

The Parliamentary Inquiry into *Autism spectrum disorder services in Victoria* Museum Victoria Submission

At Melbourne Museum a staff member witnessed a mother struggling to manage a visibly unhappy child. The mother was worried about her child making noise in the museum and was trying to leave. As they approached her, she looked concerned that she was going to be told to be quiet, but they simply said “can I help you?”

Museum Victoria welcomes almost 1.7 million visitors each year to Melbourne Museum, Scienceworks and Immigration Museum. Visitors represent a broad and diverse cross section of the community including children and adults with autism.

Since 2014 Museum Victoria has worked with partners AMAZE and the Department of Education and Training to better identify ways to serve people with autism visiting our museums.

The great thing about museums doing this (Autism aware programs) is our constituency does have special interests so they are going to particularly want to go to museums.

Fiona Sharkie, CEO, AMAZE

Great potential for synergy between museums and the autism community – people with autism learn best in a multi-sensory, engaging, self-paced, individualised settings.

Lisa Jo Rudy, Autism in the Museum Blog

Museums and other cultural organisations are valuable community resources that engage multiple forms of learning, foster wellbeing and contribute to social connectedness. Our *Autism Friendly Museum* initiative welcomes people with autism and their families by providing better information, a sense of welcome and resources to support independent access and participation.

A range of museums and cultural organisations locally and worldwide are beginning to offer programs and online resources to support visits to their institutions by people with autism who can find navigating public spaces a confusing and stressful experience.

Based on these trends in the cultural sector and services in the government sector, and through our experience, we understand there is a growing expectation within the community for the provision of services and resources which welcome and include people with an ASD.

Consultation with people with autism revealed the need for support for “everyday” access. Specialist events and programs are appreciated but by their nature are most likely to be offered on a restricted number of days in a year.

We have supported an “everyday” welcome and access approach by:

- *Raising awareness within Museum Victoria front of house staff on autism, and support of those staff to be confident to welcome and engage visitors with autism*

- *Published online resources on the museum's website in the form of social stories, and maps of low and high sensory spaces*
- *Extensive communication internally and externally about the project and the resulting web resources, to ensure awareness and community use*
- *Ongoing evaluation and updating of the social stories and maps with key audience groups and stakeholders*

The *Autism Friendly Museum* online resources (ie sensory maps and social stories) are now available for Immigration Museum, Scienceworks and Melbourne Museum and have been well received.

<https://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/visiting/access/the-autism-friendly-museum/>

<https://museumvictoria.com.au/melbournemuseum/visiting/access/the-autism-friendly-museum/>

<https://museumvictoria.com.au/scienceworks/visiting/access/the-autism-friendly-museum/>

In the first 6 months of availability 7,000 people accessed the social stories and sensory maps for Melbourne Museum alone. The Project received the Victorian Museums Award in 2015 and is being used as a model by other museums.

The following is some of the feedback we received from the AMAZE families who volunteered to trail and test the *Autism Friendly Museum* resources:

- *Really successful visit as a consequence of social stories*
- *We read the stories on the train on our way in*
- *We recognised the building straight away*
- *Arrival experience was exactly as described*
- *Sensory map was done really nicely*
- *Fantastic social scripts*
- *The visuals are really important for our family*
- *There were no surprises*
- *Liked the fact that social scripts were in a word document and could be modified*
- *We knew what to expect*

Museum Victoria's *Autism Friendly Museum* project showed that with partner AMAZE we were able to provide services simply and effectively that removed barriers and promoted inclusion. We believe this is a sustainable approach that could be adopted by others and that there may be an opportunity for Victorian cultural organisations to share information and develop a co-ordinated approach to the provision of access and participation resources for families and schools. We would be happy to assist in any wider integrated cultural sector implementation.