

Dining Out with Autism Awareness

What is an Autism Awareness Night?

Grabbing a bite out to eat may be an activity that many families take for granted. But for many families with autism, the prospect of dining out instills fear. So much so, that many families avoid the situation all together. The judgmental glare from other patrons when your child is having a meltdown; the limited menu items for those on a restricted diet; the over stimulation from the noise and chaos. You can see why it might be easier just to stay home. But staying home can also foster feelings of isolation.

Dining out with Autism Awareness is a community-oriented restaurant offering families impacted by autism the chance to feel more comfortable and enjoy dining out with other families that understand their unique situation in a place that is accommodating to their needs.

I think it would be great to bring an autism awareness night to a restaurant in my town. How do I get started?

You already have. This toolkit will give you and the restaurant you approach with all of the information you will need to coordinate your own autism awareness night.

Am I the right person to organize this event?

If you recognize that families in your town might benefit from an enjoyable and comfortable dining out experience, then you are the right person to get the ball rolling.

Will I be able to promote this event if I don't have any background in marketing?

You sure will! That's why we've provided you with all of the tips and tools you will need to get the word out.

How many restaurants should I plan to approach before I get one to say "yes"?

Maybe we're just lucky, but so far, we haven't encountered a restaurant that has declined a chance to host an autism awareness night. And, the restaurants we've worked with have decided to host an autism friendly atmosphere on a regularly scheduled basis. We think you'll find that most restaurants will embrace the opportunity.

The information in this [Dining Out with Autism Awareness](#) packet is provided by [Pathfinders for Autism](#), and [Shelly McLaughlin](#) with [CQL](#). Shelly is also a parent of a child with autism.



[Pathfinders for Autism](#) is a parent sponsored, Maryland organization that is dedicated to helping individuals with autism and their families through resources, referrals and training. www.pathfindersforautism.org

The [Council on Quality and Leadership \(CQL\)](#) is an international not-for-profit organization dedicated to being the leader for excellence in the definition, measurement and improvement of personal and community quality of life for people with disabilities and people with mental illness. www.c-q-l.org

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What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that affects the functioning of the brain. Individuals with Autism may demonstrate difficulty with:

Communication: both verbal and nonverbal;

Sensory processing: may have sensitivity to sound, light and touch or;

Social interactions: may not make eye contact, pick up on social cues or understand personal space; and

Behavior: may have obsessive tendencies, exhibit outbursts, or wander.

Each individual's collection of symptoms is unique to that person. In addition, the expression of those symptoms can fall on a spectrum from quite mild to severe. For this reason autism is referred to as a "spectrum disorder"; thus, it is called Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There is no known cure for ASD and no singular cause has been identified at this time, but various treatments and therapies are available.

Individuals with ASD generally require services and support their entire lives. However, it is critical to note that with early diagnosis, proper intervention and appropriate services, individuals with ASD can lead productive, happy lives.

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Dining Out with Autism Awareness

Benefits of hosting an Autism Awareness Night

Hosting an Autism Awareness Night is a win-win event for everyone.

- **The chance to market to a new audience.** Many families of autism often skip the decision to eat out. It's not unusual for families to experience judgmental eyes on them when their child has a meltdown in public. Some families have even heard the phrase, "Why can't they be better parents?" from another table. You are reaching a segment of the population that is often overlooked.
 - **Free publicity.** To advertise your event, local media can be contacted, flyers can be distributed around town, websites can advertise and post a link to your restaurant's site, and emails can be sent to large distribution groups. People spread good news.
 - **A packed restaurant on a typically slow night.** We recommend that you set up your autism awareness event on a night when you typically experience low flow. This helps you fill usually empty seats, and can provide less chaos for a group that can easily feel overstimulated.
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Dining Out with Autism Awareness

Tips for promoting your Autism Awareness Night

Samples for a flyer and press release are provided with this toolkit. Please carefully read your press release and flyer. Make sure that all information listed is spelled correctly and is accurate. For example, if your restaurant is not offering gluten-free and casein-free menu items, be sure your press release and flyer do not state that it is.

