



Essentials for Valuing People with Disabilities in Outdoor Spaces

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There are many “checklists” available for people to refer to when creating inclusive programs for people with disabilities. However, Karen believes that this further boxes people with disabilities into categories rather than dismantling assumptions that much of society and history has created about this population. Inclusion of people with disabilities is ensuring that each individual feel valued and a sense of belonging in their community.

1. Inclusion is Not a Program; it is a Mindset

There’s a phenomenon that inclusion is just including everyone in a particular program and that’s it! However, inclusion goes much further – it is a shift in culture, and a shift in our mindset. It is the framework of how we do everything from how we act, think, or how we relate to one another. We need to work towards challenging and questioning our unconscious biases to instill a sense of openness for all people.

2. Meet Everyone with a Sense of Curiosity

Due to our unconscious biases, we develop our own stories about people, and we categorize people into boxes. To continually move the needle of inclusion forward, it is strongly recommended that we remove these biases, and meet people with a sense of curiosity. Begin to develop a relationship with one another, ask questions, and seek answers.

3. We all Crave for Value, Connection, and Belonging

For the majority of humans, we crave to be a part of community, to be loved, or to be valued. We all want to be asked for our thoughts, opinions, or feedback. Valuing individuals with disabilities means that we believe they can make their own decisions and be listened to.

4. Inclusion is about Choice

All people need to have the ability to make their own choices as they know their lived experiences the best. All people have the ability to make choices; some may need more support than others, but we all have this ability. Unfortunately, the ability to make choices for individuals with disabilities gets taken away by others because of societal attitudes, the lack of accessibility, or the lack of education or awareness. For example, if an individual who uses a mobility aid has a choice of where to go for dinner — either Earls or Cactus Club — but Cactus Club has stairs, then the choice is taken away. It is no longer inclusion as the choice is made for them.

5. Individuals with Disabilities need to be a Part of their own Decision-Making Process

Often, individuals with disabilities are surrounded by parents, guardians, or support workers and they make decisions for them. Perhaps they are not even in the room when decisions are made. People with disabilities know their lives the best and need to be asked for their input and decisions. They need to have information accessible to them so that they can make wise and informed decisions. This may mean that the information can be provided in large print, plain language, or various languages, or that there is an opportunity to sit with someone who can assist them with understanding. Every single person has the ability to make their own decisions.

6. It Takes all Parties to Tango

Both parties need to take an active role in ensuring that inclusion is happening. Individuals with disabilities need to share what they need or how they need to be supported to fully participate, but they must also recognize that people/programs have their own limitations or restrictions. Then, it is the responsibility of others to work with

the individuals to see what works for them. Both parties need to give and take from one another, learn from each other, and be patient with the learnings from each other. Each party needs to contribute to the relationship.

7. Individuals with Disabilities need to be held Accountable

There tends to be a societal norm that individuals with disabilities can be powerless, submissive, and need to be taken care of. However, we need to hold them accountable for their mistakes or their responsibilities, just like everyone else. If they are let off easy, then it perpetuates the assumptions about people with disabilities. However, a supportive environment of understanding needs to be in place before holding each other to their responsibilities. For example, they may need an adaptive keyboard to submit a document to their colleagues or may need others to be patient when they respond to a question.

8. We Need to Recognize our own Lived Experience and our Intersectionalities

Disability is only one part of an individual's identity. People's lived experiences are influenced by their perspectives, thoughts, or opinions and all of these aspects need to be validated. As people, we are complex human beings with many layers of identity such as our gender, sexual orientation, economic status, religion, race, or ability level. All of these layers of identity and how they cross over with one another frame our perspectives. For example, a white, able-bodied, middle-income, heterosexual male will have different perspectives than a white, heterosexual, middle-income woman with a disability.

9. We all Need to Accept our Vulnerabilities

All people with lived experiences is experts of their own lives. All people need to be comfortable in their own skin, meaning they accept all their good qualities and our not so good qualities. In the past, we shied away from showing our vulnerabilities to others because we didn't want others to see our faults and weaknesses. For much of society, people with disabilities were believed to be vulnerable, weak, and submissive. However, we need to shift our thinking. Dr. Brené Brown, a sociology professor from the University of Huston, states that, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path." We need to accept ourselves wholeheartedly, which means showing up and demonstrating our vulnerabilities with one another.

10. We need to Acknowledge that we Make Mistakes – WE SCREW UP!

We are humans and we don't know everything – we do make mistakes! There is so much political correctness happening with regards to knowing how to welcome people from marginalized backgrounds. It is a challenge to keep up with the correct terms and it is good to acknowledge that we don't know everything. We all need to work and learn from each other, in addition to being patient with one another. The learnings come from making mistakes and talking about it. To do this, we need to value and respect each other so we can learn from the lived experiences of others. Inclusion is a journey we need to take with one another.