

# INTO FILM

## Welcoming school groups with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

### TOOLKIT FOR CINEMAS

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**CINEMA  
FIRST**



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## INTRODUCTION

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The chances are, if you work in or manage a cinema, you know that seeing a film on a big screen is one of life's adventures. With a bit of support and preparation, you can share that wonderful experience with young people who might otherwise not be able to enjoy it.

This toolkit is for exhibitors who wish to welcome disabled audiences to special schools' screenings. This includes children who may be defined as having special educational needs, additional learning needs or a disability, for example because they are autistic or have a sensory impairment. Slightly different terms are used within the education systems across the UK, but in this document, we use the acronym SEND to mean all the young people referred to by those various terms whether they live in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales.

This toolkit gives you the basics and should help build the knowledge and confidence you need to make this a success. Rest assured that all attending school groups come with knowledgeable accompanying staff and sometimes parents who will be on hand to provide additional support if needed.

If you would like to talk to someone about any questions or concerns you have about school SEND screenings, please contact [cinemabookings@intofilm.org](mailto:cinemabookings@intofilm.org)

## WHAT'S IN THIS TOOLKIT?

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- **Motivations**
- **Audiences**
- **The Access Basics**
- **Impact**
- **Everyday Inclusion – finding the right words**



## WHY SHOULD YOU ORGANISE A SEND SCHOOL SCREENING?

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Developing disabled audiences for your cinema could bring business benefits. It will certainly bring the wonders of cinema to young people who may have had few opportunities to enjoy it.

More than 90 per cent of autistic people would go to the cinema more often if there were more autism-friendly screenings.<sup>1</sup> Then there are their families and friends who may also be missing out on cinema trips.

Since they started, there have been over 400,000 visits to autism-friendly screenings, with frequent requests for more options and more opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

## WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

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SEND is a broad term and can include all sorts of young people facing additional barriers to taking part in ordinary things like going to the cinema. Many cinemas, in common with other public spaces, have improved physical accessibility compared to 20 years ago. You'll know all about level physical access, wheelchair spaces and evacuation plans.

Sometimes, service providers feel less confident about communication and behaviour (both young disabled people's and employees'). In this toolkit, we focus on how cinemas can support young people attending with their school who require specific things beyond physical access.

There is some general information, including about useful ways of thinking about what disability is and who 'disabled people' are. This toolkit should particularly help your venue welcome:

- autistic people
- people with learning disabilities
- people with anxiety and other common mental health conditions.

Some of the people who visit your venue may experience all of these and sometimes mobility challenges as well. Much of what is here can also help build cinemas' confidence for welcoming general audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Dimensions: '[National Autism Friendly Cinema Screenings](#)'.

<sup>2</sup> Culture Hive: '[Autism Friendly Screenings](#)'.

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## ABOUT AUTISM

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Many autistic people thrive in familiar environments with routine and structure. Some may not be comfortable with the idea of change and may have difficulty moving from one environment to another. Autistic people may be particularly sensitive to:

- sights;
- sounds;
- smells; and
- textures.

This can cause distress or discomfort. Some examples of what may create sensory sensitivities:

- bright or flashing lights;
- loud noises;
- pungent smells;
- crowds;
- queues; and
- overly hot or cold environments.

## AUTISM-FRIENDLY CINEMA SCREENINGS

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These are sometimes called relaxed or sensory-friendly screenings. Having specific screenings for autistic young people may be the only opportunity for some to visit a cinema.

An autism-friendly screening adjusts some of the usual features of a screening to reduce stress and sensory input. This includes low lighting and sound, the freedom of viewers to move around, and staff trained in autism awareness.



## ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

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A learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability causing some difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life.

People with a learning disability tend to take longer to learn and may need support to develop new skills, understand complicated information and interact with other people.

Some of these challenges can also be experienced by people who acquire a difference in mental processing, for example as the result of an acquired brain injury or a stroke (which, though rarely, can affect young people).

A reduced intellectual ability is considered distinct from specific learning difficulties, which in a schools' context are also included under the 'SEND' group. The term specific learning difficulties usually refers to diagnoses such as dyslexia and ADHD, which have an impact on cognitive processing independent of someone's intellectual ability.

## WELCOMING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

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If you are hosting people with learning disabilities at your venue, staff can support them by providing a calm and supportive environment. This means listening patiently to young people and thinking about your tone of voice and body language and the words you use.

Clear ideas and words and a warm and friendly approach will ensure that young people can relax, ask for what they need and enjoy themselves.

