

Kiwi retailer launches 'quiet hour' for autistic shoppers

October 31 2019

New Zealand's largest supermarket chain has introduced a "quiet hour" to help make shopping less overwhelming for people with autism and other sensory processing disorders.

Every Wednesday afternoon, Countdown supermarkets dim the lights, silence background music, restrict PA announcements to emergencies only and temporarily halt shelf stocking.

Even the ding of checkout tills is dialled down to a minimum, and strip lighting in freezer aisles is switched off to stop the low-level neon hum, Countdown manager Kirsten Dinnan said.

"It creates an environment a bit like a library," she told AFP. "We find that people tend to self-regulate and shush themselves."

The idea for quiet hour emerged last year when Dinnan was looking for ways to help the community in the rural North Island town of Marton, where she was managing the local [supermarket](#) at the time.

A member of her staff, Theo Hogg, suggested the change after experiencing difficulty shopping with his severely autistic son Hunter.

"A lot of us take ducking in and out of the supermarket for granted, but for those with sensory processing disorders it can be overwhelming because there are so many triggers," she said.

"It can cause a meltdown of epic proportions. Ten or 15 years ago, we'd have said that's a naughty child, but there's more understanding now and we want to create a judgement-free zone."

Dinnan said the response to a trial in several stores had been "overwhelmingly positive", resulting in the initiative being introduced nationwide this month in Countdown's 180 supermarkets.

"It highlights how some small changes can create a more inclusive environment that will impact people significantly," Autism New Zealand chief executive Dane Dougan said.

Supermarkets in Australia and Britain have introduced similar measures, although it is unclear where the concept originated.

Dinnan said the trial had not only benefitted the autistic community but other shoppers such as families with young children, the elderly and people who were recovering from strokes or [head injuries](#).

"It's great if we can reduce the stress in people's lives and make an everyday experience a bit easier for them," she said.

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