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What Is Ableism?

Ableism is a set of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that treats people with disabilities as less capable, less valuable, or less deserving of full participation. It does not always look like overt hostility—it often appears in small, everyday moments that collectively create real barriers.

In a Comment

Offering unsolicited help or expressing surprise when someone with a disability succeeds signals low expectations.

In a Staff Decision

Questioning someone's access needs or deciding for a participant what they can or cannot do — without asking.

In a Policy

Designing a program around only one way to participate excludes people before they ever walk through the door.

[illegible]

[illegible]

1 IN 4 PEOPLE
LIVE WITH A DISABILITY IN THE U.S.

U.S. adults reported having a disability

That is **28.7% of adults**
more than **1 in 4** people in communities like yours.

Source: CDC Disability and Health Data System,
2022 BRFSS

**When we design for access,
we design for the community,
we actually serve.**

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What You Will Practice Today

This session is designed to move beyond awareness into action. You will leave with practical language, a sharper eye for hidden barriers, and at least one concrete commitment to bring back to your team.

1 Identify Ableism

Recognize ableism in everyday interactions, staff decisions, and organizational systems — not just in obvious or intentional forms.

2 Recognize Intersectionality

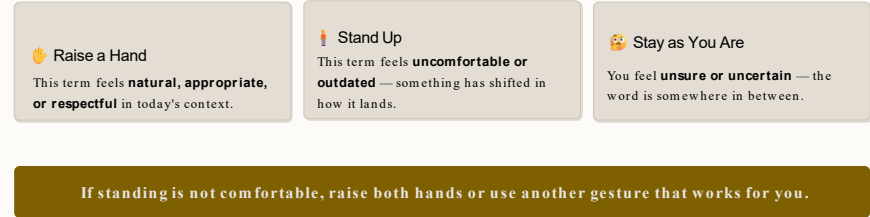
Understand how disability intersects with culture, race, religion, and other identities to shape a person's experience in recreation settings.

3 Practice Inclusive Language

Apply respectful language and engagement strategies through real scenarios drawn from parks and recreation environments.

[illegible]

Language shapes how we see people and how people experience being seen. As each term is read aloud, respond with your honest first reaction. There are no wrong answers. This exercise is about noticing, not judging.



This term feels **natural, appropriate, or respectful** in today's context.

This term feels **uncomfortable or outdated** — something has shifted in how it lands.

You feel **unsure or uncertain** — the word is somewhere in between.

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Language That Respects Choice

The words we use reveal what we assume. Shifting language is not about political correctness — it is about accuracy, dignity, and following the lead of the person in front of you.

Instead of "wheelchair-bound"

Say **"uses a wheelchair."** A wheelchair is a tool for mobility, not a restriction. The word "bound" implies confinement where none exists.

Instead of "suffers from a disability"

Name the person or the access need without adding pity. Most people do not experience their disability as suffering — the framing is ours to change.

Person-First vs. Identity-First

"Person with a disability" vs. "Disabled person." Both are used and respected.
Follow the individual's preference
— ask when you are unsure.

[illegible]

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Interrupt an Assumption

"That program is only for special populations."

"Who can participate, and what support would make it accessible?"

When we hear language that narrows access, we have an opportunity to pause and redirect. Asking a question instead of accepting the assumption keeps the conversation open — and often reveals that the barrier is in the program design, not the participant.

1

Pause

Notice the assumption before it becomes action.

2

Rephrase

Replace exclusionary framing with access-centered language.

3

Redirect

Ask what would make participation possible — then act on the answer.



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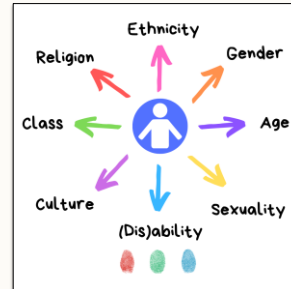
Disability and Intersecting Identities

Intersectionality helps us notice how overlapping identities, disability, race, religion, gender, language, and more, shape a person's experience in a particular setting. No one arrives at your program as just one thing.

