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Creating Autism-Friendly Events

A Provider Guide



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Creating Autism-Friendly Events: A Provider Guide

Dear Provider,

As part of the Sesame Street and Autism initiative, this guide was developed to help you in your work with all children and their families.

Imagine you're planning a trip to another country, especially one with a different language and dramatically different culture. Without knowing what to expect, or what you were going to do when you landed, you might feel pretty anxious! Similarly, a crowded room is often like a foreign country to people with autism, full of chaos and unpredictability. This guide will help you create calmer, happier transitions that will go a long way in making everyone, particularly children with autism, feel comfortable.

Transforming your space doesn't have to be expensive or require extensive preparation! Follow the simple tips and activities in this guide and you will see how easy it is to create autism-friendly events.

INSIDE YOU WILL FIND:

- » Tips on creating a welcoming space
- » Activity ideas
- » Tips on explaining autism to young children
- » Invitation template
- » Nametag template
- » Certificate template



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A Welcoming Space

Naturally, you'll want your site to feel welcoming to everyone! Here are some considerations for preparing your space and inviting participants into it.

CONSIDERING THE SPACE ITSELF

Think about ways to help children avoid sensory overload at your event.

- » Organize materials and group and label them with words or pictures to make them easier to locate.
- » Make it visually clear where children can be and where they should not be (areas that are off-limits should be clearly marked as such). You can use paper "footprints" to indicate places children should stand or walk.
- » Avoid having bright or flashing lights.
- » It's a great idea to have separate quiet areas and/or rooms, perhaps with beanbags, where children can calm down. Make sure that children have access to these rooms at their request and that they are aware of their existence as an option.
- » Choose an area without strong smells. For instance, it shouldn't smell of cleaner. Set a "fragrance-free" policy (so that participants refrain from wearing strong perfumes or colognes).

THE GREETING

Start your event with a warm welcome to everyone:

- » Speak quietly.
- » Address the child first and presume she understands you. If the child doesn't answer, you can take the lead from the caregiver.
- » A "high five" or handshake may not be the best way to say hello.
- » Remember that a child with autism may not look like they are paying attention when they actually are.
- » It may be helpful to hand something like a map or activity guide to the child as you greet them. You might create a bingo-like card on which children can check off, or put stickers on, areas they visit or activities they complete.



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Planning Amazing Activities

When planning activities, there's plenty to think about. Here are some guiding ideas:

- » **Consider small-group activities** in which children won't be physically cramped. Sometimes less is more!
- » **Whenever possible, give all children roles in which they can be successful** (activities for nonverbal children might include distributing or collecting materials).
- » **Puzzles, blocks, spinning tops, bubbles, or books** might be good to have available.
- » **It's especially helpful when children know what to expect** and there is some routine or structure to an activity. Display pictures that show what to do in each step of an activity.

SHOWCASING STRENGTHS

When planning activities, consider the strengths of children with autism. They may have:

- » Strong visual skills
- » Understanding of (and memory for) concrete concepts, rules, sequences, and patterns
- » Long-term memory (and also good memory for details or facts, especially on a favorite topic)
- » Computer and technology skills
- » Musical, artistic, or mathematical ability
- » Intense concentration or focus (especially on a favorite activity!)
- » Ability to read at an early age



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Group Activity: Sensory Tables

Sensory tables can be a great way to “level the playing field” in a group setting and have all children doing something similar side by side—no conversation required!

You can fill the tables with:

- » shaving cream
- » pasta
- » rice
- » play dough
- » sand
- » water
- » leaves and pinecones
- » marbles
- » shredded paper

Add cups, shovels, ice-cube trays, small plastic containers, tongs, small toys, sponges, plastic letters, and so on to get children interacting with the textures.

SENSORY TABLES CAN ALSO BE THEMED TO YOUR EVENT.

For instance, a back-to-school night in the fall may include a sensory table with fall leaves, small gourds, pinecones, and so on. If children have trouble with any given texture, allow them to switch activities easily.



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Group Activity: Amazing Mosaic

Since children with autism are often visual learners, you can use this art activity to create a giant “mosaic” celebrating children’s individual likes and special strengths (you might do this after watching the “Amazing” song video). Children can see, in a concrete way, how they are both the same and different from one another—and know that they have each contributed something important to the mural.

