



# Community for All

This toolkit outlines important steps and evidence-based practices to help organizations continue to create a welcoming culture and community for all. It includes resources and techniques focused on supporting engagement and opportunities for individuals with varied cognitive and behavioral abilities to contribute to an organization's mission. This is intended for any key organization member working to make changes at the organizational level, but can be utilized for specific programs or for an individual focus.



## What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the idea that neurological differences are natural and should be celebrated as an accepted part of human variation, just like variations in size, shape, and personality. Every person is unique and valuable. It focuses on brain differences being recognized and embraced rather than focusing on treating and curing deficits or symptoms. This neurodiversity movement helps individuals with neurological variations be seen in terms of their strengths as well as their needs. This concept helps reduce stigma around differences in learning and thinking and allows individuals to be active in their communities.

When applying neurodiversity principles to a variety of disabilities, it is important to consider visible versus invisible disabilities. Visible disabilities often are seen or recognized easily, whereas invisible disabilities are not immediately noticeable or obvious. Disabilities can vary — sometimes they are visible, sometimes they are invisible, and sometimes they are both.

A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the interactive online toolkit, which can be accessed by registering for a free account at [triad.vkclearning.org](http://triad.vkclearning.org) and accessing the information in the [Informational Toolkits](#) folder.

## What does it mean to belong?

Belonging is the opportunity to fully participate and contribute in a group or organization. It recognizes that every person has the right to be respected and appreciated as a valuable member of society.

Striving to be a community program where everyone belongs means making a dedicated space for everyone to contribute. This effort includes creating opportunities and implementing ongoing supports to help individuals participate in and accomplish things that are important to them. The ways in which people contribute does not look the same for everyone and can vary based on the person's interests, goals, and abilities, but should be equally valued.

## Why is this Important?

Learning from different perspectives and experiences creates greater opportunities for meaningful participation, and teaches respect for yourself and others. It recognizes and embraces differences and teaches us how to be sensitive to others' needs. A greater sense of belonging not only benefits individuals with disabilities, but also the community as a whole.

This work is never done—it's an ever-evolving goal. It takes time and is a continuous process to meet community needs.

## The Culture of Your Organization

Changing the culture of your organization is easier said than done; however, this is an important step to making sustainable change. Incorporating key organization members on the front end, particularly starting with top decision makers and working your way through the organization, helps your organization be better equipped to make lasting and significant change. When taking steps to promote belonging, it is often better to start with small, achievable steps:

1. Get to know your community.
2. Create opportunities to encourage buy-in from employees and volunteers.
3. Incorporate these changes into your mission statement or organizational goal.
4. Start small and prioritize with targeted short-term goals.
5. Encourage patron participation.
6. Encourage patron participation.

## Differentiating Participating and Contributing

Participating	Contributing
Participating is ensuring everyone can access opportunities and programming.	The opportunity for all people to contribute is the goal for community engagement.
Typically, increasing opportunities for participating is the first step. It does not stop here.	All people feel a sense of belonging to your organization when opportunities related to their interests and contributions using their strengths are available and valued.
<i>Example: Having evidence-based supports and strategies to increase the likelihood one could be independent in accessing your organization.</i>	<i>Example: Including evidence-based strategies throughout all programming as well as employing neurodivergent individuals.</i>



Educating key organization members about neurodiversity through organizational goals, policies, and trainings creates clear expectations and reduces the stress of not knowing what to do in situations.

Sometimes policies and procedures need to change before attitudes change, but these simple modifications can create a ripple effect that leads to substantial progress throughout the entire organization.

## Creating Partnerships

By using others' expertise to inform organizational practices, programs can ensure their strategies are feasible and beneficial to their patrons. They also get a better understanding of what supports are already available in their community and help create a dedicated infrastructure to increase belonging. Consider including a representative from each category below to inform organizational changes:

- Disability organizations provide information about evidence-based resources and an outlet to distribute information to various disability communities
- Self-advocates/family members highlight potential areas of need and provide personal feedback
- Other organizations with similar goals can share resources and collaborate to build initiatives in their community



Learn more about neurodiversity and creating a culture of inclusivity in the interactive online toolkit referred to on page 1.

