NEURODIVERSE EVENT ACCESS GUIDE
WELCOME!

ASD Nest is committed to hosting events that are accessible to the neurodiverse community. Our goal is to build accommodations into the fabric of event planning and execution, prioritizing accessibility considerations at the start, rather than as an after-thought. We created this Guide so that other organizations can do the same, and we look forward to continuing to develop this resource and making it available to the public.

In this Guide, please find information about the accommodations that can be built into events. We hope to create events where attendees feel both comfortable and welcome, and we have taken steps to include specific supports for both event attendees and speakers. Let us acknowledge now: We don’t have it all right, and we aim to raise the bar at every event, challenging ourselves to deepen our commitment to creating a truly inclusive experience. Where we fall short, please let us know so that we can better plan for the future and create a professional space and we can all learn together.

We are grateful for the guidance of our Accessibility Advisory Board for their thoughtful recommendations, and we are happy to make this Neurodiverse Event Access Guide available to the public. We are grateful for the Accessibility Advisory Board that has made this possible:

Board Chair: Becca Lory

Board Members: Lydia X.Z. Brown  Haley Moss
                Dena Gassner  Morénike Giwa Onaiwu
                Carol Greenburg  Max Schneider
                Paul Kotler  Stephen Shore

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ACCOMMODATIONS FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

Prior to the conference

• Offer full/partial scholarships available for all autistic individuals

• Send out a “Getting ready” email to all attendees before the conference, including details such as:
  
  • Directions to the venue including both the street address and visual landmarks. Please note if event facilities are ADA-compliant.

  • Event location, time, and schedule, including details for any meals (menu & options for those with dietary restrictions). Provide the names and locations of a variety of local restaurants, as alternatives.

  • Include notes on temperatures at the venue (E.g., “Temperatures in the Event Center can vary room-to-room. We recommend dressing in layers. A coat rack will be available in the main conference room.”)

  • Include information about any relevant room details (E.g., “The main room has mirrors on the back wall, which face the podium and stage and can reflect light and be distracting.”)

  • Remind participants to refrain from wearing strong perfume, cologne, and/or lotions out of respect for attendees with sensory sensitivities.

• Ensure that attendees are able to contact the conference team with any additional accessibility needs.

Considerations for the physical environment of the conference

• Ensure that the layout in all rooms allows for space for movement, and invite all participants to move, as needed, during and between sessions. Language to consider as you welcome attendees, “This space is yours. Please feel free to do whatever you need to do to feel comfortable and to fully engage. Pacing and stimming are welcome!”

• Lighting in rooms should be dimmed wherever possible. Shades should be drawn to cover any windows and to control direct sunlight/glare.

• Make efforts to ensure that session rooms are free of clutter and distractions. Whenever possible, doors to session rooms should be kept closed during presentations to minimize outside noise and distractions.

• A designated Quiet Room should be available throughout the conference.

  • Sample description of a quiet room: “This space will be a small corner room with natural light and with the option of drawing the shades. The room will be outfitted with one rectangular table with three chairs and set off to one side of the room. There will be water, granola bars, and some fidgets in the room, and speakers/conference attendees are welcome to bring any other items into the space for
their own comfort. Signage on the door of the room and in the room itself will clearly state that this room is to be maintained as a sensory retreat space, offering a break from over-stimulation and/or overwhelming situations. Anyone who needs a space to make a work call, for example, will not be permitted to do so in this space and will be asked to move to a nearby lounge. A conference team member will check on this space to ensure that it remains accessible periodically throughout the event.

• Program, Badges, Signage, and Tools

• Provide fidgets and invite attendees to bring and use any fidgets throughout their time at the conference.

• Provide earplugs at the registration table for anyone with noise sensitivities.

• Provide pronouns stickers for all attendee badges (including blank stickers for anyone who does not use pronouns/wants to include their own pronouns).

• Use supports such as ASAN’s Color Communication Badges to allow attendees to express their current communication preference quickly, nonverbally, and simply (more information here https://autisticadvocacy.org/2014/02/color-communication-badges/):
  • Green sticker: Let’s Talk! I am actively seeking communication.
  • Yellow sticker: Do I know you? I only want to talk to people I recognize, not by strangers or people I only know from the Internet.
  • Red sticker: Please don’t talk to me. I do not want to talk to anyone, or I only want to talk to a few people whom I know. (An individual who chooses to use red stickers might want to let some close friends know that they are on the individual’s “red list” and are allowed to approach and talk, despite the red sticker).