1. Put the paper on the floor or tape it to the wall.
2. Spread out the magazines and the copies of the “Amazing Mosaic Muppets” pages. Have children read and color the copies of the pages, cut them out (children who can use scissors can cut, those who don’t can tear or have a grown-up or volunteer help), and glue them to the paper.
3. Invite children to look through the magazines to find images of things they like or things they’re good at, and glue them onto the paper. They can write their names by their contribution(s), or dictate something to write.
4. You might conclude by saying something such as, *Look how amazing we all are!*

MATERIALS

- » Large sheet of chart paper or butcher paper
- » Lots of old magazines
- » Child-safe scissors
- » Stickers (optional)
- » Glue sticks
- » Crayons and markers
- » Copies of “Amazing Mosaic Muppets” printables (next pages of this guide)



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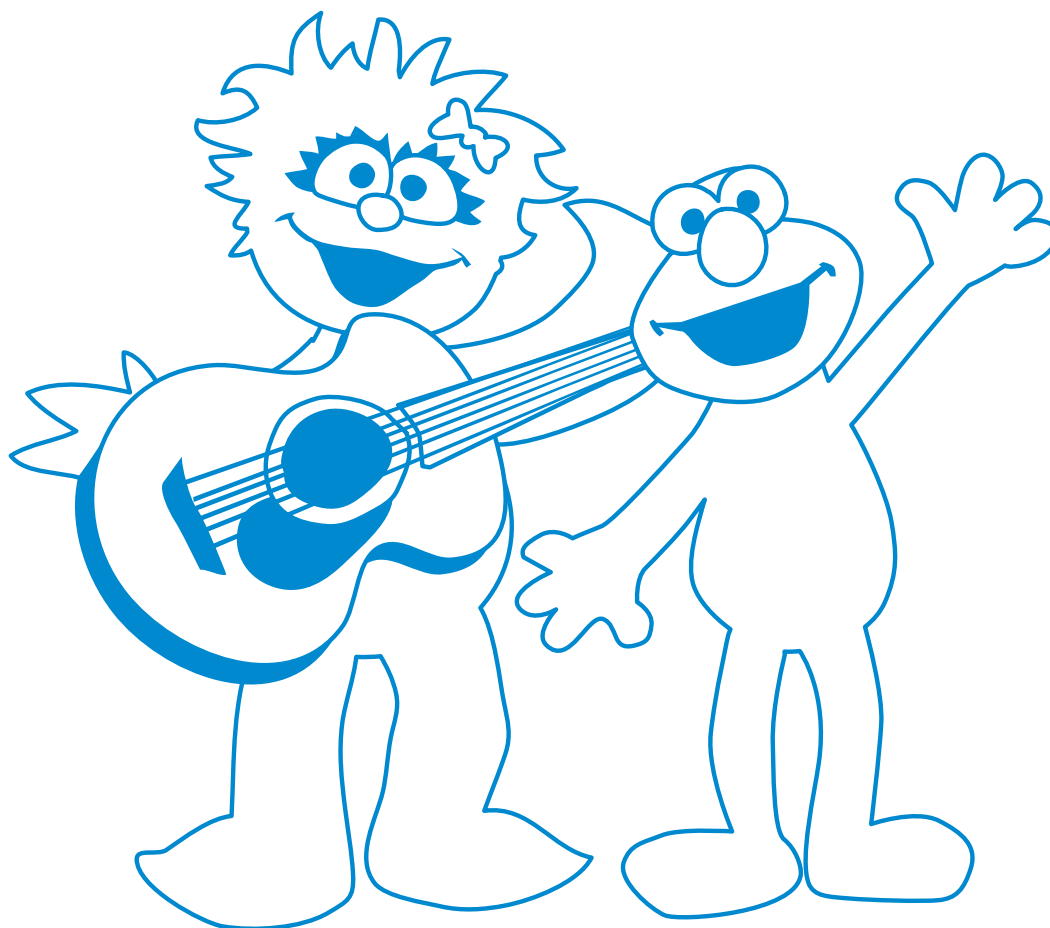
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Amazing Mosaic Muppets

Color and cut out to use in a mural (see Group Activity: Amazing Mosaic page).



Rosita plays guitar.
Elmo does not know how to play guitar.
But Elmo loves to sing.
So Rosita plays guitar, and Elmo sings along!

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Amazing Mosaic Muppets

Color and cut out to use in a mural (see Group Activity: Amazing Mosaic page).



Abby Cadabby and Super Grover can both fly.
They love seeing Sesame Street from way up high!

