

Challenges That People with Autism and Caregivers Face in Public Environments

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Abstract : Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder that affects verbal and non-verbal communication, behaviour and sensory processing. As a result, people on the autism spectrum have a difficult time when confronted with environments that have high levels of sensory stimulation. This is often compounded by the inability to properly communicate their wants and needs to caregivers. The capacity for people with autism to integrate depends on their ability to at least tolerate highly stimulating public environments for short periods of time. The overall challenges that people on the spectrum and their caregivers face need to be established in order to properly create and assess methods to mitigate the effects of high stimulus public spaces. The paper aims to identify the challenges that people on the autism spectrum and their caregivers face in typical public environments. Nine experienced autism therapists have participated in a semi-structured interview regarding the challenges that people with autism and their caregivers face in public environments. The qualitative data shows that the unpredictability of events and the high sensory stimulation present in public environments, especially auditory, are the two biggest contributors to the difficulties that people on the spectrum face. If the stimuli are not removed in a short period of time, uncontrollable behaviours or 'meltdowns' can occur, which leave the person incapacitated and unable to respond to any outside input. Possible solutions to increase integration in public spaces for people with autism revolve around removing unwanted sensory stimulus, creating personalized barriers for certain stimuli, equipping people with autism with better tools to communicate their needs or to orient themselves to a safe location and providing a predictable pattern of events that would prepare individuals for tasks ahead of time.

Keywords : autism, built environment, meltdown, public environment, sensory processing disorders

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