



AUTISM FRIENDLY SPACES

Adapting existing services and places
to cater for people with autism



VO 357

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1. Aim of the project

Autism is a complex developmental disability that affects the lives of approximately 1% of the world population (CDC, 2014). The new estimate represents a **15 percent increase** in prevalence internationally in the last two years: from 1 in 68 children to 1 in 59 children. (CDC, 2018).

In Malta, there are around **7, 700 people** with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). This means that there are around 27, 800 immediate family members who are affected (this includes only parents/primary care givers and siblings if present). Since the number of persons with autism is on the increase, there is an identified need for better adaptation of services, more awareness and better education in the services provided.

The main aim of this project is to **create a change** in community by:

- *adjusting environments* to be more accessible to people with autism
- providing training and *creating awareness* in the community
- supporting the *social aspect* for youth with autism



2. Action Plan

Schools

1. Educators can gain more knowledge and practical tips about autism through online modules created specifically for this scope. Certificates will be given to the educators who finish this successfully.
2. Professional help will also be given to adapt the physical space as much as possible to better cater for students who are on the autism spectrum.

The training will be provided by professionals whose area of expertise is Autism. The training will include input from Psychologists, parents of children/adolescents with autism and people who are on the autistic spectrum.

By the end of the training, the attendees will be able to:

- understand what autism is and how a person with autism experiences things differently
- understand the complexity behind the condition especially the behaviours seen in public spaces
- virtually meet persons with autism who will explain their way of seeing things
- be aware of the challenges met by parents whose children/adolescents are on the spectrum
- find solutions on how to make simple changes to make the classes more accessible to students with autism



Shops and Services

Most of the public spaces can prove to be very struggling for people with autism. For this reason, the Autism Friendly Award helps businesses and service providers to adjust their spaces to make them more accessible to people with autism. The criteria will change per the kind of service provided, however, the main criteria are:

- Appointing two Autism Ambassadors

The Autism Ambassadors will be given training and will be the point of reference for anyone needing guidance with regard to autism.

- Accommodating physical environment following a consultation

A visit by a member from the Autism Friendly Team will take place to check if there are certain arrangements that could be made. The adjustment could take place for a few hours per week (such as a supermarket which promotes certain hours per week as Autism Friendly) or else it would be an all-time change (such as adjusting the lighting in an office). The member from the Autism Friendly Team together with the providers of the service will identify areas for change which might be provoking anxiety in persons within the autism spectrum. This will give an idea of the range of challenges that the site might hold. Changes such as symbols to support written signs, better signage, an option of a quiet area within the site are encouraged. A visit will be made to ensure that the necessary adjustments as applicable were made.

- Commitment to raising awareness

This commitment can be shown by putting up signs saying it is an Autism Friendly Space, providing information if the public asks, using the logo with explanation about the Autism Friendly Award on the website or any other form of dissemination to the public. Moreover, the services providers will be encouraged to take part in World Autism Awareness Week and share experiences of customers who would be willing to give feedback about the changes in their site once they are more accessible. In the first two months, a feedback sheet will be provided to the customers who will be encouraged to fill it in.



Social aspect

There is a need for open spaces where youth with autism can hang out and socialize. This project aims to address this by opening a youth centre. A startup youth centre will be set up and will welcome youth who are on the autism spectrum. The youth will decide the way forward for the youth centre such as resources needed to be bought, activities to be done and outings encouraging independence skills.

After two years of this youth centre, the youth with the help of the youth workers will visit different existing youth centres to help in the adaptation of these youth centres with regards to physical space and resources that are inhibiting youth with autism to attend. As an aftermath, more youth with autism will be encouraged to attend youth centres and to feel included with others.



Foreseen outcomes

1. Each site that achieves the Autism Friendly Award will be helping to make Malta a more autism-friendly place. Given that the place will be made more **accessible** and inclusive therefore there will be an overall better customer service provided.
2. Overall **awareness** which will reach many different communities in Malta through the different outlets such as the educational sector, the social aspect and the services/shops found in Malta and Gozo.
3. Through the **social aspect** of this project, the issue of loneliness in youth who are on the autism spectrum will be addressed.



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