

Dealing with Ableism in Early Childhood Settings



“Ableism” refers to ideas and actions that devalue people with disabilities. Even in inclusive early childhood settings, sometimes families report that they or their children with disabilities encounter ableism. Learning about disabled peoples’ experiences can help educators and caregivers deal with ableism in programs for young children.

Be aware that ableism exists in everyday life

- Society tends to treat disability as “abnormal,” but it is part of the human experience.
- Ableism includes stereotypes of people with disabilities as weak, powerless, pitiful, or incompetent. In fact, a disabled person is a complete human being with rights, needs, and strengths. They are worthy of respect and empathy, regardless of how the disability affects their lives.
- Nondisabled people sometimes don’t see mental illness and chronic health conditions as disabilities. However, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) recognizes that having a chronic illness or mental health condition may make someone eligible for accommodations in school or the workplace.
- Nondisabled adults often say they feel “inspired” by disabled peoples’ accomplishments. This does not cause direct harm, but it shifts focus from the disabled person’s experience to the nondisabled person’s feelings.
- Some nondisabled adults resent “disability” accommodations, such as fully accessible playgrounds or designated parking. However, such measures often benefit anyone in a community. For example, an entrance ramp for users of wheelchairs or walkers can also help people with strollers.

Be well-informed, and share your knowledge

- Search online and in the library for books, podcasts, articles, and other resources created for adults by disabled people about ableism and disabilities.
- Ask your librarian for help finding children’s books to share that feature disabled characters and reflect anti-ableist attitudes.
- Use correct terms for a disability and avoid problem-focused language. Notice the differences between “Poor Amul is crippled and confined to a wheelchair” and “Amul has a spinal cord injury. He manages his wheelchair well.”
- Find out how a person prefers to talk about their (or their child’s) disability. For example, Rani’s mother calls herself “an autism mom” while Shawn’s dad prefers, “My son is on the autism spectrum.” Learning about “person-first language” (Jonas has autism) and “identity-first language” (Jonas is autistic) is helpful.
- Avoid disability-related slang, such as “The kids are acting crazy” or “That’s a lame excuse.” Instead, use descriptive language. “The kids have a lot of energy today” or “That’s not a good reason.”

Also note that ableism isn’t just about how nondisabled people think about people with disabilities, but also how they often *don’t think* about them when creating environments and planning activities. Keep disabled children and adults in mind when setting up spaces and experiences for young children.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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