To be a good communicator with people with a learning disability you need to:

- speak in plain English and state ideas clearly;
- avoid jargon or long words;
- be prepared to use different communication tools and to be creative;
- follow the lead of the person you're communicating with;
- go at the pace of the person you're communicating with; and
- check you and they have both understood.



## ANXIETY CONDITIONS

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Anxiety is what we feel when we are worried, tense or afraid – particularly about things that are about to happen, or which we think could happen in the future.

Anxiety is a natural human response when we feel that we are under threat. It can be experienced through our thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.

Anxiety can be experienced on its own, but it is often also associated with living with other characteristics or conditions. That could be the sensory challenges of living as an autistic person, for example, or living with a long-term physical health condition.

Sometimes anxiety can be acute, taking the form of the rapid heartbeat of a panic attack or another physical manifestation such as flapping arms, shouting or crying.



## HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE EXPERIENCING ANXIETY

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Young people attending SEND school screenings will have teachers, support workers and/or parents with them who know them well and can guide staff through anything that they need to do. However, it's understandable to feel apprehensive about what could happen or to be unsure how to help if you observe someone experiencing acute anxiety.

In general, the principles in this toolkit are aimed at removing disabling barriers, including by providing a calming and predictable environment. This will help everyone to relax and enjoy themselves. You will be doing a huge amount to reduce the likelihood that someone will experience an acute episode of anxiety while at a screening - but if it does happen, and it may, there is no need to panic yourself.

While there are likely to be others available to support a young person, it can help to know what to do to support someone having a panic attack. This includes that you:

- try to stay calm;
- gently let them know that you think they might be having a panic attack and that you are there for them;
- encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply – it can help to do something structured or repetitive that they can focus on, such as counting aloud, or asking them to watch while you gently raise your arm up and down;
- encourage them to stamp their feet on the spot; and
- encourage them to sit somewhere quietly where they can focus on their breath until they feel better.

You should never encourage someone to breathe into a paper bag during a panic attack. This might not be safe.



## THE ACCESS BASICS

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What cinemas can do to welcome SEND young people

- Consider the choice of film for a school screening. For example, films can link to a curriculum area such as personal, social and health education (PSHE).
- Discuss with the school what films are age appropriate and could be relevant to their SEND young people.
- Arrange general disability or specific autism awareness sessions for staff, using a reputable training provider.
- Start the film at the advertised time and make sure trailers are not shown in these screenings.
- Reduce sound levels and keep lights at a very low level so the screen is not in complete darkness.
- Provide a quiet chill-out area with chairs in case audience members need a break from the film.
- Know what's on offer so you can provide accurate information.
- Listen and learn what you can improve next time.

## WHAT STAFF CAN DO

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- Attend a general disability or autism awareness session.
- Understand what access features and facilities are available and be able to direct people to them.
- Be proactive and communicate with young people directly where this is welcomed by them – and with teachers, support workers and/parents if the young person prefers this.
- Smile, speak calmly and without too many hand gestures or body movements.



## THE AUDIENCE MEMBER'S 'JOURNEY'

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### **BEFORE THE SCREENING**

Planning and communication in advance of a screening are key parts of making it a success. Sharing as much information as possible with young people, their teachers, support workers and parents will help to make the event a success. Here are some ideas:



### **VISUAL OR AUDIO-VISUAL 'WALK-THROUGH'**

A simple map of your building, showing entry points, foyer, toilets, auditorium and chill-out/quiet zone could help SEND young people prepare mentally for their visit and to feel confident navigating their way around on the day.

You could highlight areas that could be busy or noisier that they may wish to avoid - for example, if you will have an area to buy refreshments on the day. If possible, offer alternative quieter routes through to seating.

An alternative is to film a short 'walk-through', showing visitors what to expect and describing what you are showing them.



### **SENSORY STORY**

A sensory story takes a potential visitor on a journey through your venue using the senses. It begins with a description of what the venue does and what people will experience on the day. You could take visitors on a journey describing what they might expect to see, hear, smell and taste if they were to visit. This helps people to prepare for a visit, build the confidence to undertake it, and feel calmer when they do.



### **TRAINING**

There are many general disability awareness courses and specific courses, particularly on autism, which could be valuable for staff. There are lots of online resources that can help build an understanding of the everyday challenges young people with SEND face.



## ON THE DAY

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You can begin your direct engagement with SEND young people by having the environment, people, facilities and support ready and waiting:



### **ARRIVAL**

Have a member of staff available to welcome visitors and to provide information and support to young people and to teachers, support workers and parents if needed.



