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Space Center Houston Now a Certified Autism Center

HOUSTON, June 25, 2018 – [Space Center Houston](#) strives to ensure that the nonprofit is an accessible and accepting destination. That essential work has been recognized by the [International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards](#).

The science and space exploration learning center is the first of its kind to be designated as a Certified Autism Center by the IBCCES.

“Science, technology, engineering and mathematics education is for everyone,” said William T. Harris, the center’s president and CEO. “This certification highlights our dedication to be inclusive and to inspire the next generation of problem solvers.”

The certification process involves rigorous training for staff, inspections and improvements that enable Space Center Houston to better welcome and accommodate guests with autism spectrum disorder and other sensory and cognitive challenges.

Being a certified autism center also includes a commitment to maintain that training and provide the best guest experience possible.

“This is who we are,” said Harris. “We are a values-based organization and we’ve incorporated accessibility and inclusion into the very fabric of Space Center Houston as part of our way forward.”

The center goes beyond simply meeting Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and a certified autism center designation is the latest example.

In 2016, Space Center Houston hired Stephanie McMahon, a special education certified teacher and mother to an autistic child, as a senior lead instructor in its Education Department.

The center named McMahon as their accessibility and inclusion coordinator in 2017. She expanded her training to include the customer service staff in the center who interact with guests on a daily basis.

“Space Center Houston was always welcoming to guests with special needs,” McMahon said. “I was able to help support that commitment by leading informal training for my instructor colleagues on working with guests with disabilities, including autism.”

Her workshops shared techniques for special circumstances, such as how to respond to a child who elopes, or runs when overwhelmed.

“We train our team about awareness and sensitivity, best practices for instruction and interactions.”

McMahon also leads the Accessibility and Inclusion working group, composed of representatives from across departments at Space Center Houston.

“The working group is our forum to brainstorm and create plans to ensure that we are meeting all our guests’ needs,” said McMahon. “From facilities to our website, everyone comes together to support our accessibility and inclusion initiatives.”

The center offers [“Sensory Friendly Evenings,”](#) with reduced lights, sounds and crowds as well as [Space Center University for the visually impaired](#) and other events designed to provide quality learning experiences for guests with special needs.



McMahon also noted the center’s development of the “Stellar Explorer Guide,” that individuals and school groups can use to prepare guests with autism for an upcoming visit and “Vocabulary Cards” for non- or low-verbal guests that can help with transitions and timelines.

“Beyond special events, we take great pride in welcoming guests with special needs every day,” McMahon said. “We offer sensory friendly backpacks, which have sound-cancelling headphones, sunglasses, a fun space book and other sensory items.”

“This is an exciting time at Space Center Houston. We have a proud history of welcoming anyone interested in science and space exploration and we are working hard every day to improve on that legacy.”

Learn more about Space Center Houston Accessibility and Inclusion initiatives [here](#). For more information about the IBCCES, visit their website [here](#).

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The Manned Space Flight Education Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit science and space exploration learning center with extensive educational programs. Space Center Houston is the cornerstone of its mission to inspire all generations through the wonders of space exploration. The center draws 1 million visitors annually, was named “Best Museum in Texas” by USA Today and generates a \$73 million annual economic impact in the greater Houston area. Space Center Houston is a Smithsonian Affiliate and the Official Visitor Center of NASA Johnson Space Center. More than 250,000 teachers and students from around the world visit the center annually to experience our educational space museum with more than 400 things to see and do. For more information, go to www.spacecenter.org.

SOURCE: Manned Space Flight Education Foundation