## Proactive Supports

Proactive supports are strategies and resources that can help prepare individuals before a visit and create environments that set the individual up for success. These supports include resources your organization already has, such as a website, brochures, signs, and maps, as well as other resources that can be adapted to help patrons during their visits. These proactive strategies:

- Clarify expectations
- Establish predictability
- Reduce distractions

Everyone can benefit from being proactive, but this approach is specifically important and relevant for children and adults with autism and neurodevelopmental disabilities. This is because they play into common strengths while supporting the developmental differences associated with autism, such as difficulty recognizing social cues, challenges with flexibility, intense interests in certain things, and sensory differences that can be distracting for some individuals.

## Modifying Your Organization's Supports

When making changes to your organization to promote true belonging, it can be helpful to think about situations or areas where you are constantly repeating expectations or being asked the same questions over and over. Adding supports may help clarify expectations in a fast and easy way. Consider what information would be most helpful for your patrons (before and during visits), how this information will be available (on website, through social media or email, and on-site), and whether the information is easily accessible and understandable for patrons (written in plain language, pictures included for guidance, and located for everyone to see).

## Changing the Space

Visually and concretely clarifying and defining boundaries help explain rules in a clear manner and provide feedback on behavior expectations. Remember some unspoken and assumed rules may not be clear to everyone. Some people may have difficulty understanding personal space, may prefer standing or moving during performances, or may get too close to others or the exhibit. Also, a lack of structure or boundaries may be overwhelming or confusing to some individuals. If a person is unsure where to go or which areas of off-limits, they may get lost, hurt, or miss out on seeing all that is available at your organization. By providing structure, you increase predictability and decrease anxiety and stress for everyone.

## Visit Considerations

Taking time to structure and organize patrons' and consumers' visits can increase predictability and help organizations plan for possible unexpected situations. Key organization members can take steps to promote smooth and entertaining experiences for all. Key organization members can create simple tip sheets with information that can help patrons plan for their visits. Tip sheets can include information such as:

- Ticketing information
- Information regarding times (start/end time, special activities, etc.)

- Busiest times of the week
- Wait times between activities
- High traffic routes vs. low traffic routes
- Restrooms and quiet spaces
- Options for shortening activities
- Current policies on early or late arrivals
- Current policies on refunds and re-entry during unanticipated challenges
- Who is available to help on site and where they are located

## Considering Sensory Needs

Sensory needs vary across individuals. For some, they may be hypersensitive to sensory input or are easily overstimulated. For instance, a person who is oversensitive to sensory input may have difficulty coping with the loud noise of a fire alarm, tolerate bright lights, have difficulty wearing certain fabrics, or find another person's touch extremely uncomfortable. Other people are undersensitive to sensory input and seek out more sensory stimulation. For instance, a person with hyposensitivities may not understand personal space, have a desire or need to touch or bump into things, have a high tolerance for pain, and love fast, spinning, or intense movements. Not every person with sensory needs falls into one category; some individuals have a variety of both hypersensitivities and hyposensitivities to sensory input.



## Quiet Areas

Organizations can address sensory needs across all programming by setting up a quiet space or break area for individuals who need it. Having these quiet areas available during visits or events tells patrons that your organization is committed to supporting their diverse needs. If a designated quiet room is not realistic, being able to communicate where to find quieter areas at your organization can be helpful. Many individuals and families have reported that even if they did not need it during their visit, just knowing that quiet spaces are available is very comforting to them.

## Creating Social Narratives

Social narratives are brief descriptions of a situation or experience that clarify context, social rules, and expectations. These are used to describe social situations specific to the person while promoting self-awareness, self-calming, and self-control. They are social learning tools that help individuals understand situations that may be new, overwhelming, scary, or confusing.

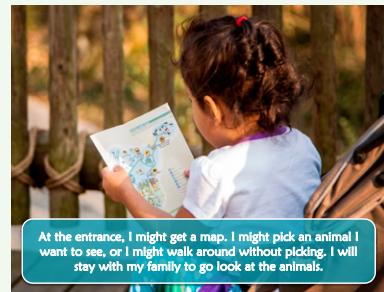
The social narratives described below are adapted from Social Stories™ by Carol Gray. For more information on Social Stories™, click on the following link: [carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/](http://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/)



See examples and download a handout on creating social narratives in the interactive online toolkit referred to on page 1.



