

Autism Accessibility and Inclusion

A Guide for Inclusive Events

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Autism SA uses person first and identity first language to represent the diverse language preferences of the Autistic community.



We acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first inhabitants of the nation and the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work.

The background is a solid purple color. Overlaid on this are several thick, semi-transparent, light purple lines that flow and curve across the upper half of the image, creating a sense of movement and depth.

**So, what is
autism?**

What is autism?

Autism is a different way of thinking, a neurological developmental difference that changes the way a person relates to the environment and the people in it.

Put simply, autism changes the way that a person sees, experiences and understands the world.

You might have heard people referring to autism as a 'spectrum'. This means that there are a number of ways that autism can be experienced.

While autistic people share a range of similar characteristics, there are an equal number of differences, so the experience of autism varies greatly from person to person.

Dr Stephen Shore an autistic professor at Adelphi University, New York, said:

“ If you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism. ”

People on the spectrum may have various support needs. A person's support needs will vary and will change depending on the context, the environment, the task, and a range of other factors.

Autism is not an intellectual disability or a mental health condition, although some people on the autism spectrum may have a co-occurring intellectual disability or mental health condition.

“ There is no one experience of autism ”



Language around autism

There are various ways in which an autistic person may identify with a diagnosis, or for some individuals they may identify as being autistic without a formal diagnosis, therefore self-identify.

Generally there are two types of language around autism:

Person First Language

Person/individual on the autism spectrum.

Identity First Language

Autistic, autistic person/individual.

Each person on the autism spectrum may have a preference as to which language use they prefer. It is best practice to know what language use the individual prefers and ensure that is used when engaging with or referring to that individual.

“ Best practice is to use the language preferred by the individual you are interacting with. ”

Other language around autism

Asperger's

'Asperger's Disorder' was a diagnostic term used before the diagnostic manual was updated in 2013. If someone has a diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder, then this diagnosis remains.

Neurodiversity

Just like biodiversity, the term neurodiversity recognises that we all have different minds. The term is used to recognise that we all have different neurology from each other, resulting in different strengths, skills, abilities and interests.

Neurodivergent

Differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical.

“ My differences turned out also to include gifts that set me apart. ” - John Robison, New York Times Bestselling Author

Characteristics of autism

Every autistic person is unique and has their own strengths and challenges. The way an individual's autistic characteristics present will vary from person to person.

Some characteristics that can present in people on the autism spectrum include:

- May be detail oriented
- May identify irregularities easily
- May be a logical thinker
- May maintain a focus on a task
- May enjoy routine and predictability
- May have a specific area of interest or passion
- May see things from a different perspective
- May have differences in communicating needs and desires and may use Augmentative or Alternative Communication to assist with communication
- May have difficulties in understanding others' communication styles or intent
- May have differences in engaging in expected social interaction and interpreting other people's behaviour
- May process sensory information atypically
- May process cognitive information atypically.

What this might look and sound like

Some autistic individuals:

- May identify slight errors or inconsistencies such as spelling mistakes or grammatical errors
- May identify inconsistencies in patterns or sequential tasks, such as timetabling
- May take things literally and misinterpret sarcasm, idioms or metaphors
- May become upset or confused if there is a delay or change in schedule
- May focus on a small detail such as a light that is not working as opposed to engaging in an event
- May have significant knowledge around a certain topic and may want to share this
- May have difficulty waiting or taking turns
- May find it challenging to identify or misinterpret unspoken social expectations, e.g. asking questions, sharing information, waiting
- May find it distressing when someone breaks a rule
- May better understand information when presented visually as opposed to spoken
- May process and respond to sensory information like light, smells or noise, touch, temperature and feelings, to name a few, in a different way.

Autism in Australia

The exact prevalence of autism in Australia and internationally is unknown.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that there were 205,200 Australians on the autism spectrum in 2018, which is around 1% of the population.

