



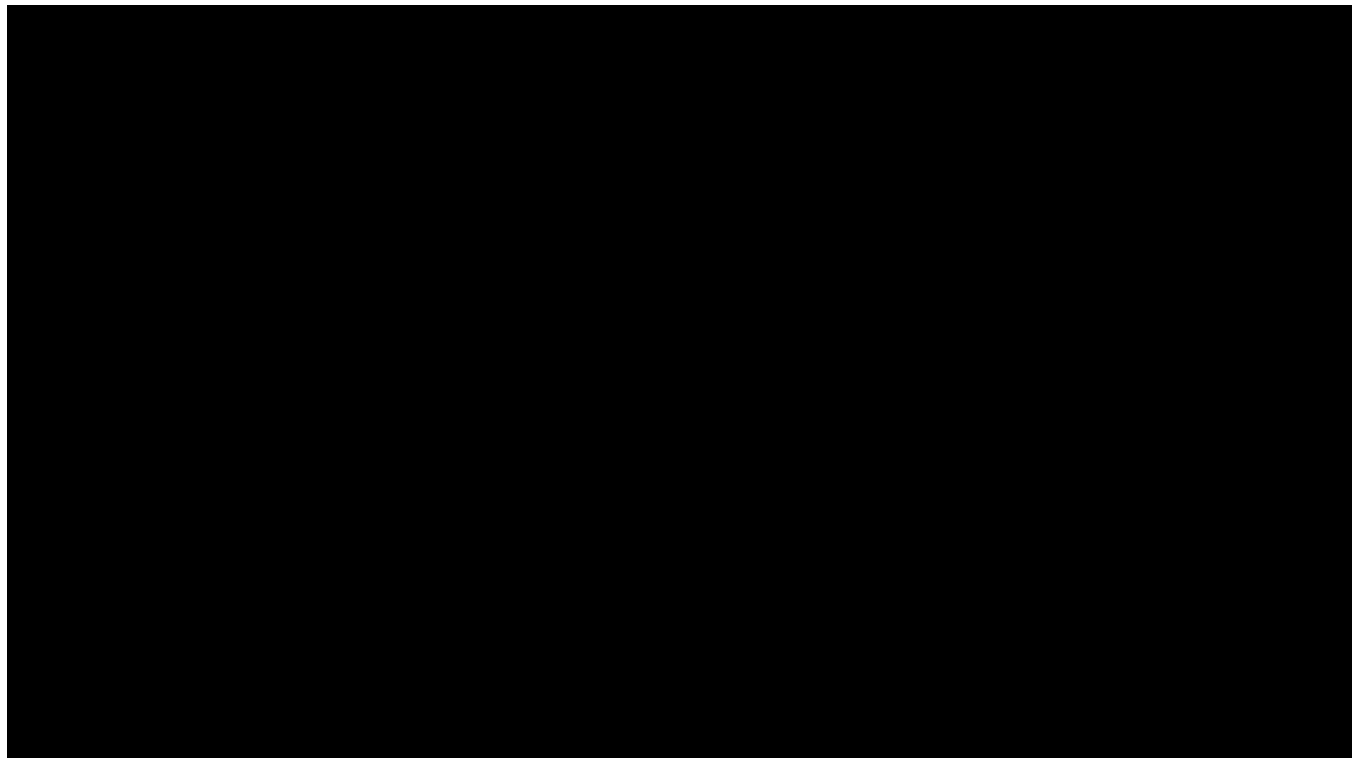
TOP TITLES NOW UP TO  
**90% OFF**

[SHOP NOW](#)

## How Restaurants Can Create a More Inclusive Experience for Children with Autism

Dining out can be difficult for families of children with autism. A restaurant in Illinois recently made headlines for its changes to make the experience more enjoyable. Here's what other restaurants can do to be more inclusive too.

By **Tess Lopez** | Published on December 6, 2021



Laura Hurd uses the phrase "lovingly stretching"—an idea introduced by bestselling

author, speaker, and autism advocate, Temple Grandin—to refer to the steps she's taken to get her 8-year-old son, Miles, who has autism, gradually at ease within social settings. He's made significant progress in recent years, though Hurd says it wasn't always easy, especially in restaurants.

Advertisement



Advertisement

"When he was younger, it would help us to sit away from others, like in a quieter area," says Hurd, who is based in Mount Carmel, Tennessee and hosts the *Miles Autism Homeschool* podcast. "The way we always approached it was that we knew most facilities were clueless about autistic children's needs. If we ever saw there was going to be a problem with his coping in these situations, we made it known to the staff, and people were always very understanding and willing to help in any way they could."

Many families of children with autism can be uncomfortable dining out. Most children with autism have sensory processing difficulties and restaurants are often an overstimulating environment. It can also be challenging waiting too long to be seated, and dealing with unwelcome stares from others. Because of this, many opt for take-out, or skip going to restaurants altogether.