### **QUIET SPACE**

Some young people may arrive feeling anxious and need time to calm down, so allow them or their teacher, support worker or parent to address this before they enter the film screening area.

A clearly signposted chill-out area helps, with low lighting and comfortable seating. Sensory toys and trained staff could be provided in partnership with teachers, support workers or parents during the screening.

Ideally, this would be a dedicated space but if not, designating a place in the foyer and keeping this clear of members of the public provides a clear place to have time away from the screening experience if the environment becomes too much.



### **LIGHTING**

If you can, reduce the overall brightness of the lights within your building - in the foyer, the toilets as well as in the auditorium itself. Consider health and safety and trip hazards. Lower lighting, if technically possible, will help reduce the sudden contrast between "lights down" and "lights up".

If this is not possible in all areas of your buildings, try to allocate an area where lights are continually dimmed, and that is quieter than the rest of the building – your chill-out or quiet space – and ensure everyone knows where this is.

**NOISE**

If you play background music before a screening, lower the volume and use calming sounds. Try to reduce other noise. During the planning of a screening, provide information about what could happen and when so that people are prepared. If you can, provide alternatives to noisy hand dryers in toilet areas. You could switch off hand dryers and use paper towels for the screening.

Some autistic people choose to wear ear defenders in noisy environments. If you offer regular SEND school screenings, you could buy some of these to loan out.

**CROWDS AND QUEUES**

Your usual arrangements probably already aim to minimise crowding and queuing. This can be particularly important for SEND schools' screenings. Covid measures are useful guides to manage these issues.

**TEMPERATURE**

You also probably take steps to ensure a constant moderate temperature and good ventilation during screenings. Again, this is particularly important for SEND screenings.

## LETTING PEOPLE HAVE WHAT THEY NEED

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**FOOD AND SNACKS**

Some young people with SEND may only eat certain food items. They may bring food with them, as any food on sale would not be suitable. Any young person might also have allergies or a physical health condition, such as diabetes, and need to eat at specific times.

It's worth contacting the school in advance, explaining what refreshments will be on offer, and taking any orders in advance to avoid disappointment and to understand allergies and other needs.

**USE OF MOBILE PHONES AND PORTABLE ELECTRONIC DEVICES**

Please allow electronic devices to be used on silent for the screening, as some autistic people may use these to play games which helps them concentrate on the film or calms them down.



## WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE ATTENDING SEND SCHOOL SCREENINGS SAY

*"I felt that this was an extraordinary experience, as normally in cinemas films don't have captions. Since I have hearing loss this helped me a lot."*

(LILIANA)

*"It was good that it was autism friendly so more people could watch it and it was more accessible. All the staff were so nice."*

(EMILIA)

## WHAT CINEMAS SAY

*"We are so happy to partner with Into Film and support their mission to offer access-friendly screenings. As a cinema, we are conscious of the importance to open up the cinema experience to as wide an audience as possible, and especially those who have so often been excluded in the past. To us it is also a way to develop our audiences and therefore it makes moral and financial sense to fulfil this mission."*

(Genesis Cinema)

## WHAT TEACHERS SAY

*"For some, it was their first visit to the cinema and they loved it. For all, it was their first visit as a class community and they loved it. Some children with SEND were very apprehensive and with some careful support, not only attended but loved it!"*

Melanie Fidge, Senior Management Team at Prior Church of England Primary School, Wimbledon (State school)



## EVERYDAY INCLUSION – FINDING THE RIGHT WORDS

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Many of us feel unsure about what words and phrases to use about aspects of life that we know less about. The information here may help staff to find the right approach and the right words.

### THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

An idea called the social model of disability is a useful way of understanding that disability is a set of barriers people with certain characteristics and experiences can come up against, generally falling into three categories:

- environments – examples include inaccessible buildings and communications;
- attitudes – because of stereotyping, prejudice and ‘ableism’ that can lead to discrimination and excluding and hurtful behaviours; and
- systems – examples include inflexible policies, practices and procedures, which can disadvantage and disable people.

### ABLEISM

Ableism can be described as systemic discrimination and everyday excluding behaviours affecting disabled people. Ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people are a problem that requires ‘fixing’ and that experiences of impairment, ill health or neurodivergence are abnormal.

Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies many people as ‘less than’ and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalisations. The reality is that neurodiversity, impairments and health conditions are ordinary and common human experiences – just ones that have not always been considered in planning services or in terms of who society values.

