



Sensory Inclusive Basics For Ushers and Front of House Staff

What does sensory inclusive performance mean?

Sensory inclusive performances are designed to welcome all patrons – those with and without disabilities – into a supportive, judgement free environment through physical and cultural modifications.

Why is this important?

Sensory inclusive performances have been spreading across the entertainment world spearheading the inclusion of families who have been isolated from the power of the theatrical experience and community. Presenting organizations, artists, and communities can partner in creating a safe, welcoming, relaxed and non-judgmental environment where audiences can feel at ease from the moment they purchase a ticket, to the front doors of the theater, to the stage, and on their way home.

Welcoming people with sensory integration needs and families with energetic young children and others who find more structured public spaces challenging changes lives. Being welcomed, relaxed, encouraged, and entertained in community is the fundamental core of why live performance exists. Performing arts centers creating welcoming environments in which kids and their families can emote, jump up and dance around, come and go as they please, take breaks if they like, and build confidence through being included in experiencing the arts provides formerly isolated people with the basic human need of inclusion. These performances are also an opportunity for those who do not have sensory differences to experience being a part of this unique community.

What are examples of accommodations?

- Lights remain on at a low level in the theater during performance
- Gradual light changes on stage
- Gradual sound changes and lower overall sound level
- No strobe lighting or lighting focused on the audience
- Resource materials to prepare for their visit
- Freedom for audience to talk and leave their seats during the performance
- Quiet areas within the theater
- Space in the theater for movement and standing
- Limited crowds

What Will the Audience Be Doing Before The Performance?

- ⇒ Some will arrive early, some will arrive really early. They will need time to get comfortable with the front of house. Your calm and relaxed presence is comforting and welcoming.
- ⇒ Most often the house will have places in the lobby or surrounding rooms for families to take a break. You can help guide families to these resources and they may utilize them throughout the day. These include:
 - Quiet Area(s)
 - Reading Area
 - Activity Area (Including toys, art, and maker supplies)
 - Your Front of House TV (Showing the performance)
 - Concession Stand (Frequently the food choices are different from what you usually have.)
- ⇒ Some will be emoting, touching, and moving around the space quickly. Allowing them to explore on their terms the space will be amazing service. (Your role might shift from encouraging quiet to ensuring safety.)
- ⇒ Some will be wearing or bringing adaptive gear like noise reduction ear protectors, toys, electronic devices, and books.
- ⇒ Some will not greet you or make eye contact when you greet them. Know that what you might expect connection to look like may not be what they display. Know that you have been successful in connection.

Hot Tip from our friend and top expert in the field, Kevin Spenser:

Some people with Autism can only process one sense at a time. In order to focus on hearing what you are saying, they may need to look away from you or close their eyes.

- ⇒ Some families may apologize a lot. Part of the goal of these performances is to provide a judgement free space so people with and family members of people with neural differences can expand their role in the community.
- ⇒ They may need to sit in the very last row of the audience. (What we've been trained to think of as "better seats" may not be better seats for some.)
- ⇒ They may need to switch seats or they may need to have the exact seats on their ticket.

What Will the Audience Be Doing During The Performance?

- ⇒ Some will arrive late, or really late or really, really late. It's a victory when we can accommodate their challenging schedules.
- ⇒ Some will emote
- ⇒ Some will need to move in and out of the seating area. They will need to move through front of house doors to the lobby
- ⇒ As with all children's performance, young audience members will need a parent with them before leaving the building. (This is your opportunity to ensure safety.)
- ⇒ Parents may find a place in the back of the audience to let a child run back and forth.

Audience:

- ⇒ **Tip Sheet** - Some may have or request a document that works like a libretto. (With photos)
- ⇒ **Social Narrative** - Some may have or request a document that outlines your house's facilities and expectations about how audiences enter, utilize and leave your facility.
- ⇒ **Check lists** - Some may have checklists that expand on what's available and give order to events.

Materials are often provided by the artist/artist's management and can be treated as templates and used again. These materials provide structure, guidance and comfort for some audience members. It is not likely nor necessary that every family have a copy of these items. Most will have received a link to these resources by the time they arrive at your theatre. It's great to have enough copies for about 10% of your audience members on hand. Most often families who benefit from these documents have them already.

After The Performance

Many sensory inclusive performances involve higher levels of audience engagement. It is common for performer(s) to Meet and Greet at the end of the show. Photos, Questions and Answer time and interaction with the cast is helpful for all and everyone appreciates your commitment to be the welcoming presence in these post event activities.