey to and from a visit location is often one of the most challenging aspects for autistic pupils. Transport may involve unfamiliar environments, close proximity to others, noise, motion, and unpredictability.

Planning should consider:

- Whether the pupil has travelled by the chosen mode of transport before
- Seating arrangements that reduce anxiety (e.g. near a trusted adult, by a window, away from noise)
- Whether the child will need ear defenders, sunglasses, or familiar objects during the journey
- Managing transitions such as boarding and disembarking, especially in busy or time-pressured settings
- What will happen if the child is distressed while travelling, and how staff will respond
- Access to snacks, drinks or sensory items that help the child remain regulated
- Supporting communication during travel, especially if the pupil is non-verbal or uses Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

Where a pupil finds transport especially challenging, a phased or practice journey may help them become more confident. In some cases, meeting the group at the venue may be more appropriate, provided this is agreed with parents and risk assessed.

8. During the Visit

Staff should remain alert to signs of overwhelm. These may be subtle or vary from the pupil's usual presentation.

Possible signs include:

- Withdrawal or shutdown (becoming quiet, still, or non-responsive)
- Repetitive movements, increased stimming or pacing
- Change in tone of voice, facial expression or breathing
- Refusal to follow instructions without clear reason
- Increased sensitivity to light, noise or touch

These should be seen as indicators of distress, not misbehaviour. Responses should prioritise calming, reassurance and space.

Good practice includes:

- Knowing in advance where pupils can go for quiet time if needed
- Giving permission to step away before reaching a crisis point
- Keeping communication simple, clear and calm
- Allowing time to recover without pressure to rejoin the group immediately
- Supporting without drawing unnecessary attention

A successful visit does not require full participation in every element. If a child needs to pause or opt out of part of the experience, this can still be a positive and meaningful outcome.

9. After the Visit

Gathering feedback helps refine future planning. If a pupil was well-supported, this can build staff confidence and increase willingness to try more ambitious trips in future.

Post-visit review may include:

- Informal feedback from staff and parents
- Reflecting on what worked and what could be improved
- Updating pupil support profiles for future visits
- Noting venue adjustments that were particularly helpful

Sharing positive outcomes with families can also build trust and strengthen home–school collaboration around inclusion. Providing feedback to the venue can support their development of their accessibility offer.

Example

A Year 4 pupil with a diagnosis of autism was invited to attend a class trip to a local museum. The pupil experienced high anxiety around noise and unfamiliar settings and was prone to shutting down when overwhelmed. They were also selective about food and found group eating spaces particularly difficult.

The visit leader worked with the SENDCo and the pupil's parents to understand their needs. A photo-based visual story was prepared, including images of the minibus, museum staff, toilets, lunch area and shop. The pupil was supported to rehearse parts of the visit in school, including carrying a backpack, queueing, and using headphones.

A familiar teaching assistant accompanied the pupil and provided 1:1 support. The group arrived early to avoid crowds, and the pupil was given permission to eat lunch in a quieter space with their 1:1 support. A short break outside during a noisy gallery experience helped the pupil to recover and rejoin the group.

The visit was successful, and the pupil later contributed to the class display, having taken photos during the trip. Similar strategies were then adapted for a later theatre visit.

Andrew Hall

andrew@quietguides.co.uk

www.quietguides.co.uk