Internationally this rate varies significantly, from 1 in every 59 people in the USA, with the average prevalence across Asia, Europe, and North America being between 1-2 percent.

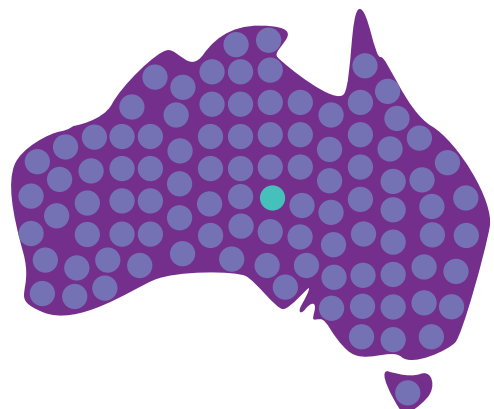
Statistics also show that:

- The number of Australians diagnosed on the autism spectrum increased by 42% between 2012 and 2015
- 3 out of 4 people diagnosed on the autism spectrum are young people, aged between 5 and 24 years
- 1-2 out of 4 Australians diagnosed on the autism spectrum are female.

While the reported prevalence of autism varies around the world, there has been a clear increase in the number of people diagnosed on the autism spectrum in recent years, but this doesn't necessarily suggest that there are more autistic people in the world than there were 10 or 20 years ago.

Evidence suggests that the increase is the result of a number of cultural and clinical factors, including social influences driving greater awareness of autism, increase in population and improved diagnostic procedures and changes in diagnostic criteria allowing more people to access diagnostic services.

“ If you have an event with 100 people, it is very likely that at least 1 person is autistic. ”



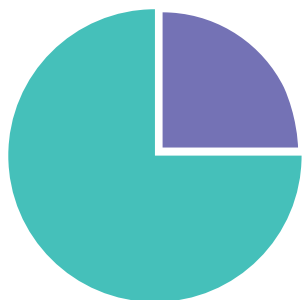
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The facts

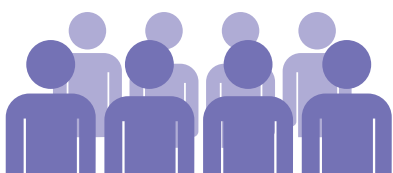
Facts about autism

205,200

estimated Australians are diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum



more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of autistic Australians are young (between the ages of 5 – 24)



12,900,000

estimated parents/carers, siblings and grandparents are close to someone on the autism spectrum

70%

of people on the autism spectrum also have one co-occurring condition, 40% have two or more



estimated Australians are autistic

38%



of autistic Australians participate in the workforce (compared with 83.2% of people with no disability)

29%



of people on the autism spectrum have skills that are considered exceptional

Between 1-2 out of 4

Australians on the autism spectrum are female

SOURCES

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018. Disability, Aging and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings. [Online] Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#:~:text=In%202018%20there%20were%204.4,years%20and%20over%20had%20disability.>

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Facts about autism and common misconceptions

Do autistic people all look and act the same?

Like everyone, autistic individuals have varied strengths, skills, interests and support wants and desires.

How do autistic people communicate?

Everyone communicates, but some autistic people have their own style. This may include monotone, formal language, echolalia, or a different accent to others in their family or surroundings. Other individuals may be non-speaking or only use speech in certain environments. Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) may be used to assist communication, such as pictures, written words, or technology.

Do people on the autism spectrum have a sense of humour?

Absolutely. Many people on the spectrum love humour and many comedians are autistic such as Hannah Gadsby, Jim Jefferies and Josh Thomas.

For some autistic people, understanding sarcastic humour and idioms can be confusing.

Do autistic people display behaviours that concern others?

Some autistic people may on occasion display behaviours that concern others. This happens for many reasons such as to gain attention or connection to others, to communicate, or to avoid a situation or sensory input.

Sometimes being autistic can mean that certain inputs that others do not notice can cause distress. A person may respond to distress by engaging in a behaviour that people may observe as being concerning when simply they are responding to the environment around them the best way they know how.



