

How to Host a Sensory-Friendly Movie Showing

An afternoon at the movies is an exciting event for every kid. But for families with special needs kids, the theater is not always the most welcoming place. Read on to learn how you can create an inclusive movie event for everyone in your community to enjoy.

"These events are very important to have in the community; it makes it accessible to all. And it also brings a greater awareness. People tend to be afraid of what they don't know. The more we get the word out there and the more we train various places of business on how to do sensory-friendly events, it just makes it more accessible and more enjoyable for everybody."

— Kris Krieger, Easterseals Midwest's
Autism Training Supervisor

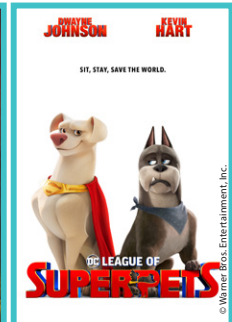
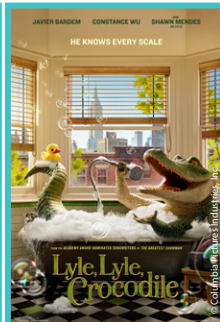
What is a sensory-friendly movie showing?

A sensory-friendly movie showing is a movie where special accommodations are made to allow children and families with sensory disorders, autism or any other special needs to enjoy a trip to the movies without the negative stimuli they might experience at a typical theater showing.

Why is it important for the community to offer these events?

These unique events provide families with an option to be somewhere they couldn't be before. They create an inclusive environment so no one in your community has to miss out on enjoying a day – or night – out at the movies with those they cherish most.

— Our Top Title Picks for Your Sensory-Friendly Event —



Initial Steps

"Thank you from my whole heart for such an amazing event yesterday! We have stopped going out to movies due to my daughter's sensory needs; but last night she went to bed with a happy heart and smile telling me that it was the best date ever. Thank you for all the information you shared and for having such an extraordinary event planned!"

- Attendee

- 1 Partner with a local organization who works with individuals who have sensory-friendly needs.** Some options include Autism Speaks, Easterseals, Special Education Schools, etc. Your partner organization will likely have trained experts who can help volunteer, staff your event and help you promote the event to your intended audience.
 - 2 Choose a date/time.** Be mindful that weeknights can be hard when individuals have been sitting at school all day and their patience and/or medications might be wearing off. We suggest a matinee showing during the weekend to optimize attendance. You will also want to check for conflicting events in your community.
 - 3 Select a family-friendly movie.** New releases often generate a lot of excitement and interest. Experts recommend that you avoid any big special effects, like scenes with flashing strobe lights, as that might be too much for some attendees. Make sure that you obtain the correct movie license for your event. Swank Movie Licensing USA provides licensing options for nearly all of the top Hollywood studios, including Walt Disney, Warner Bros., Columbia Pictures, Universal, Lions Gate, Paramount and many more.
 - 4 Before the event, walk the space where you will be showing the movie.** You might want to invite your partner organization so they can make suggestions about what accommodations will be best for your particular space. See bottom for a list of common adjustments for sensory-friendly showings.
 - 5 Start promoting your event!** When advertising within your school or library, mailing or emailing families and patrons, or posting on a private social media group, you are allowed to use the studio name, title and images from our promotional materials. When advertising in a public forum, such as newspapers, radio stations or public social media, you are not permitted to use the movie title or studio name. For example, you can say: "Join Us at ABC Library for a Sensory-Friendly Movie Event at 7 p.m.! Call for details."
- See page 4 for some sample marketing and advertising.
- 6 Send out a reminder about a week ahead of time.** We also suggest including a social story. A social story is a communication tool used to describe a new or unfamiliar social situation to help individuals with autism. We've included an example on page 5 that can be customized for your space.
 - 7 Staff Up.** On the day of your event, it's a good idea to have some extra volunteers on hand to help show folks to the auditorium and the bathroom. You might also want to offer some alternate activities for those who need a break from the movie. Easy ideas including a coloring station, snack station or an open space to have play time.

Suggested Accommodations

Lights up. Providing some dim lighting in the room throughout the movie takes the edge off quickly changing colors and lights from the movie itself, which can make it easier for those with visual processing issues to follow the action without becoming overstimulated. It also allows audience members with sensory issues to feel safer because they can see where they are more easily.

Sound down. Many people with autism struggle with loud noises. Turning the volume slightly down on the movie can help, as can providing ear plugs and encouraging audience members to bring noise-cancelling headphones or other sensory aids from home.