Ways to get the word out:

- Send your flyer to a local printer and ask if they would be willing to print, free of charge, flyers for you to distribute. Offer to put the phrase “Printing kindly provided by (name of printer, web address)”
- Distribute flyers in pediatrician offices, medical specialist offices, dentist offices, psychology practices, schools, libraries, local grocery stores, dry cleaners, daycare centers, gyms
- Email announcement and flyer to your local Autism Society, Arc, and other autism support groups and ask them to please forward the information to their email distribution lists and post information on their websites, include in their newsletters, etc.
- Send a copy of the press release and flyer to local media outlets, such as local newspapers, local TV stations, and local cable network station. Media editors will edit the information you send them to fit in the space they have available. Do not be surprised if a newspaper edits your content to 4 sentences.
- Email the announcement and flyer to everyone in your email address book; those people will most likely forward the information to people they believe will be interested
- For Maryland residents, Pathfinders can promote your event through our newsletter (depending upon timing and notice); our e-mail alerts; and our website’s “Calendar of Events”. (a good marketing point for the business and families!) If you want to use the Pathfinders for Autism logo, please contact us in advance. Please call Pathfinders at (410) 769-9500.

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Dining Out with Autism Awareness

Hosting an Autism Awareness Night – some tips for the restaurant staff

How to Serve a Guest with Autism:

It is important to note the each person with autism is an individual and should be treated as any other customer would. Individuals with ASD symptoms vary greatly. Many are able to communicate, are extremely intelligent and may not *appear* to be impacted. That being said, there are a few things to keep in mind:

1. Please do not touch! Even a hand shake or assistance with a coat MAY be too much for some individuals with autism.
2. In the event of a meltdown or tantrum, please do not try to assist or intervene. Ask the caregiver how or if you can help, but let the experienced caregiver handle the situation.
3. Their caregivers will assist you with communication if needed.

Accommodations to Consider:

1. Offer Crayons or other sensory stimuli at tables, if it is age appropriate.
2. Turn down music.
3. When seating choices are available, ask the caregiver if they have a preference. A table in a quieter section, a table preferred by the individual, or a booth may be better.
4. Offer a quiet room where parents can calm a child in case of over stimulation – such as coat room, unused private room or area of restaurant.
5. Subtle signage that will inform other customers and promote understanding.
6. Try to ensure proper labeling of food ingredients on the menu for families whose loved ones are on a restricted diet due to allergies and behavioral reactions to certain foods. Many families restrict gluten, milk products (casein), and even corn and soy!
7. We know that you strive to provide efficient service. Individuals with autism *may* have trouble waiting for their food to arrive. Please let your wait staff know that quick, efficient service is a helpful accommodation for these individuals. Ask the caregiver when they would like the check... with dinner, or at the end of the meal as is customary.

* For Maryland residents, Pathfinders for Autism can provide “autism sensitivity training” to restaurant staff. Please call (410) 769-8221 to schedule training for your event.

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Gluten-free and Casein-free menu items and tips

Some people with autism experience problems with their digestive systems where they are not able to break down the complex protein chains found in wheat (gluten) and/or dairy (casein) products.

A gluten-free, casein-free diet means NO milk products, wheat, barley, oats, spelt or rye flours.

Below are several links to websites offering ingredients to avoid and recipes for your chef to review. Also, people who follow the GFCF diets strictly, will have concerns about cross contamination - such as frying French fries in the same oil used to fry onion rings. Please note that not all families with ASD follow gluten and casein-free diets, so a few options are all you need. And, since your chef is making the effort, you may consider posting your menu options on some of the autism, celiac disease and GF/CF Blogs to generate more business.

This link takes you to a website with gluten (wheat) and casein (milk) ingredients to avoid.