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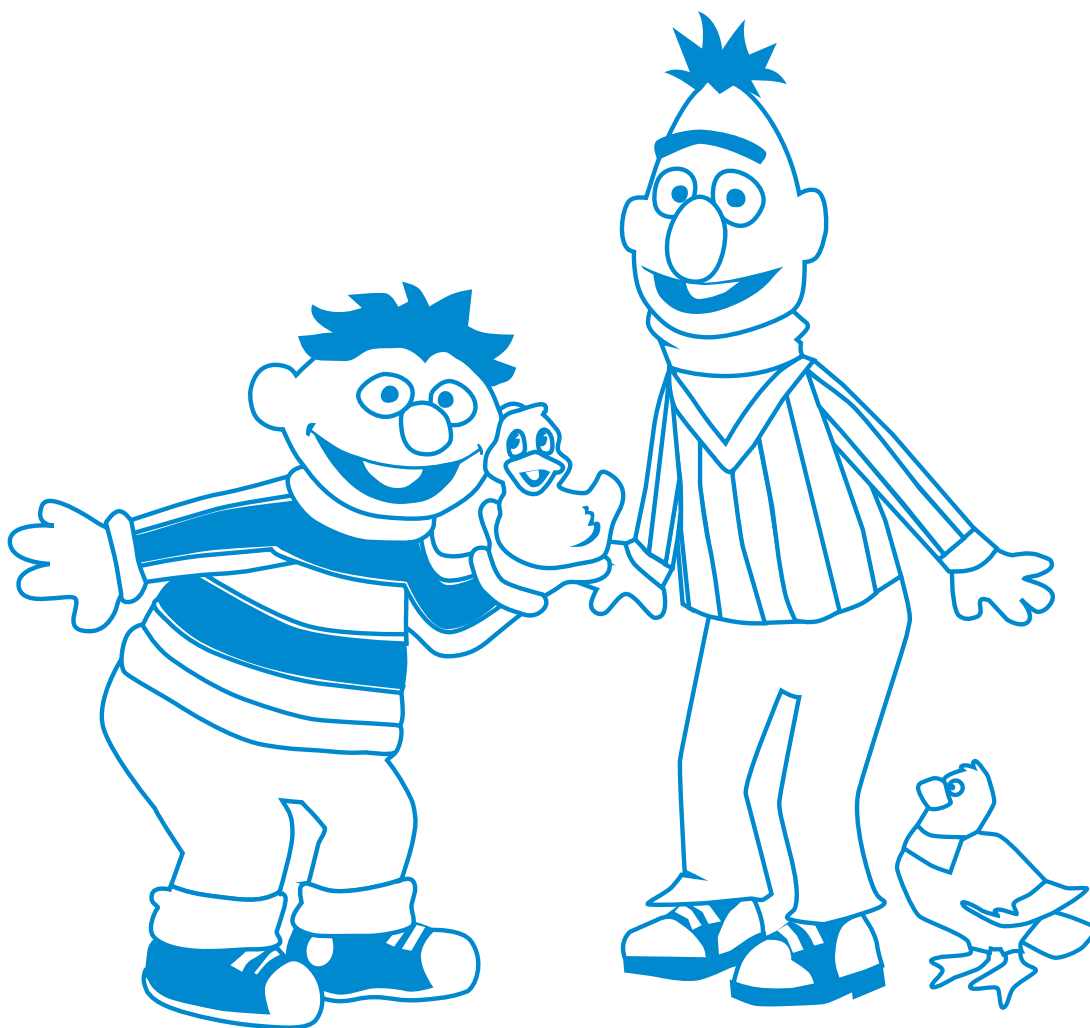
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Amazing Mosaic Muppets

Color and cut out to use in a mural (see Group Activity: Amazing Mosaic page).



Ernie is good at singing and he loves his Rubber Duckie.
Bert is good at counting and he loves to watch pigeons.
They are good at different things. They love different things.
And Ernie and Bert are good friends!