Accessibility and Inclusion

Accessibility and inclusion

Accessibility refers to something that can be accessed by all, regardless of ability. Inclusion occurs when diverse groups of people (e.g. of different ages, cultural backgrounds, genders, abilities) feel valued and respected, have access to opportunities, and can contribute equally.

Autism, accessibility and inclusion

Autism is a different way of processing, a neurological developmental difference that changes the way a person relates to the environment and people around them.

Put simply, autism changes the way that a person sees, experiences and understands the world.

There are no physical differences between a person with an autism diagnosis and one without, making autism an Invisible or Hidden disability. Autism can be characterised by differences in social communication, social interaction, as well as atypical behaviour, interests and processing of sensory stimuli.

While autism is an invisible disability the barriers around accessibility and inclusion are often as significant as the barriers for people with a physical disability in accessing environments and being included.

The Australian Catholic University completed the summary of results from a consultation survey, to inform a submission into the Federal Senate Select Committee on Autism, prepared by ACU Engagement for the Australian Autism Alliance released in July 2020. As outlined on page one of the report, 3884 participants completed the survey. On page six, the report outlined that 68% of autistic individuals felt socially isolated and 48% felt sometimes unable to leave the house because they are worried about people behaving negatively towards them because of their autism.

Families with a child on the autism spectrum also reported feeling socially isolated (73%) and felt unable to leave the home (60%).

The main reasons families avoided going to public places were because of:

- Crowds/number of people (87%) and
- Concerns around how people would respond to them (58%).

“Everyone has the right to participate in an accessible and inclusive society.”

Autism, accessibility and inclusion fact sheet

The Australian Catholic University's summary of results from a consultation survey, which was used to inform a submission into the Federal Senate Select Committee on Autism, and prepared by ACU Engagement for the Australian Autism Alliance (released in July 2020) shows that the places autistic people avoided going to were:



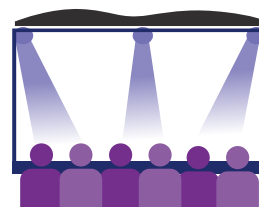
46%

to the shops



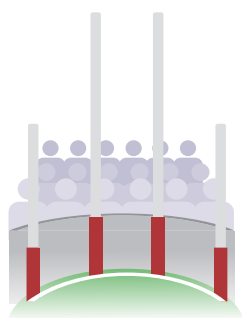
52%

to family gatherings



47%

to concerts



45%

to sporting events



45%

to gyms or pools



58%

to pubs / bars

The reasons given for avoidance of public places were identified as:

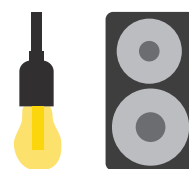
Crowds

and number of people (92%)



Noise & light levels

(82%)



37% of autistic individuals indicated that they don't receive support to access social and recreational activities but would like to.

In 2019, the Australian Autism Research Council, now the Australasian Autism Research Council, conducted community consultation to produce a report - 2019 Autism Research Priorities. One of the top three priority research areas raised by autistic respondents was **'raising awareness and educating the Australian community about autistic people'**



What is the Autism Friendly Charter?

The Autism Friendly Charter is an initiative of Autism SA, designed to build capacity for social inclusion and participation, which has been developed in collaboration with the autistic community.

Why join the Charter?

In Australia it is estimated that 1 in every 100 people are diagnosed as autistic. That means that there are more than 200,000 people on the autism spectrum in Australia - and many more parents, siblings, grandparents, and friends that have a close connection with someone who is autistic.

A survey conducted in 2018 revealed that 92% of respondents would be more likely to visit a business that has committed to being autism friendly over one that has not.

What's in it for me

- Free online autism awareness training for you and your team
- Free listing on the Autism Friendly Charter Directory
- Autism Friendly branding assets to show your commitment

Am I eligible?