### Nashville Zoo Social Narrative



## Visual Schedules

Many people use schedules or to-do lists in their everyday routine to organize their day and keep track of their progress. Visual schedules function in the same way, but provide additional support depending on the individual's age and functioning. Visual schedules are tools that break down a task into multiple steps and can be helpful in reducing uncertainty by communicating when certain activities will occur throughout the visit or during parts of the visit.

Visual schedules come in many forms — with objects, photographs, images, line drawings, and text only. When making these supports available to your patrons and consumers, consider your target audience's age and understanding.

## Adding Structure

As mentioned earlier, structure increases predictability and clarifies what is expected during a community outing. It also increases engagement during activities by reducing opportunities for uneasiness or confusion and promoting clear boundaries to help with transitions between activities. The table on page 7 provides further examples of how to use supports to increase structure.

### MORE INFO

*See examples of visual schedules and how to embed them in your organization in the interactive online toolkit referred to on page 1.*

## Different Types of Visual Schedules



**Photo**



**Electronic**



**Line Drawing**

## Additional Supports for Increasing Structure

### Timers



Timers, particularly visual timers, help make the passage of time more concrete.

They are helpful with both transitions away from preferred activities and engagement during nonpreferred activities.

### Interactive Maps



Scavenger hunts can be a creative and interactive way to get patrons interested in a variety of activities offered at your organization. They provide structure and spell out specific ways to interact with objects or exhibits while learning more about the organization.

Sensory tours help patrons explore and learn about the organization through their senses. These tours create a clear way to interact while visiting and promote unique and innovative ways to experience the visit.

Modified maps that distinguish quiet, high-traffic, and loud areas on their map to help patrons plan out their visit accordingly.

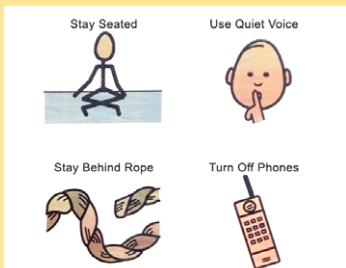
### Breaking Down Multi-Step Tasks



Tasks analyses can be helpful for tasks that are multi-step because they simplify the activity into achievable steps.

They are useful when working with larger groups because they help promote independence or when individuals who want to do things on their own just need a little support to be successful in doing so.

### Visuals for Rules and Expectations



Visuals can be used to represent behavior expectations and unspoken social rules. They increase understanding by making policies clear.

Patrons can use visuals as reference points to help build independence while out in the community.

Make sure you review visuals before beginning the visit or activity and reinforce expectations by pointing out and praising people who are following the rules. Staff can also point to the visuals to quickly redirect the individuals to follow the rules.

- Add visuals to places where rules may be unclear or have changes
- State rules positively so the person knows what to do
- Simplify rules so they are clear and concise
- Make visuals accessible



See examples of proactive supports, as well as tools to aid in the planning for these supports in the interactive online toolkit referred to on page 1.

## Setting Up Supports

Before using supports, consider how these resources are going to be available to patrons so individuals can bring them throughout their visits. Planning out the logistics of setting up supports on the front end can reduce confusion and promote successful visits.

### How can you support families before they arrive?

- Make supports available for download on your website or social media pages
- Send supports to individuals after they register for events
- Have laminated copies available at the front desk or ticket counter
- Create a simple system for patrons to check out and return supports before and after visit
- Determine where copies will be stored
- Use signs to direct individuals or families to supports
- Elect point person(s) to monitor supports during events and regular business hours

### How can you support families once they have arrived?

- Offer to review the supports when the individual/family first arrives
- Allow individual/family to review the supports or participate if interested
- Reference supports during the applicable parts of the visit
- Ask for feedback from families

Key organization members can work together to determine what system works best for visitors and themselves.

