

## Making changes at the Eden Project

The Eden Project visitor destination in the South West of England is taking its programme of events to the next level by making them accessible for those with special needs, sensory difficulties and autism spectrum condition.



Photo credit: Hufton + Crow

The team at Eden believes that everyone should have equal access to visitor destinations, regardless of their ability. The progress they have made so far can already be seen in the facilities on site, with special Changing Places toilets installed in 2011, a fleet of electric wheelchairs available to all visitors and easy access in and out of their two giant greenhouses known as Biomes, housing the world's largest rainforest in captivity and one with a Mediterranean climate.

The Eden Live Team, responsible for planning and building the programme on site, has realised that the large crowds, noise and special effects associated with some of these events can prove daunting. So, collaborating with Sensory Trust, a national charity working to create equal and meaningful access to outdoor spaces for all, they decided to put some time aside and open the site exclusively for those that need a slower pace and a calmer environment – in other words, relaxed sessions.

The work began last year, when Eden started offering relaxed sessions for their Father Christmas experience. Five shows were held specifically for children with autism, sensory processing and learning disabilities. Performers and staff were

trained in disability awareness, as well as basic Makaton, and the show was adapted to suit the audience. Children had the opportunity to enjoy an interactive, multi-sensory performance, as well as take part in a trail throughout the site that was supported with Widgit symbols.

Feedback from visitors of these sessions was really positive, with one mum commenting: “It was really lovely and so well thought through. Santa and all his Elves did fantastic signing and made such a fuss of my son who is in a wheelchair and can't talk. It was really special.”



Dinosaur Uprising, the summer event at the Eden Project, has been developed even further to ensure that all children are able to come along and enjoy the event. On specific days throughout the summer, the site will open early to a capped number of visitors, to allow for a quieter, more intimate experience of Dinosaur Uprising – including a chance to meet the dinosaurs and learn about life on earth before the time of humans.



As well as offering a quieter experience, lighting levels in the exhibit are raised, and more staff members – all trained in disability awareness as well as basic Makaton – are on hand to assist. The dinosaur puppets that feature in the main show make an appearance but only those specially selected for their gentleness, and the puppeteers interact with the visitors in a multi-sensory way. Finally, the majority of the signage has Widgit symbols supporting the wording, and the adventure journal offered to all young explorers features a range of activities suitable for all abilities.



The Eden Project will always strive to provide inclusive events, and is constantly improving its offering for those with special needs. Working with Sensory Trust, the Eden Live Team is creating a blueprint for running relaxed sessions for all their seasonal events – as well as continuing to listen to feedback from visitors.

For more information, and to learn how to book onto a Dinosaur Uprising relaxed session, visit: <http://www.edenproject.com/visit/whats-on/dinosaurs>.