<http://gfcfdiet.com/unacceptable.htm>

Link to sites with recipes

Note that this site is gluten-free and offers some casein-free options too. Make sure you check the recipes to be sure it is coded CF for casein free.

<http://www.glutenfreecookingschool.com/archives/category/gluten-free-casein-free-recipes/>

Recipes and other helps for preparing gluten-free, casein-free meals.

<http://www.gfutah.org/gfcfrecipes/>

BLOG - Featuring recipes from parents and some well known chefs/cookbook authors- such as Molly Katzen of Moosewoods.

<http://gfcfmommy.blogspot.com/2007/09/autumn-menu-ideas-2.html>

Link to restaurant menu offering gluten and casein-free choices.

<http://www.ribcompany.com/gfcfmenu.html>

We understand the complexities associated with preparing these special diet menu items. We would ask the restaurant owner to please consider offering gluten-free and casein-free

menu items for their guests who follow this diet. However, an alternative would be to please allow families to bring their own food for the person with autism, understanding that the rest of the family would be ordering off the menu.



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Dining Out with Autism Awareness At The Main Street Tower

By Shelly McLaughlin

Dining out is supposed to be a relaxing and enjoyable experience; the meal you would never take the time to create yourself and a chance to splurge on that tasty dessert. But if you have a child with autism, your restaurant experience may be more like mine, filled with tantrums and stares. More than once I've chased my son across a restaurant and into the kitchen while he searched for his drink after what he perceived to be an intolerable wait.

So when Pathfinders for Autism announced they were organizing an Autism Awareness Night at a restaurant an hour away from my house, the little voice inside my head screamed, "we need this *here!*" And so *here* became The Main Street Tower Restaurant in my town of Bel Air, Maryland.

When I first approached Mario Buontempo, The Tower's owner, he immediately embraced the idea. Pathfinders helped me prepare for the meeting, providing me with success stories from other similar events, and the marketing benefits to the restaurant. But it turned out I really didn't even need any of that. Mario jumped right to the details; What date? How should the tables be set up? Do we need a special menu? Do the wait staff need to act differently? What do the parents need?

"It was so nice to go to a restaurant and not have to worry about my son acting out or having a meltdown," sighed Theresa Sachs. "I didn't have the stress and stares from others wondering what was wrong with my child. Socially, it was good to meet families encountering the same problems and share some ideas. I can't wait for the next night out!"

"For me, it was such a wonderful experience – I've been waiting for this for a long time," stated Pam Cuneo. "So as soon as I heard about the event, I made my reservation. I'm a single parent, and even though I don't live in the Bel Air area, the travel was worth it. And I let out a loud YES! when I found out they are going to do it again. It's great to give our children that whole community experience."

What made the parents feel so welcome? Great hospitality and a willingness to be flexible. Mario offered home-made gluten-free and casein-free menu items, reduced background noise, and a wait staff willing to make any accommodation requested. "I enjoyed every moment," said John Schilling, head server. "The best feeling was being asked by families if we would do this every month."

"Every restaurant should do this," encourages Mario. "It was a special treat for us to meet so many families that typically avoid restaurants. I put my soul in their shoes and did

everything I could to make them feel comfortable. And now we're starting to see some of those families on other nights as well."

This night wasn't just for families of autism. Other community members came and increased their understanding of the impact autism has on so many families today. And they probably left with a very different perspective of what they previously viewed as simply bad behavior.

So this time when my son ran into the kitchen, instead of glares, I got knowing nods.



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Main Street Tower Restaurant

a n n o u n c e s

Autism Awareness Night

Tuesday, June 24, 2008



If your family is impacted by autism, eating out just got a little easier.

The **Main Street Tower Restaurant** in Bel Air, will host a night of dining out with other families that understand your unique situation in a setting that accommodates your family's needs.