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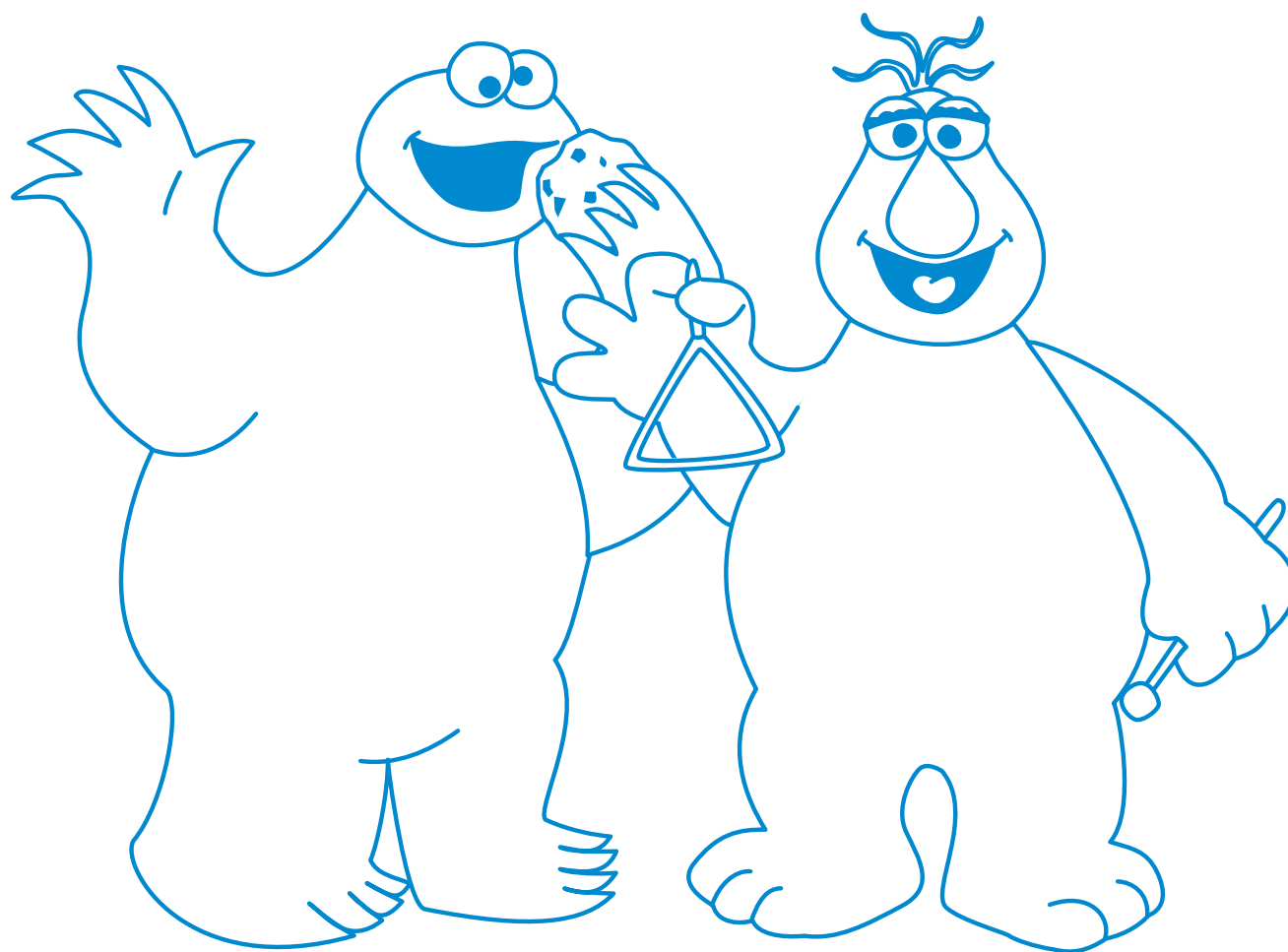
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Amazing Mosaic Muppets

Color and cut out to use in a mural (see Group Activity: Amazing Mosaic page).



Cookie Monster's favorite thing is cookies.
Telly's favorite thing is triangles.
But they both like to visit Hooper's store.

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Tip Sheet: Explaining Autism to Young Children

Whether you're engaging with children with or without autism—the following talking points can help you converse with all children about autism:

- » **It's okay to be curious about people different from you.** We are all made differently. No one is the same. Isn't that neat?
- » **(Child's name)'s brain works differently than yours.** Your brain is like the boss of your body. It's what makes you you! The brain has an important job: it helps you make sense of the world around you.
- » **Your brain lets you understand everything you see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. The brain of a person with autism works differently** and that can make it hard to talk, listen, understand, play, and learn in the same way that others do. Many autistic people are good at remembering videos, drawing, reading, and many other things.
- » **Everyone with autism is different, the same way all children have differences.** Some children do things differently than others.
- » **People have other ways besides talking to tell us what they know and want.** When you see your friend hand flapping, rocking, or repeating noises, she may be trying to tell you something, or trying to calm down.

WHAT TO SAY TO A PARENT OF A CHILD WITH AUTISM

Adults who do not have children with autism may not always know “the right thing to say” to those who do. Here are some thoughtful ways to connect. Ask/say:

- » Is there anything I can do to help you out?
- » I'm here for you if you want to talk.
- » I don't know what you're going through, but I'm always willing to listen.
- » Whenever you need some time for yourself, I'd like to help out.
- » Can I offer to babysit so you and your spouse can go out to dinner?
- » ...or offer any compliment that you would give to a typically developing child.



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You're Invited!

» To: _____

» Date: _____

» Time: _____

» Place: _____

More Info: _____



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Hello, My Name Is

Print these nametags on sticker paper and cut them apart. Use them to help participants introduce themselves.

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You Are Amazing! Congratulations!

(name of child/family)

has participated in

(name of event)

(date)



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