## Putting Evidence-Based Supports in Action

### Possible Supports for Sporting Events and Performances

- Visual schedules of the game or performance, either in individual form or projected
- Modified map of venue available prior to the start of the event



- Visuals for rules of the event or unspoken social rules for being a spectator
- Social narratives on how to cheer on the team (chants or traditions) or what to expect at a game or performance
- Checklists of performers
- Visual timers between wait times or intermissions
- Cues or warnings before changes in volume, lighting, etc.
- An identified quiet space

### Possible Supports for Exhibits

- Visual schedules of events or activities available
- Modified maps of venue available prior to the start of the game or performance
- Visuals for rules for interacting with the exhibits
- Scavenger hunts to create structure during the visit
- Visuals for breaking down multi-step activities (e.g., arts and crafts, returning library books, interactive exhibit)
- Social narratives about attending exhibit or event
- Visual timers to facilitate transitions between exhibits

As mentioned above, supports are only beneficial if they are **available**. This means creating supports that are **clear and understandable** to their target audience and having supports located in areas that are **convenient and easily located** by patrons and staff.

Although putting supports in place on the front end can help set up individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities for success and will prevent some challenges, sometimes situations do not work out as planned. In these situations, communication is key. One concern that often comes up is a difficulty knowing how to communicate. Taking a step back and being more aware of your word choice can be useful in all situations, not just challenging situations.

### Special Events

In addition to providing the supports throughout your programming, it may also be helpful to hold special events that focus more specifically on the needs of individuals who are neurodivergent. These events are designed to be less overwhelming and to ensure an environment accepting of varied ways of engaging, such as standing during performances and less common ways of responding (e.g., vocalizations). This is a time to share with the community your organization's efforts in a welcoming way that allows for feedback from patrons.

During these events, organizations often modify many aspects of the experience using the strategies described in this toolkit. These may be things an organization is hoping to embed across programming and would like to introduce during these special events. A main goal of these events is to provide a successful experience for patrons and to help patrons feel more comfortable engaging in other programming your organization offers.



Special events can also promote awareness and acceptance by educating the broader community. These events may include sharing or posting facts about certain disabilities and may feature story time or testimonials from neurodivergent individuals or family members.

These events are a step in the right direction, as organizations recognize the importance of making programs and events accessible to all. However, having one specific day or a few events throughout the year is only one piece in promoting belonging and neurodiversity.

### Supporting and Communicating with Patrons During Visits

- Stay calm and use a neutral tone
- Ask how you can help and be prepared to offer guidance towards quiet areas or other needs
- Use short, concrete statements regardless of the language level of the individual
- Model gestures they can use or visuals they could reference to respond to you (e.g., thumbs up, shake head, point to picture on map)
- Ask closed-ended questions to assess understanding (e.g., questions with clear yes/no responses)

## Evaluating the Process

As key organization members start to make changes and add additional supports, it is important to evaluate how these changes are perceived and whether efforts are successfully promoting acceptance and belonging. Informal feedback from patrons during visits can be helpful, but more formal measures may also be needed to determine the effectiveness of program efforts.

## What? The Focus of the Evaluation

When determining which type of evaluation to use, it can be useful to start by determining the **focus and goals of the evaluation**. Once goals are set, you should **determine a plan for reviewing the data**. It can be valuable to create this plan before data collection to ensure that the organization gathers enough data to make informed decisions and meaningful changes.

## Who? Identifying Your Audience

### Who is your target audience?

- Employees and volunteers
- Patrons
- Leadership
- Combination of these individuals

### What Info Do You Need About Audience:

- Simple demographic information (e.g., identifying who makes up your audience, how old they are, their specific needs and strengths, and how far they traveled) can help organizations determine:
  - » The **reach of their efforts** and how to adapt modifications to fit community
  - » Whether there are members of society they are missing with their current outreach efforts.
- Attendance rates for various events and exhibits can help organizations determine:
  - » The **level of engagement** of audience
  - » Which programs and supports are most popular.

## When? Evaluation Methods

### Before

- Determines the need for change and identifies the starting point
- Identifies areas of concern and focus
- Provides an outlet to consider feasibility of proposed changes
- Allows for meaningful modifications to occur early in the process

### During

- Allows key organization members to monitor how well changes and supports are working
- Figures out whether program is reaching its target audience

### After

- Determines whether organization is meeting its objectives
- Determines if organization change has been successful
- Tracks long-term impact of sustained changes
- Provides evidence for continuing with inclusive practices to promote belonging

## How? Information Gathered, Tools Used, and Interpreting Results

Identifying what **information** key organization members would like to gather is an important next step. Different types of information include:

