

How can we make hospitals more accessible for autistic children?

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Autistic children may have to visit hospital more often than non-autistic children due to health conditions which co-occur with autism, such as epilepsy and mental health issues. However, they face various barriers to accessing appropriate care in hospital, including communication difficulties and overwhelming sensory stimuli.

We asked 51 parents of autistic children aged 4-12 about their child's experiences in hospital to understand the key issues, and to understand how to make the hospital environment more comfortable and accessible.

1. Clear communication

 94%

of autistic children found it difficult to communicate how they felt to a healthcare professional

...and more than half of parents found it difficult to communicate with healthcare professionals about their child's medical needs too



Use verbal & non-verbal communication, give processing time, & make things fun

They made it clear to my child what they planned on doing in small, simple directions. They asked if they could do each step, and checked she understood what will happen

They gave her time to get used to the environment before the procedure

they have taken time to listen to him and his fears

2. Increased autism understanding

38% of parents had to explain what autism was to a healthcare professional.

61% felt their child was assumed to lack capacity because they were autistic.

58% experienced autism-based discrimination from patients or staff

We need to build a better understanding of autism among hospital staff.

"A general understanding of his condition and needs helps the communication"

"While the nurses knew what autism was they kept asking unachievable things of him"

Better use of key information summaries to highlight autism diagnosis to staff

Using hospital passports to understand the child's way of communicating

Autism training for all hospital staff

3. A comfortable sensory environment



74% of children had a difficult sensory experience while in hospital



76% autistic children experienced symptoms health of health conditions differently due to sensory and communication differences

The majority of parents said that both they and their children had difficulty communicating their child's sensory needs to hospital staff.

- ★ Consult the Hospital Passport to understand sensory sensitivities and experiences/expressions of discomfort
- ★ Allow soothing toys and fidgets
- ★ Find a quiet space, use ear defenders
- ★ Give reassurance and explanations
- ★ If possible, turn off bright lights

4. Increased accessibility

Increased flexibility of appointments

Quiet waiting areas

Option to wait outside

Continuity of care

Using Key Information Summaries

Hospital Passports

Autistic children face many barriers when accessing healthcare in hospitals, relating to communication, an overwhelming sensory environment, and lack of autism awareness among healthcare staff.

These changes will make this environment more accessible and will potentially have a big impact on these children's hospital experiences, improving their healthcare across their life.