

## The voice of the Voluntary Arts

# Welcoming people with a learning disability to the voluntary arts

Arts groups offer a rich variety of experiences for people to express themselves, share common interests, develop new skills, explore and create things, appreciate the work of others and so on. Given the right opportunities, people with a learning disability can thrive in the creation and enjoyment of arts activities – just like everyone else. However, they do not always find that arts activities or groups are accessible to them, and as a result are often put off entirely or find it very difficult to take part in the way they would wish.

In most cases, the difficulties they face are not put there deliberately, but come about through lack of knowledge or forethought. Making your arts group or activity open to people with a learning disability requires you to think about how it might seem to them, what barriers they are facing, how accessible and welcoming you are, and whether you have fully engaged with them at all levels. This briefing will consider the ways in which you can make what you do more relevant, fun and inclusive for people with a learning disability.

## A. Definitions

### What is a learning disability?

- A learning disability affects the way someone learns, communicates or does some everyday things.
- It is not always possible to say why someone has a learning disability.
- We do know that all learning disabilities are caused before, during or shortly after birth and the condition is part of the person throughout his or her life.

- A learning disability can be mild, moderate or severe.
- There are many different types of learning disability.
- A learning disability does not stop someone from learning and achieving a lot in life if he or she gets the right support.

It's important to understand that:

- People with a learning disability are individuals with their own personalities, likes and dislikes, goals and ambitions. Because of this, it is not possible to say that all people with a learning disability will develop, act or learn in the same way.
- Every person with a learning disability, no matter how severe their impairment, can make choices on how they want to live and do things. They just need the right opportunities and support to fulfill them.

### How do we look at disability?

Our society tends to have an old-fashioned view of disabled people. It is called the **medical model** of disability and places emphasis on what disabled people cannot do rather than valuing what they can do. This way of looking at disabled people defines them by their impairment, as unable to function in the way that other people do – the 'problem' rests with them and they need help, support and treatment. This way of looking at disabled people is slowly disappearing, but is still common in many communities and is frequently used in the sports and medical worlds to categorise people.

There is another way of looking at disability, which is used more and more by enlightened people in the way they relate to disabled people. This is called the **social model** of disability. People adopting this approach use the word 'disabled' in a different way. Instead of using it to refer to the person's impairment, it is used to refer to the way society 'disables' a person by negative attitudes, the way the environment creates barriers and the way organisations relate to them.



The social model views the disabled person as a unique individual with the same rights, ambitions, feelings and hopes as everyone else and suggests that we should change the way things are currently arranged to make the world we all live in more equal and fair. Working through the social model is a good way to help disabled people raise their aspirations, realise their potential and fully contribute in a more equal society. We are more likely to do this if we rethink how we include everyone in the way we do things, and by taking a more inclusive approach.

## What do we really mean by inclusion?

It is important to fully understand what we mean by 'inclusion'. So often this is confused with 'integration', which is another way of involving people.

- **Integration** is when you involve someone with a learning disability by inviting them to join in with what already exists, accepting the arrangements that are already in place. The disabled person has to make all the adjustments and fit in as best they can. For some this works, but for most it sets up all kinds of barriers that they either have to overcome (with varying levels of difficulty) or find too overwhelming and therefore quickly lose interest and leave.
- **Inclusion** is something entirely different and affects everyone involved, both disabled and non-disabled. It is about equality of opportunity and involves rethinking the way you do things so that everyone's needs are considered and met. Taking time out to reflect is important, to give you the necessary time and space to reconsider how you do things, so that you can begin to put together an idea of how you might run your group or activity in a more inclusive way. The word 'might' is used quite deliberately, because doing things in an inclusive way is very different depending on where it is happening, who the people involved are, the resources available, the facilities that are used, etc.

There is no fixed set of answers that states exactly what inclusion entails, although there are some key indicators to help you. It is about:

- reflecting on the way we do things;
- meeting challenges;
- overcoming barriers to work out our solutions;
- making it a reality.

These need to be done together with (in this case) people with a learning disability, so that they are fully involved and feel that their views and opinions are valued from the beginning.

## B. Overcoming the barriers

People with a learning disability have said that the main barriers to taking part in arts activities include:

- limited money;
- a lack of suitable transport;
- poor or no information;
- not being made to feel welcome;
- not having anyone to support them.

Below are some suggestions of ways in which you may be able to help overcome these barriers:

**Money** – many people with a learning disability have limited finance.

- The issue of reduced rates for disabled people is a difficult one, but perhaps you could relate it to income or benefits. Some people with a learning disability have a job, while others are on benefits.
- You could consider a 'supporters go free' policy.
- You may need to offer assistance to people who need help to understand their money when paying for things.
- You could provide free transport or set a reduced rate for it.

