

Autism Friendly Business Initiative

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors. Autism is referred to as a spectrum disorder due to the range of severity within the diagnostic boundaries.

The incidence of autism has reached epidemic proportions in the past decade. The startling statistics are:

- **Autism is the fastest-growing serious developmental disability.** 1 in 68 children in the U.S. 1 in 42 boys are diagnosed with autism. More than 3.5 million Americans live with autism spectrum disorder;
- **Autism is one of the fastest-growing serious developmental disabilities in the U.S.** More children will be diagnosed with autism this year than: childhood cancer, AIDS, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, Down syndrome, and diabetes combined;
- **Autism costs our nation over \$126 billion per year,** more than triple the cost from 5 years ago. The cost of caring for an individual with autism may exceed \$2 million over a lifetime, on top of the average \$250,000 to raise a child today, with most of the expense occurring in adulthood. Thankfully, the cost of lifelong care can be reduced by 2/3 with early diagnosis and intervention.

However, as a result of the sheer number of diagnosis and the “spectrum” of disorders, many families choose to isolate themselves from the community to avoid negative reactions from others, which can lead to many issues, including depression. The diagnosis not only affects families, but also negatively impacts our community. Did you know that only 19% of people with disabilities participated in the labor force in 2014? This lack of participation decreases the labor market, strains taxpayers, and restricts people with unique abilities from living a more complete life.

The Autism Friendly Business Initiative **focuses** on encouraging and training local businesses in the area of Autism Awareness, Acceptance, and Understanding. Our vision is to see our community become not only welcoming to individuals with autism spectrum disorder, but where those individuals can become valued, participating members. The Autism Friendly Business Initiative is a unique collaboration of parents, professionals and community members who provide quality support and training that is accessible to all businesses to create a platform for autism awareness.

The **mission** of this initiative is to help our community adapt to the coming changes of the members in our community through education and understanding. We believe that when more people become aware, there will be growth. Thus, we have developed a 3-level system to ease businesses into understanding and accepting and potentially hiring our citizens with autism spectrum disorder.

Consider the yellow “safe place” sign. It’s a simple sign that communicates a message of safety to young people. The Autism Friendly Business Initiative or AFBI is similar. The logo communicates that a particular business is the “place” for those with autism to find understanding through education and a ‘judgment free’ zone for them and their families. The symbol will be available in many forms including a window cling placed on the inside of a certified business and digitally for social media and on local community websites. Families, or individuals with ASD, would enter the business and expect to be received and treated as any other member of our community.

There are three levels (each level requires certification at the previous level):

Level 1: *The business, its managers and employees have made a public commitment to train its staff in autism awareness. They will view a short film on autism spectrum disorder and answer 3 questions regarding the film, showing that they watched it and are at this level, aware of recognizing the signs that someone may have autism and how they should respond*

Level 2: *The business has made small modifications/adjustments to their premises to improve access to those with autism in order to better them*

Level 3: *The business has committed to reviewing hiring strategies and promoting a supportive work environment to individuals with ASD.*

FEAT of Louisville and the Autism Friendly Community working group focuses on training and supporting businesses to breakdown education and perceptual barriers to welcome and support customers with autism and their families. We provide the opportunity to businesses of any size to receive autism awareness certification and ongoing support. Our approach is simple and straightforward.

Join the growing number of businesses in Kentuckiana who want to set themselves apart from others by investing in compassionate and exceptional customer service and enriching the economy with a specialized workforce.

The Benefits:

SALES AND REVENUE

- Attract new customers
- Rise in Profit
- Increased Customer Satisfaction
- Enhance your brand and help new customers find you

MARKETING AND PR

- Promotion via website, social media, newsletters and media outreach to local news outlets on your behalf through FEAT of Louisville
- Provide rich customer experience
- Improved reputation
- Generation of referrals and increased business

CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS

- Ability to welcome customers with special needs and their families without fear
- Offering exceptional customer service experiences creates a positive effect on employees
- Skills to provide compassionate customer service and provide a positive experience
- Knowledge and confidence to accommodate ALL customers

The Process:

INITIAL CONTACT

1. Contact an Autism Friendly Business Initiative
2. Complete assessment of current business structure

EMPLOYEE TRAINING

1. The training begins with a short video segment that will provide the necessary tools for your employees to begin offering compassionate customer service to families with disabilities. Together, a time will be scheduled when your employees may view the training material
2. Add AFBI training material to your “new employee” training orientation to ensure that business is in compliance with minimum requirements of number of staff trained

MARKETING

1. Once certified at Level 1, your business will become visible to the autism community and our extensive network of families, first through the FEAT of Louisville website and then through various avenues of print and social media

ONGOING SUPPORT

1. For continued support you may contact FEAT of Louisville for additional questions and resources
2. We can assist you as your company moves through the remaining levels of the Autism Friendly Business Initiative which will continue to propel your company within our community

Let's Begin:

To receive the ranking of becoming an Autism Friendly Business, the following criteria must be met:

___ Business will agree that all upper level management submits to the same training as employees. This enables management to create compassionate and exceptional customer service from the top down

___ 80% of employees who personally deal with customers must be trained

Training for level 1 will include access to a 10-minute online video with a required, brief, assessment to ensure that the video was viewed and understood

___ Certified business will keep available "feedback questionnaire cards", provided by the Autism Friendly Business Initiative, for all customers to complete as requested

___ For business with multiple locations, 80% of employees from each location must be trained via the online videos in order for each location to receive certification

Annual Re-certification

___ The Autism Friendly Business Initiative requires that re-certification be completed on an annual basis (this pertains to level 1 particularly) and on a date specified by your AFBI Representative. Because we believe that empowerment comes through knowledge, we want to keep you abreast of new material or modifications that will enable even your newest employees to provide compassionate customer service**.

***Because level 1 is online training, as new employees join your business, you can request access to the online training as part of your own new employee training.*

Training for the business can begin as soon as an agreed upon date is set and all paperwork is signed.

Business Name or DBA

Business Address

Business Representative

Date

AFBI Representative

Date

The relationship will be terminated if and when any of the following conditions occur:

- *Training falls below 80% or*
- *After 3 warnings* (at level 1)*

**If Business receives 3 or more complaints from the customer feedback cards, a meeting with an AFBI Representative will be requested to discuss a reasonable remediation plan. If the plan is not successfully met within 60 days, certification may be revoked.*