

Building Your Community

Supporting People with Disabilities

The need: About one in four adults lives with some kind of disability, physical, sensory, intellectual, or hidden. Most of the time, the hardest part isn't the disability itself; it's being left out or underestimated by everyone else. Youth can change that, with respect, inclusion, and a little know-how.

"I am different, not less." — Temple Grandin

"Know me for my abilities, not my disability." — Robert M. Hensel

"Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes doesn't mean he lacks vision." — Stevie Wonder

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes, run in one sitting. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. Option A needs no setup; Options B and C use real service arranged ahead of time.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- What different kinds of disabilities can you think of? Are all of them visible?
- Have you ever not known how to act around someone with a disability? What made it awkward?
- What's the difference between feeling sorry for someone and respecting them?
- How might it feel to be helped without being asked, or talked about as if you weren't there?

Learn (10–20 minutes)

Disability is a normal part of being human, and it's far more common than people realize. It covers a huge range. It includes using a wheelchair, being blind or Deaf, or having an intellectual or developmental disability like Down syndrome or autism. It also includes many "hidden" disabilities you can't see at all, like chronic illness or learning differences. Here's the key thing: people with disabilities are people first, with the same hopes, humor, and desire to belong as anyone. Often the biggest obstacle isn't the disability itself. It's a world that wasn't built with them in mind. And it's people who exclude, stare, pity, or underestimate them. That part, we can fix.

For a lot of people with disabilities, the hard part is:

- Being left out, of activities, conversations, and friend groups.
- Being underestimated, treated as less capable than they are.
- Facing barriers, physical ones like stairs, and social ones like awkwardness or pity.

A closer look. There's a teen who uses a wheelchair. He's sharp, funny, and great at video games. But at school he spends a lot of time on the edge of things. The group heads somewhere with stairs. People talk to whoever's pushing his chair instead of to him. And often it's just easier for everyone else not to think about it. He doesn't want pity. He wants what anyone wants: to be in the group, asked along, talked to directly, treated like the regular guy he is. The day some classmates start actually including him, and asking him, not assuming, the whole picture changes.

Why inclusion matters. Most exclusion isn't cruelty; it's thoughtlessness. People aren't sure what to say, and they worry about doing the wrong thing. So they keep their distance. Or they swing the other way and help too much, treating a capable person as helpless. Both leave someone on the outside. Add physical barriers, like a building with only stairs, and it's easy for a person with a disability to be shut out of ordinary life. Often no one means any harm by it. The fix is mostly about awareness and attitude. It means learning how to include people respectfully and noticing barriers. And it means remembering there's a whole person there, not a condition to feel sorry for.

How youth can help. Most of what helps is about respect and inclusion, and youth are great at it once they know how. Youth can:

- Include people with disabilities the same as anyone: invite them, talk to them directly, make room.
- Learn simple etiquette: ask before helping, talk to the person (not their companion), and don't touch wheelchairs or service animals.
- Notice and speak up about barriers: a blocked ramp, an event no one can access, someone being left out.
- Help with accessible activities and programs, like adaptive sports, Special Olympics, or inclusive events.

Keep these in mind.

- **Person first.** It's a person who has a disability, not “a disabled” anything. The person comes first, in words and in mind.
- **Ask, don't assume.** Don't help without asking, and don't assume what someone can or can't do. “Would you like a hand?” is perfect.
- **Talk to the person.** Look at and speak to them directly, not to whoever is with them. They're right there.
- **Inclusion, not pity.** They don't want to be your inspiration or your charity. They want to be included as an equal.

Serve (30–60 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Include someone, on purpose *(no cost, no prep, works in any setting)*

The most powerful thing you can do costs nothing: include someone with a disability the way you'd want to be included. Invite them into your group or activity, talk to them directly, ask (don't assume) whether they'd like anything, and treat them as the equal they are. One person who makes the effort to include can change how someone experiences a whole day, or a whole school.

Option B — Host something everyone can join *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

As a group, plan and run an activity built so everyone can take part: an accessible game afternoon, an art or music session, or a get-together with a class or group of peers who have disabilities. Learn the basic etiquette first (ask before helping, talk to the person directly), then put the focus where it belongs, on doing something fun together, as equals.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll set up ahead of time the inclusive activity and, ideally, partner with a class or group of peers who have disabilities, and learn the basic etiquette, so the event is welcoming and ready.

Option C — Volunteer with an inclusive program *(more effort; ongoing service)*

Get involved with a local or national nonprofit built around people with disabilities, like adaptive sports, Special Olympics, an inclusive club, or a buddy program, and show up regularly. Be a teammate, a buddy, and a friend, not a helper hovering over someone. The friendships that grow from showing up again and again go both ways.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll connect ahead of time with a local or national disability nonprofit and set up the group's ongoing role. JustServe.org can help you find one and make the connection.

Before you go (all options): Always ask before helping, never assume, and never push a wheelchair, grab someone, or handle a mobility device or service animal without permission. Don't provide personal or medical care; that's for trained people. Work through established programs in supervised settings with your mentor, and follow the guidance of staff and families, who know each person's needs best.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

What's one thing you learned that will change how you act around someone with a disability?

Why do you think “asking before helping” matters so much?

What's the difference between including someone and feeling sorry for them?

Did anything surprise you about what people with disabilities actually want from others?

Then finish one or both sentences:

One way I'll include people with disabilities better is...

One assumption about disability I want to let go of is...