Hands busy. Having a fidget item, blanket or stuffed animal can be comforting and allow people with sensory issues to concentrate and enjoy the movie. Consider providing stress balls or other fidget items, and let your audience know they are welcome to bring their own comfort items to the screening.

Rules relaxed. At the movie theater, we're expected to stay as still and silent as we can. That's hard to do if your body needs to move in order to stay calm, which is common for people with sensory issues. Let families know their loved one with sensory needs are free to move and vocalize, as long as everyone is safe.

Breaks allowed. When sensory overload hits, a break is often the only solution. Set aside a separate room for quiet breaks, and consider having dim lighting (and, if possible, non-fluorescent lighting), blankets and pillows in this room. If your facility can accommodate multiple break spaces, it might also be helpful to designate an additional "get the wiggles out" area where people can safely burn off excess energy.

Intermission included. Especially if your audience includes lots of young children, consider pausing the movie halfway through for an intermission. If you do this, let your audience know in advance how long intermission will be, so families can help their loved ones with sensory issues manage the transition time (transitions to and from breaks, and to and from physical spaces, can be difficult for people living with autism or other sensory needs).

Bathrooms accessible. Children with autism or other sensory needs might need extra help in the restroom. Provide clear signage to restrooms with accessible stalls and changing tables or, ideally, family restrooms.

Allergies considered. Food allergies are a common concern for children and families with or without other disabilities. If you plan to offer snacks at your screening, inform families, through labels or signage, which snacks contain the most common allergens (peanuts, tree nuts, dairy, soy, gluten, etc.) and allow families to bring their own snacks from home.

Captioning on. As the audience at your sensory-friendly screening might include people who need to vocalize or move to keep their bodies calm and comfortable, others in the audience might have trouble hearing the movie. Turning closed captions/subtitles on will help everyone follow what's happening.

"We became interested in hosting sensory-friendly events because it's a growing audience....We've had very positive feedback from those that attend; they're glad to see that they are represented and we're trying to address their needs in providing programming and spaces for them to participate in the library and the community."

- Kyle Knight, Popular Materials Manager at St. Louis' Central Library



Marketing Examples

1 Facebook Post



2 Flyer



3 Postcard



You can use these samples for ideas, but don't forget to announce this on all of your channels!

Other ideas include: direct mail, library website, partner websites, Twitter, posters and email list servs.

Social Story Example

Social stories are a common tool caregivers use to help prepare individuals with autism for new or unfamiliar situations.

We recommend you put together a guide, similar to the below, and email it out to your attendees in advance of the event. Then they will review it together in the days or week leading up to the movie showing.

Outside View

I will be going to the Downtown St. Louis Public Library on October 12. This is what the outside of that building looks like. If the building is a new place for me, I might feel nervous or confused. Many people feel this way in new places. I can feel safe by staying with the person who came with me. If I feel nervous or confused, I can ask [the person listed below] for help.

This person will be with me and can help me:



Helpers

I can ask anyone in a pink shirt for help and they are happy to show me the way to the library or the theater once I enter the library.



Inside Theater View



This is the theatre the movie is going to be playing. I can sit wherever I feel the most comfortable. The people putting on the movie understand some sounds and lights might bother me. This performance is sensory-friendly, which means the people have changed some of the sounds and lights. They hope this will help me enjoy the show more!

If the sounds and lights still bother me, I can ask for help or a break. I can ask this person for help:

Intermission

- Halfway through the movie, everyone takes a break!
- This break is called intermission. It lasts about 10 minutes.
- I will know it is time for intermission when the lights in the audience get brighter.
- At intermission, people can go to the bathroom, get a drink or a snack, walk around the lobby, talk to each other, or use their phones and tablets.
- When intermission is almost over, I will see the lights flash. This will remind me to put away my phone or tablet, go back to my seat, and get ready to watch the rest of the movie.
- I might need a break while the movie is still going on. I might need to go to the bathroom or I might feel overwhelmed and need a break to calm down. This is OK, and I can ask for help.
- I can whisper quietly or sign to the person I am with that I need a break.

I can ask this person for help:

Family FYI

- You're free to bring in quiet sensory aids – earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones, dark or tinted glasses, fidgets or comfort items, blankets – to help the person you are with feel safe and comfortable and enjoy the movie.
- We do ask that electronic devices be turned off during the movie, and any fidget or comfort items be noiseless enough to keep from distracting fellow audience members.
- Food and drink are not allowed to be consumed in the theater.