You are likely to be eligible if you are:

- A hospitality or retail business
- A service organisation (such as a bank)
- An agency, department or authority
- A community groups or organisation

If you are from a large organisation, individual teams and departments within your organisation can still join the Autism Friendly Charter as a separate team or a group.

How do I get started?

1. Register at: autismfriendlycharter.org.au
2. Nominate people in your workplace, including volunteers, to complete the training
3. Complete the training
4. Each participant who undertakes the training will receive a certificate
5. Create your free business listing on the Autism Friendly Charter online directory
6. Incorporate the autism friendly branding assets into your business

Contact us

If you would like to be part of the Autism Friendly Charter initiative or would like more information, contact Autism SA's Infoline on **1300 288 476** or email afc@autismsa.org.au



autism friendly
an Autism SA initiative



Find an Autism Friendly organisation near you.

Select industry...

Within 10 km



Type in a suburb...



Locate me

Search

We are supporting businesses to be more inclusive

Only 4% of over 205,200* individuals on the autism spectrum believe business and organisations know how to support them.

Watch this short video to see how

The background is a solid purple color with several thick, overlapping, curved lines in a lighter shade of purple. These lines create a sense of movement and depth, resembling stylized orbits or flowing paths.

Autism friendly events

Planning autism friendly events

If you are planning an event, it makes sense to ensure that as many people as possible can access it.

There are two key areas that should be focused on to ensure your event is Autism Friendly:

Planning and communication

Providing information about the event in an accessible way, and well in advance enhances accessibility and inclusion.

Creating autism friendly environments and using autism friendly practices

Consideration to, and the application of, adjustments to support in communication, sensory, social and information processing can significantly support accessibility and inclusion for the Autistic community.

Planning and communication

The planning of events with careful consideration to accessibility and inclusion can make an event enjoyable for all. Planning prior to the event can identify any potential barriers that could negatively impact accessibility and inclusion for participants.

Adjustments, modifications and supports can then be put in place to reduce these barriers:

- **Work with a team and include people with a lived experience**
- **Use resources such as [this one](#)**
- **Consult with a range of people with a lived experience.**

Attending an event which often consists of processing social, communication and sensory information, can, for many people on the spectrum, be difficult. So too can being able to predict what is going to happen, in what order and when. This can often mean that for many people on the spectrum, attending and engaging in events can create significant anxiety.

Planning autism friendly events



Planning

Some specific things that people on the spectrum are likely to want to know, and which should be included in the information about your event, show, or gathering, includes:

.....

How do I purchase a ticket and the ticketing processing?

Do I need to print out my ticket and bring my ticket with me? Who do I give it to?

Seating arrangement

Can I choose my own seat? How do I find my seat? Is there a range of seating options available?

Entry/Exits/Emergency Exits

Where do I go to get in? Where do I exit?

Facilities

Are there toilets, drinks, food? Can I bring my own food and drink?

The expected sensory environment

Crowd numbers, noise level, bright lights, strong smells, movement

Waiting areas and how long to expect to wait for things

Where do you line up for the event? When should I line up and how long before I can sit down?

Venue open times and event starting times

When does it start? Will it start on time? When will it finish?

Schedule of events including break times

What is going to happen and when?

Transportation and parking information

Is there public transport to access the venue? Is there parking? Where is it? What does it cost?

Can I visit the venue prior to the event?

Can I come early so I can get settled? Can I come and see the venue a week before the event?

If I become dysregulated, anxious or need a break

Where can I go? What will it look like? How to get there?

What can I bring with me?

Can I bring supports, food and drink?

If I bring a support person, do they need a ticket?

Do you accept the companion card? Do support staff need their own ticket too?

Do staff understand autism and what support is on hand if I need support?

Who do I get support from? Where can I find support during the event?

Who can I contact if I have any questions and how can I contact them?

Email, text, phone?

Planning autism friendly events

Communication



Communicating information about the event well in advance, in an accessible way, supports accessibility and inclusion. Providing information using clear visual information can enhance information processing.