**Transport** – there is often poor access to transport.

- You should consider providing transport if possible.
- If public transport is used, consider how you can help people who might need assistance understanding timetables, routes to take, etc. People with a learning disability sometimes need to practice a journey several times to learn the route.
- You should provide accessible parking bays at your venue(s) wherever possible.
- Some people with a learning disability might need a supporter to be with them when travelling. Can you provide a supporter or find someone who can?

**Information** – this is often unclear.

- Many people with a learning disability find reading difficult. They may prefer to get information on audiotape or face-to-face. Do you provide information in alternative formats?
- If you have to provide written material, there are ways to make it easier to understand by using symbols, pictures and simple text.
- Have clear signs and notices.



- Invite a trainer to run a session on using makaton symbol and sign language.

### **Not feeling welcome** – this is often a big barrier.

- Think about how you welcome people with a learning disability to your group or activity and make sure you are prepared.
- Arrange for someone to meet newcomers on arrival and to spend time with them during the visit.
- Copy what other groups do (if they are doing it particularly well) and have a buddy system to help support people for the first few weeks.
- Design and make an ‘easy read’ information pack.
- You may need to train key staff in ways to make your group or activity feel more welcoming.
- Involve people with a learning disability in decision-making groups.

### **Not having anyone to support them** – think about how you can remedy this.

- Consider, as a group, how you could provide the right kind of support to people with a learning disability; you could include a buddy system (mentioned above).
- Think about arranging a training session for staff and members to learn more about what constitutes good support and the best way of providing it for your group or activity.
- Write a set of guidelines for your group about good support, which could include these points:
  - Be patient.
  - Join in with what is happening.
  - Respect silences.
  - Respect everyone’s contribution, before, during and after sessions.
  - Help people only as much as necessary.
  - Encourage people to make their own choices.
  - Enjoy yourself.

Involve people with a learning disability in helping to produce the guidelines.

### **Improving how we communicate**

Communication is a very big topic. Thinking carefully and using good communication will help to improve all the other points

raised by people with a learning disability when describing the barriers they face.

- Use clear and simple text (plain English), with short sentences, simple punctuation and no jargon. This is sometimes referred to as ‘easy read’.
- Use the same words to mean the same thing. Avoid writing or saying ‘my house’ first and then ‘my home’ then ‘where I live’ later on.
- Use words where the meaning is clear. For example, ‘John was all over the place.’ Does this mean John was in more than one place at once? Or does it mean John was confused and not having a good day?
- Pretend you are explaining it to someone else. This will help you think more clearly about what you want to say.
- Use large print (at least 14 point), a clear typeface and plenty of spacing.
- Use bullet points or story boxes and fact boxes to make the points clear.
- Use images such as photos, drawings or symbols to support your text.
- Do not rely on abstract symbols; choose one or two simple pictorial symbols and put them to the side of the word.
- Ask people with a learning disability how they would like to have things communicated to them. Remember that everyone is unique and no two people can be treated in the same way when it comes to communication.
- Get feedback on your communication methods and materials. Find out what people think and how they think you could improve things even further.

### **A welcome to all**

Everyone has the right, and should have the opportunity, to enjoy a wide experience of arts and cultural activities.

By opening up your art group or activity to people with a learning disability you will be starting on a long, yet highly exciting journey towards making everything you do much more inclusive. New ways of doing things bring their challenges but also huge rewards. People with a learning disability have a great deal to offer the art world, whether through performing arts, music, drama, photography or the visual arts. Hopefully, this briefing has started you on that journey and given you ideas on how you might do it.



## Further Resources

Briefings from VAN that relate to this topic are available to download for free from [www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings](http://www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings):

- 10: **Access**
- 44: **Disability Discrimination Act Part III**
- 45: **How do I Create an Equal Opportunities Policy?**
- 53: **Creating Clear Print**
- 110: **Whose Board? Whose Agenda? Including disabled and deaf people in your management committees**
- 111: **How inclusive are you? A checklist for voluntary arts groups**

Other publications:

- **Am I making myself clear?** – Mencap's guidelines to accessible writing – available from Mencap, (*contact details opposite*)
- **Welcoming people with a learning disability to your venue** – Mencap
- **Doing Arts** – introductory guides to running arts projects with people with a learning disability – Mencap
- **Get Together** – Mencap Inclusion Training Pack – Mencap, Swan Courtyard, 4 Coventry Road, Birmingham B26 1BU. T: 0121 707 7877
- **Using Communication** – Nora Fry Research Centre/ RNIB Multiple Disability Services, University of Bristol. T: 01177 923 8137
- **So what is Inclusion?** Resource Pack, ISBN 978 1 904479 10 9. UK Youth Avon Tyrell, Bransgore, BH23 8EE
- **Arts and Disabilities Directory** – for the island of Ireland – [www.artsanddisability.com](http://www.artsanddisability.com)

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*Understanding learning disability*

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