- Reactions and Perceptions
- Education and Learning
- Improved Skill Set
- Effectiveness and Impact

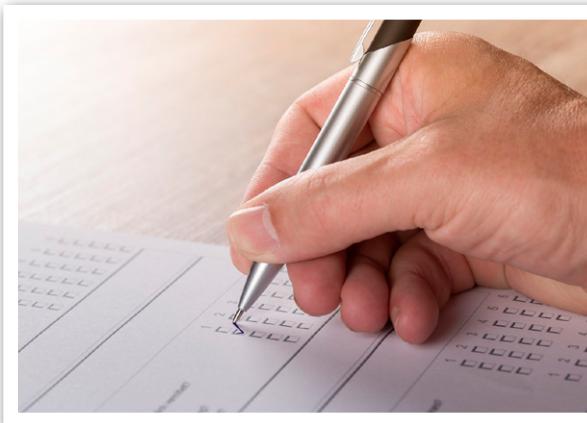
### How? Collection Methods

- Questionnaires/Survey
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Existing data
- Observations

### How? Interpreting Evaluation Results

There are many ways to review data. If your data is in the form of numbers, such as attendance and number of supports used, you could review it by looking at things like change over time or averages. If your data is in the form of narrative feedback, you could review it by looking for themes.

When interpreting data, use your evaluation goals to guide the process. Consider whether goals were met, identify current organizational strengths and weaknesses, and areas to explore further. Identify recommendations and areas of improvement and translate them into **clear action plans**. Focus on what actions you and other key organization members can take next to reach your organization's goals and objectives. Remember to consider your audience when reporting the detail and scope of the results. Ask yourself, what information does the target audience want to know about and how will this information be helpful? The evaluative process is an **ongoing process** as you and your organization take steps towards increasing a sense of belonging in your organization and community.



## Conclusion

Promoting neurodiversity through belonging practices is an **ongoing process**. Small effective modifications on the front end can lead to big organizational change. The goal should be to move beyond an idea of one event to daily practices that better fit the community's strengths and needs.

Organizations are most successful at meeting these goals when they have **buy-in from leadership** and can **change the culture of the organization**. The importance of being an welcoming community program should be seen as a priority from the top down. Buy-in occurs by determining how the supports in this toolkit align with the program's mission and how these strategies can be embedded into the organization.

When determining which supports best fit your community, remember that **open communication** between key organization members and patrons is key! Using the suggestions in this toolkit is a first step in promoting neurodiversity and belonging within your organization and community.



Learn more about the types of information gathered through evaluations, different collection methods, and how to interpret evaluation results in the interactive online toolkit referred to on page 1.

## National Resources:

- ADA National Network: A Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings**  
[adainfo.org/hospitality/accessible-meetings-events-conferences-guide/](http://adainfo.org/hospitality/accessible-meetings-events-conferences-guide/)
- American Bar Association Commission on Disability Rights**  
[uwyd.edu/union/reservations/accessible\\_meetings\\_toolkit.authcheckdam.pdf](http://uwyd.edu/union/reservations/accessible_meetings_toolkit.authcheckdam.pdf)
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network Resource Library**  
[autisticadvocacy.org/resources/accessibility/#barriers](http://autisticadvocacy.org/resources/accessibility/#barriers)
- CDC.gov: Making Meetings Accessible**  
[stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/44534](http://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/44534)
- Collaborative on Faith & Disabilities**  
[faithanddisability.org](http://faithanddisability.org)
- National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder Evidence Based Practices**  
[autismmpdc.fpg.unc.edu/ebps/](http://autismmpdc.fpg.unc.edu/ebps/)

## Local Resources:

- Disability Rights Tennessee**  
[disabilityrightstn.org](http://disabilityrightstn.org)  
(800) 342-1660
- Empower Tennessee**  
[empowern.org](http://empowern.org)  
(615) 200-6028
- Tennessee Disability Pathfinder**  
[TNPathfinder.org](http://TNPathfinder.org)  
(800) 640-4636
- Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD) Community Engagement Initiative**  
[triad.vumc.org/ce](http://triad.vumc.org/ce)
- Vanderbilt Kennedy Center**  
[vkc.vumc.org](http://vkc.vumc.org)  
(615) 322-8240

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