.....

Communicating information about the event well in advance, in an accessible way, supports accessibility and inclusion.

Providing information using clear visual information can enhance information processing.

Provide information using:

- Checklists
- Dot points
- Maps
- 3D virtual tours
- Step by step guides
- Point-of-view videos
- Plain English

Autism friendly events

The environment in which the event is taking place, should be carefully considered to maximise accessibility for all. If you are planning an event, you should consider various aspects including communication, visual supports as well as the physical and sensory environment.

Physical Environment



Location

To support accessibility for all, venues for events should consider the location in relation to public transportation, parking, amenities etc.

- Ensure venues are accessible by public transport
- Ensure venues that have ample parking.

Seating

Some people may find comfort in having a wall behind them to reduce sensory input or being close to an exit or walkway to allow for a quick exit if they become overwhelmed or need a break.

- Offer a range of seating options e.g. arm chairs, seats, beanbags, bar stools
- Allow people to select and book their own seating, and by knowing the type and location of that seat in relation to walls, walkways and exits
- Ensure that booked, selected seating is honoured.

Crowd flow and spacing

For many autistic people with sensory sensitivities being bumped, or the thought that they may be bumped, can be distressing.

- Design spaces so that people enter one way and flow through a space so that it is less likely that they will bump into each other
- Use clear visual supports to demonstrate the flow of traffic
- Ensure there is adequate spacing between seating, so people do not touch each other.

Retreat

Challenges with processing sensory, communication and social input can build up and become overwhelming for some people. Having a clearly defined, easily accessible place that provides a low sensory environment - where a person knows they can retreat - will give them time and space to re-regulate.

- Have a space that is clearly defined and identifiable, where a person can retreat if they are becoming too overwhelmed
- The space should be a low sensory environment (low noise, light, smell, movement) and easy to locate
- There should be a range of sensory tools and seating options available
- Information on the space, and how to use it, should be provided prior to the event
- Access to green spaces can be beneficial.

Autism friendly events

Communication and support



Know autism

Understanding autism and being able to identify potential barriers to accessibility and inclusion.

- Complete autism awareness training
- Talk and listen to autistic people and people with a lived experience
- Have a dedicated support line staffed by those who understand autism so people can text or call in the lead up to the event to get additional information.

Visual supports

Many autistic people process visual information better than verbal information, particularly when there are competing sensory channels. Information that is presented visually remains constant and can be referred back to.

- Use simple, clear visuals to show what to do, when and where e.g. *Wait here, enter here, go this way, line up here, show will start at this time, break time, return time.*

Welcoming attendants

Often the case with events, there are multiple sensory channels at play and this can cause confusion particularly to someone with who has difficulties with social, communication and sensory processing. Having a person present can provide clear information about what to do, where, when and how, supports accessibility and reduces anxiety.

- Employ a welcoming attendant, that is clearly identifiable, located at the entrance of the venue and understands autism and inclusive practices.

Starting on time and stay to schedule

People on the autism spectrum often prefer that schedules are adhered to as it reduces anxiety.

- Ensure that the event starts on time or provide clear information as to how long the event has been delayed for and why.

Literal language

By using literal language, and avoiding sarcasm, you can increase understanding and reduce misinterpretation of information. This can reduce anxiety and confusion.

- Be cautious of frequently using sarcasm or idioms.

Monitor the audience

The effects of social, communication, and sensory input are cumulative and a person on the spectrum may become dysregulated and need to get away from the input in order to calm down or re-regulate.

- If you notice that a person is becoming distressed, reduce the sensory environment (noise, light, smell, movement), have a break early, or remind the audience of the Retreat (see page 19).

Autism Friendly Events

Sensory Environment



Lighting

If a person is sensitive to lights, either their brightness or inconsistency, it can negatively impact on a person's experience in an environment.