The Main Street Tower Restaurant will provide:

- gluten and casein-free menu items
- reduced background music
- a quiet area in case of need
- a restaurant staff trained in autism sensitivity

The event is hosted by **Pathfinders for Autism and the Main Street Tower Restaurant in Bel Air, Maryland.**

Pathfinders for Autism is a parent sponsored, state-wide organization that is dedicated to helping individuals with autism and their families through resources, referrals and training. They offer an on-line, searchable database of service providers and products and a caring and knowledgeable staff to personally answer telephone and e-mail inquiries.



The event is scheduled for **Tuesday, April 29, 2008**

with seating from **4:00 to 9:00 p.m.**

Families interested in attending are encouraged to call ahead
at **410.838.8007** and mention Pathfinders.

**For Immediate Release
April 1, 2008**

**CONTACT: Rebecca Rienzi, Pathfinders for Autism, 410-769-8221
Shelly McLaughlin, event catalyst and parent, 443-871-8857
Mario Buontempo, Main Street Tower Restaurant, 410-838-8007**

The Main Street Tower Restaurant in Bel Air, MD Announces Autism Awareness Night

April 1, 2008 – Bel Air, MD - Eating out just got a little easier for many Harford County families living with autism. The Main Street Tower Restaurant is hosting an Autism Night on Tuesday, April 29, 2008 in the hopes that families impacted by autism will feel more comfortable and enjoy dining out with other families that understand their unique situation in a place that is accommodating to their needs.

Bel Air resident, Shelly McLaughlin, approached the local eatery after learning of a similar event hosted by Pathfinders for Autism and the Rockfish Restaurant in Annapolis. Pathfinders for Autism is a parent sponsored, state-wide organization that is dedicated to helping individuals with autism and their families through resources, referrals and training. They offer an on-line, searchable database of service providers and products and a caring and knowledgeable staff to personally answer telephone and e-mail inquiries.

"I learned about the Annapolis event and thought it was a great idea. I wanted the same opportunity for families in my community," says Shelly McLaughlin, the parent volunteer who initiated the event. "I met with Mario Buontempo, the restaurant's co-owner, who was incredibly enthusiastic about the idea and willing to do whatever he could to accommodate families".

"Events like this mean a lot to families with a loved one with autism," says Dawn Koplos, Executive Director of Pathfinders for Autism. "Sometimes the seemingly simplest of tasks can be extremely challenging for our families. They may opt not to try new places for fear of their

child's reaction to an unknown environment or the response from other patrons. We are grateful to the Main Street Tower for their consideration.”

The Main Street Tower Restaurant is offering gluten and casein-free menu items (many individuals with autism follow restricted diets), reduced background music (to accommodate sensory integration issues) and a quiet area in case of need. Pathfinders for Autism will train restaurant staff in autism sensitivity resulting in a better experience for all.

The event is scheduled for Tuesday, April 29 with seating from 4:00 to 9:00 PM. Families interested in attending are encouraged to call ahead at 410-838-8007 and mention Pathfinders.

Pathfinders for Autism was founded in 2000 by B.J. Surhoff, Baltimore Oriole Hall of Famer and his wife Polly Winde Surhoff and other parents of children with autism to create a centralized resource for other families living with autism. In 2003, Pathfinders launched the Pathfinders for Autism Resource Center offering an on-line, searchable database of service providers and products and a staff to personally answer telephone and e-mail inquiries. In 2007, Pathfinders launched the Pathfinders for Autism Education & Training Initiative – offering specialized training to professionals who serve individuals with autism, including vocational rehabilitation staff at Maryland State Department of Education’s Division of Rehabilitation Services. In 2008, Pathfinders will work in partnership with the Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics to train pediatricians in the use of standardized tools to screen for developmental delays (including autism spectrum disorders) at appropriate age intervals.

*Autism now affects 1 in every 150 children in the United States and Maryland’s State Department of Education Special Education Census Data reports **6.342** individuals with autism in the public school system (age 3 through 21) at the end of 2007 – in 1993, this figure was **260**.*

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