"There are expectations [when it comes to] the way a restaurant runs and what happens along the trajectory of a visit," says Jennifer Carlson, Ph.D, a pediatric psychologist with the division of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. "There is a lot of waiting. That can be difficult if there's no clarity as to why you're waiting and what you're waiting for."

You're often expected to vocally communicate with people. For individuals with autism, who may not be using vocal speech, when the environment becomes stressful, they can turn toward a reliance on 'get me out of here'—fight or flight."

**RELATED:** [Sensory-Inclusive Activities That Make Family Time Fun For All](#)

It raises the question as to what accommodations restaurants can make to relieve some of these stressors. Brazil Express Grill, a casual Brazilian steakhouse in Schaumburg, Illinois, recently made headlines for becoming the first sensory-friendly restaurant in the Chicagoland area.

Co-owner Ana Santos-Vitelo followed the recommendations of her friend and founder of the nonprofit [Autism Hero Project](#), Tamika Lechee Morales, and overhauled the restaurant to make the experience easier for children with autism. "It's about inclusion," she says. "Everyone has the right to eat at a restaurant."

Santos-Vitelo took advantage of the quiet hours during the pandemic to update the menu, build sensory boxes that include earphones, fidget toys, and storybooks she created, which detail the service timeline so kids know what to expect during their visit. Staff are trained to recognize when a child is distressed so they can offer the box to parents. Similarly, parents can ask for the box or request to dine in a small, private room with a large window as an alternative space to take a break.

Other venues across the country have also implemented changes to make the environment more comfortable and inclusive for children with autism. In 2019, for example, New Jersey sports bar Riv's Toms River Hub opened a sensory-friendly dining room filled with bean bags, Legos, and other toys that invite children with autism to feel more at home. On the outskirts of Birmingham in Homewood, Alabama, Farm Bowl & Juice Co. has sensory bags with earmuffs and fidget toys at the ready.

**RELATED:** [Mom Receives Autism Diagnosis Along with Her 3 Children: 'It Was Life-Changing in a Good Way'](#)

And [Champion Autism Network \(CAN\)](#), a nonprofit founded in 2012 in Surfside Beach, South Carolina, developed a town-wide solution: Families who have children with autism can present the organization's CAN Card, available with a membership purchase on its website, to any participating business or retailer in the area to discreetly relay their need for specialized service or support. In the restaurant realm,

this can include expedited seating and food service. "When Miles was younger, just knowing that that town was going to be supportive if we were to go there took a load off," says Hurd.

The CAN program, which has expanded to other cities across the country, is an admirable template for other communities to follow, but there are other ways restaurants can reduce or prevent distressing triggers.

An image of a restaurant table.




PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES. PARENTS.

## **How Restaurants Can Become Sensory-Friendly**

Dr. Carlson notes that adjustments to sensory details, like lowered music volume and distance between tables, are quick and easy ways to be more accommodating.

Developing a sensory-friendly section of the menu can also be really helpful since sensory processing challenges can affect the texture, color, taste, and temperatures of food. "When you're processing all of those different senses at once, and you have sensory processing difficulties, [eating] can be really overwhelming and not enjoyable," says Brittny Coleman, MS, RDN/LD, and CEO and founder of

Autism Dietitian and the [Autism Nutrition Library](#). Because many kids with autism are also likely to have food sensitivities, Coleman recommends a menu based on nutritional needs, like [gluten-free](#) or dairy-free meals.

This might simply involve making a swap for healthier, higher quality ingredients to ensure kids receive a well-rounded meal with lean protein, fiber, and healthy fats—three things Coleman recommends to all her clients. She also cautions restaurants against letting foods touch and dressing up meals with condiments and other garnishes that could deter a child with autism from eating.

**RELATED:** [15 Things I Wish I'd Known When My Son Got an Autism Diagnosis](#)

But creating a restaurant experience that feels safe, familiar, and overall more inclusive boils down to the attentiveness of the staff. "I think restaurants being really attuned to the parents' needs and training their staff to be ability aware is critical," says Dr. Carlson.

Staff and management can complete autism awareness training and receive a certification through programs like Autism Eats or the [International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards](#) for venues under a hospitality umbrella.

With a child who's distressed, Dr. Carlson recommends hosts or waiters ask families how they can make the child comfortable and have accommodations ready. They can also speak with the family to determine the child's preferences in the preparation and delivery of the meal.

"There are a lot of unknowns you can't control in a public setting," she adds. "What you can control in support of an autistic person is making communication available."

---

Was this page helpful?



## Related Articles

child eating at

[SOCIAL](#)

Josephine Mele

[AUTISM SYMPTOMS](#)