- Use natural lighting where possible
- Use lamps and dimmers
- Avoid bright overhead fluorescent lighting
- Ensure no broken or flickering lights
- Understand that people may wear hats, hoods or sunglasses inside to reduce the impact lighting may have on them
- Pre-warn if using strobe, bright or no lights.

Visual input

Hypersensitivity to visual information can mean that highly patterned furnishings can cause confusion or be distracting.

- Avoid using furnishings such as carpets and curtains that are highly patterned
- Avoid highly visual backgrounds behind speakers or performers
- Avoid using ceiling fans that spin overhead.

Sound

For some the ability to filter out irrelevant noise can be difficult so having a constant, repetitive noise can be very distracting. Additionally, loud sudden noise can cause distress to someone that has noise sensitivity, or the anticipation that a loud sudden noise may occur can be anxiety evoking.

- Check and reduce the environment's inside noise, such as air conditioners, clocks, hand dryers
- Check and reduce the environment's outside noise, such as traffic noise, construction noise
- Use door props or other supports to eliminate sources of loud, sudden noise
- Check microphones to ensure they do not have feedback prior to an event
- Pre-warn if using loud noise and try not to use too frequently
- Consider using a silent applause or pre-warn the audience of an applause.

Smells

Many people on the spectrum can be hypersensitive to smells.

- Consider serving food away from the event
- Select venues that do not have permanent sources of strong smells
- Eliminate any sources of strong smells prior to events
- Pre-warn if using any strong smells and try not to use too frequently.

Atmosphere

Generally, low sensory environments are more accessible. A person may need to have breaks to reduce the sensory build up if they are in high sensory environments for extended periods of time.

- Use low lighting (but bright enough to see) and low sound
- Use calming colours and tones and have a clear, organised space.

Autism friendly events: quick guide

Use this quick guide as a checklist for making your event autism friendly



Physical environment

Location
Seating
Spacing

Crowd flow
Retreat



Communication and support

Know autism
Monitor the audience
Start on time

Literal language
Visual supports
Welcoming attendants



Sensory environment

Lighting
Visual input
Sounds

Smells
Atmosphere

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Supports and resources

Supports and resources

There are a range of supports and resources available if you would like to learn more about how you can support the autism community.

Autism SA

Autism SA is an established, well-governed, profit-for-purpose organisation. As the first organisation of its kind in Australia, Autism SA was founded in 1964 by autistic individuals and their families. The founding members were driven by the desire to ensure that they had access to the best information, education, intervention, and support. They advocated for acceptance and understanding and they encouraged research and leadership in the community. Since 1964, Autism SA has been single-minded in its focus upon supporting the autism and Autistic communities. Autism SA has been at the forefront of service development and advocacy with a strong legacy of being responsible for bringing many firsts to the community in South Australia and nationally.

Today the organisation prides itself on a strong values-driven culture of empowerment of, and support for autistic individuals.

For general information and support, contact the Autism SA Pathways Team on **1300 288 476**, email mypathways@autismsa.org.au or visit autismsa.org.au and use the LiveChat option.

Autism Friendly Charter

The Autism Friendly Charter was developed by Autism SA to support mainstream business and events offered by organisations to be accessible and inclusive. Free online training has been developed to support their workforce in applying inclusive principles.

An eligibility criterion applies for businesses wanting to sign up.

Visit autismfriendlycharter.org.au for more information.