A Travel League Example

A parent registers their autistic child for a youth travel league. The athlete meets the eligibility requirements, and the parent requests a disability-related modification on the form. In the first call, the coach says, "I'm not sure this is the right league for your child," before asking what support would help.

Eligibility and welcome both matter.



What This Example Asks of Us

- Do we see a young athlete with their own goals?
- Does disclosure prompt collaboration or doubt?
- Are eligibility and support considered separately?
- Whose preferences guide the conversation?

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Discuss the Barrier

What would you ask before deciding how to support this young athlete in the travel league?

Separate the athlete's goals, the published eligibility criteria, and the requested modification. Is the coach responding to a real program requirement or to an assumption about autism?

The Athlete's Goals

What does the young person want? Have staff asked them and their parent?

The League Criteria

What are the published eligibility rules? Has the athlete met them?

The Support Request

What modification was requested? What would help the athlete participate?

Discuss with a neighbor, then share one question the coach could ask on the first call.

[illegible]

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BARRIER BUSTERS

Group Practice

Each group will receive one recreation or workplace scenario. Work together to move from identifying the problem to building a better response. Choose one person to share your group's revised approach.

1

Name the Assumption

What belief is driving the current staff response or policy? Say it out loud, naming it is the first step to changing it.

2

Identify the Barrier and Its Impact

Where does access break down? What does this mean for the participant's ability to join, belong, or return?

3

Rewrite What Staff Say or Do

Draft a new response describing the actual words or actions that would center the person's choice and open access.

[illegible]

"The Swim S

Amira, a paraplegic woman, arrives for open swim

[illegible]

"The Overly Helpful Counselor"



What is assumed?

Where is the barrier?

What would you say or change?

[illegible]

[illegible]

"Adaptive vs. Inclusive"

What would you say or change?



"The Meeting That Wasn't Heard"

What would you say or change?

[illegible]

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Rewrite the Response

Complete these two sentences for your scenario:

"I would say or do..."

What are the specific words or actions you would take in the moment? Be concrete, not just the intention, but the actual response.

"Our team would change..."

What policy, routine, or practice would you bring back to your organization to address this barrier at a systems level?

Center the person's choice in your response. Name at least one practice the organization, not just the individual, can improve.

[illegible]

Group Reports

01

Name the belief that was driving the barrier — spoken or unspoken, intentional or routine.

02

Describe where access broke down and what it meant for the person trying to participate.

03

Share the revised response your group drafted — the actual words or actions, not just the principle.

04

Identify one shift in policy, communication, or training that would prevent this barrier from recurring.



Pause and Rephrase

Slow the moment. Name what happened. Offer a better frame before the conversation moves on.



 Ask a Question

"What are we assuming about this person?"
Questions create space for reflection. They shift the team from reaction to curiosity.



Redirect to Access



Do the rules describe real requirements — or inherited assumptions? Policies should open access, not quietly close it.

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My Inclusive Commitment

For the program or routine you identified in the access check, take a moment to make your commitment specific and personal. Written intentions are far more likely to become action than general goodwill.

One Response I Will Change

What is one thing you currently say or do that you will replace with a more access-centered approach?

Write it here:

One Practice Our Team Will Review

What policy, routine, or communication habit will you bring back to your team to examine together?

Write it here:

First Step and Timeline

I will take the first step by:

Date / action: _____

[illegible]

One Action I Will Take

What is one action you will take after this session?

Share your action with someone near you. Name the first step, not just the goal, and say when you will take it. Accountability begins in this room.

Inclusion is not a destination. It is a daily practice, built one conversation, one policy, and one decision at a time.

[illegible]

Thank You

Ask before assuming. Build access into everyday practice. Create places and spaces where people belong.

Language Matters

Follow the individual's preference. Ask before assuming.

Access Is a Practice

Build it into forms, signage, communication, and policy.

Interrupt with Curiosity

Pause, ask, and redirect — every time, in every setting.

Tracey M. Crawford, CTRS, CPRP
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