• Include session descriptions in the event program and in the “Getting Ready” email indicating the level of interactivity participants can expect in each session. This can help attendees plan their day/s and ensure that they are able to full participate. Sample Interactivity Level designations below:

  • LEVEL 1 Mostly lecture with optional Q&A
  • LEVEL 2 Lecture with some activity or moderate noise/business in the room
  • LEVEL 3 Highly interactive session, or high volume and movement in the space

• Be thoughtful in language used in instructions for speakers, in all written marketing materials, and Day Of signage, including:
• We recognize, affirm, and validate an individual’s identity as an Autistic person, and we commit to using identify-first language.

• We will make every effort to ensure that directions, instructions and any additional conference Signage uses language that is clear and unambiguous.

• Food

  • Offer a variety of food options, and share the menu in advance of the conference. Avoid foods with strong smells, and ask, whenever possible, for sauces and other “add-ons” to be on the side.

  • Whenever possible, set up food/drink stations outside of active session rooms to control for distractions during event, and note when this will not be possible. Inform catering and facilities staff of your effort to minimize extraneous sensory distractions.

  • Ensure that water is available throughout the event for both speakers and attendees. Water bottles make great “take-homes” as they also eliminate the need for disposable water bottles or cups.

• Sessions

  • Have a large-print copy of all session slides available for any attendees with low vision.

  • Provide CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation) for any individuals who request it. When possible, provide this service for all attendees.

  • Ask all presenters to use microphones to ensure that all hearing audience members are able to access presentations.

  • Take the opportunity during opening announcements to share reminders with all attendees about accessibility. For example:
    • We will be using silent applause / “flappause” during sessions
    • We invite anyone to stand up and walk around during sessions and/or leave and re-enter sessions as needed. And stimming is welcome and encouraged!
    • Please respect others communication badges and preferences.
    • Reminder about the location and purpose of the Quiet Room

  • Offer a variety of options for Q&A. For example, in addition to taking questions from the audience at standing microphones, provide index cards for anyone who wishes to write a question to the speaker and have runners collect all index cards and share them with the presenters.
ADDITIONAL SPEAKER-SPECIFIC ACCOMMODATIONS

In addition to the Accommodations listed above that will be provided for all participants, the following specific accommodations can also be provided with conference speakers in mind.

Prior to event

- Offer speakers the opportunity to visit, see photos, or do a physical/virtual walk-through of the venue in advance of the conference. Share relevant details about all spaces they will be presenting in (E.g., Will there be a stage? What kind of mic will be used? Are there overhead lights or spot-lights?). Share where the Quiet Room will be located during the conference as well as venue floor plans so that speakers are able to familiarize themselves with the space.

- Session information
  - All session topics, requirements, and panel questions shared in advance of the conference, and conference organizers are available to any speaker who has any questions about their session.
  - All videos used in sessions must be Closed Captioned.
  - All presenters should bring their presentations on a flash drive, in case of any technical glitches.

- Travel and hotel
  - Cover both lodging travel for all speakers and answer any additional questions about travel considerations or recommendations (E.g., best subway routes, etc).
  - Provide individual travel itineraries with flight and hotel details for easy reference.
  - Provide important “turn-by-turn” directions with landmarks and photos for routes from hotel to event venue.

Day of the event

- A point-person should be assigned to each speaker for the day of the event. Each point-person can be introduced by email in the days leading up to the event, meet the speaker at the registration table, assist with registration and room/sound-checks, and be available to offer any additional support before, during, and after the speaker’s session/s (E.g., Show the location of the break room, help with Q&A, and/or help to manage any over-crowding of the speaker following the session).

- Each presenter should have a scheduled time for room and soundcheck the morning of their session. This will give speakers the opportunity to:
  - Do a sensory scan of the physical space, if needed
  - Do a soundcheck (being sure to check sound from presenter’s position to avoid echoes or feedback)
  - Review location of any standing speakers in the room
  - Do a microphone set-up. All speakers will be asked to use a microphone to ensure that they are heard by everyone in the audience, particularly in the event that anyone in the audience is experiencing any hearing loss. See here for more information: https://chroniclevitae.com/news/2175-a-note-from-your-colleagues-with-hearing-loss-just-use-a-microphone-already

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• Do a lighting check, and lighting can be adjusted according to speaker preferences, when possible
• Ask for any additional seating (E.g., stool behind a podium) or other needs
• Provide visual time-checks for speakers during presentations (E.g., designated event team member in the session with time cards displaying final 10, 5, and 2 mins remaining during sessions). These time-keeping supports should be optional and modified to meet the speaker’s preferences and needs.
• Specify any protocols for Q&A time. For example, “For the Friday afternoon Expert Panel, index cards will be available on all tables and NestCon team “runners” will collect, curate, and deliver questions to the moderator, so that select questions can be addressed.”