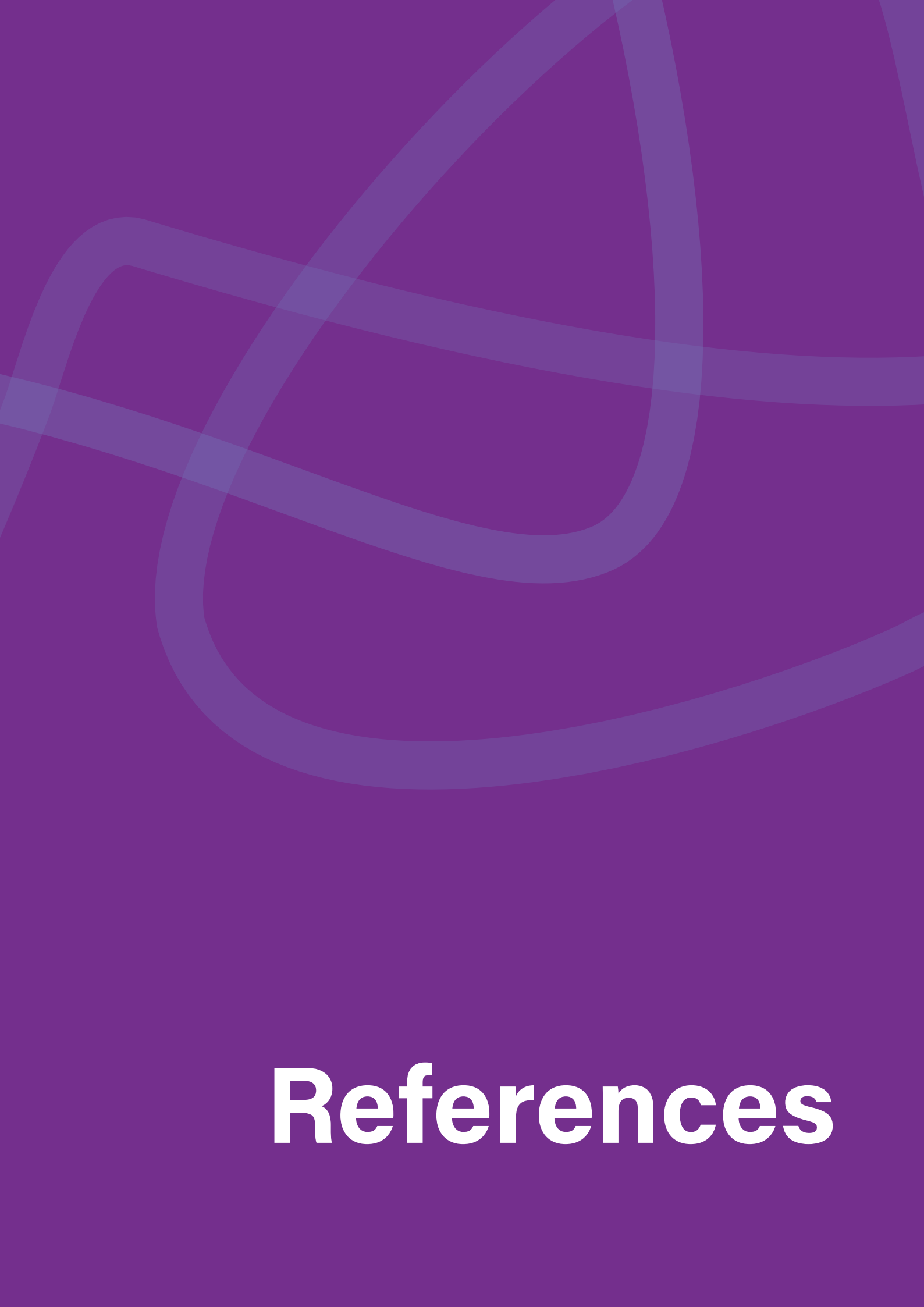
Autism SA's Training and Consultancy

Autism SA's Training and Consultancy Team can support organisations, venues, events and teams by developing a tailored support package to meet their specific needs. Training is carefully designed and implemented to support workplaces, venues, events and teams in building awareness and confidence in applying inclusive and accessible practices in different environments. We are also able to provide consultancy which can be used to support workplaces, venues, events and teams to access and apply inclusive practices.

For more information about Autism SA's Training and Consultancy, please contact **1300 488 476**, or training@autismsa.org.au.



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This guide has been developed by Autism SA and is intended as a general guide only.