The good news is that that many barriers experienced by disabled people, including SEND young people, can be removed or reduced by:

- careful planning;
- adhering to access standards; and
- a friendly welcome.

Barriers can be removed through:

- specific screenings (such as relaxed performances for autistic people of all ages and school screenings for SEND young people);
- making use of access technologies (such as subtitles and audio-description);
- providing specific facilities and equipment, such as quiet spaces and ear defenders;
- offering human support and an inclusive welcome.



How staff respond to SEND young people can build their confidence and reduce anxiety - which may be the result of everyday experience of disabling barriers.

The British Film Institute (BFI) uses identity-based language and refers to 'disabled people'. This term is intended to include the d/Deaf community, neurodiverse people and SEND young people. However identity is a personal matter and people may prefer to self-describe using different language to the BFI preferred terms.

It makes sense to tune in to the language that people use about themselves as you interact with them, but the following information provides a starting point.

## **NEURODIVERSITY**

People who are neurodiverse or neurodivergent are defined as having variations from more neurotypical cognitive functioning. This can relate to sociability, learning, attention or mood. This includes but is not limited to people with ADHD, autistic people, people with specific learning difficulties (including dyslexia and dyspraxia), and people with learning disabilities. Additionally, some mental health conditions can fall under this description.

## **MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS**

This term is used to describe a range of conditions and/or characteristics, including low mood, depression, anxiety, bipolar and schizophrenia. Some of these are less common. Taken together, mental health conditions affect many people at some point in their lives. Where these things are long-term and they have a substantial impact on people's lives, they may require different forms of treatment and support. There remains a great deal of stigma about some of these conditions and there is much that those engaging with audiences can do to provide a positive welcome and to accommodate specific needs.

## **DEAF PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH HEARING LOSS**

The term 'Deaf' with a capital letter is used to describe people who mostly or entirely use sign language to communicate, including through an interpreter to access audio-visual content or to talk to a hearing person. The capital refers to the idea of a specific cultural community.

People with hearing loss often communicate using lip reading and residual hearing enhanced with a hearing aid).

Some people with these characteristics will consider themselves disabled because of their inability to hear at all or as well as other people. Some will consider themselves disabled because they experience disabling barriers because of a lack of communications access.

Others, especially Deaf people who are sign language users, feel that they are not disabled. For them, British Sign Language is simply their first language, an essential element of their cultural identity, and how they communicate with others in the Deaf community.



## **BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED**

These are the appropriate terms for someone that experiences substantial or complete loss of sight. Alternatives sometimes used are people with visual impairments or sight loss.

## **PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**

This usually refers to someone that experiences an impairment related to mobility but can sometimes include hearing and visual impairments and long-term physical health conditions.

## **VISIBLE AND NON-VISIBLE DISABILITIES**

For some people, their experience of an impairment, long-term health condition or neurodivergence will be immediately visible and obvious to people who interact with them. A visible disability could be a visible difference to someone's face or limbs. It could be clear because they use a wheelchair, cane or hearing aid, or because of how someone speaks or walks.

Non-visible disabilities include many aspects of neurodiversity, mental health conditions and long-term physical health conditions causing symptoms such as pain, fatigue, stiffness, anxiety, distress or depression.

The experience of non-visible disability can have just as substantial an effect on someone as visible disability, both in terms of individual impact and the barriers they face. However, sometimes people don't receive the same level of support or understanding.



## ABOUT INTO FILM

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Into Film is the UK's leading charity for film in education. We support educators to unlock the power of film to deliver transformative learning outcomes for children and young people aged 5-19 in class, extra-curricular settings and in cinemas.

Designed in partnership with educators, our programme features the UK's only school-specific film streaming service (Into Film+), online teaching resources and training, careers information, cinema screenings and a network of extra-curricular film clubs.

The core Into Film programme is free for UK state schools thanks to funding from the National Lottery (through the BFI), Cinema First and Northern Ireland Screen.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

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- [UKCA's guidance for cinemas](#)
- [UKCA's autism friendly screenings guide](#)
- [BFI's Inclusion in the Film Industry](#)
- [Inclusive Cinema's how-to guides](#)
- [Dimensions](#)
- [Dimensions' national autism friendly cinema screenings](#)
- [National Autistic Society \(NAS\)](#)
- [NAS 'Too much information' film](#)
- [Independent Cinema Office's guide](#)
- [Mencap](#)
- [What is a learning disability?](#)
- [Communication: speaking to people with a learning disability](#)
- [Mind](#)