

The Nickelodeon logo, featuring the word "nickelodeon" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font. The text is positioned above a large, orange, splatter-like graphic that resembles a paint blot or a splash. The background of the entire page is a vibrant purple with a fine, white, speckled texture. Large, abstract shapes in yellow and dark purple are layered over the background, creating a dynamic and colorful composition.

nickelodeon

**Talk and
Take Action:
A Family Guide to
Disability Inclusion**



**Disability
Belongs™**

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A family of two boys of mixed ethnicity doing homework in the kitchen with their mothers. One of the boys wears a hearing aid.

Introduction

Nickelodeon presents Talk and Take Action: A Family Guide to Disability Inclusion. This guide invites all kids and families to learn about disability inclusion, spark important conversations, and celebrate together.

Disability is a broad aspect of **identity** that includes any condition of the body or mind that affects a person's everyday activities and the way they navigate the world around them. It can be physical, sensory, emotional, cognitive, chronic illness or pain, and more. Disability is expansive – some disabilities are apparent while others are non-apparent, some may be temporary or permanent, some may be from birth or happen at some point throughout life. Many people also have multiple disabilities. In the United States, more than 42 million people have a disability. Around the world, around 1.3 billion people have a disability and 240 million of them are kids. Disabled people are impacted by interpersonal, societal, and environmental factors like attitudes and assumptions, accessibility of spaces, and availability of social support. This means it is everyone's responsibility to learn about and practice **inclusion**.

When talking about disability with kids, it's important to use the word "disability" in place of **euphemisms** (common words or phrases people sometimes use to avoid saying a word directly). Using the word disability recognizes disability as a valued aspect of identity and natural part of human diversity; it also unites people with disabilities through **disability culture** and pride.

Everyone benefits from learning about, listening to, and celebrating the disability community! This guide lays the foundation for family discussions about disability inclusion, **ableism**, and identity and **intersectionality**. Having early, open dialogue about these important topics helps kids expand their thinking and contribute to creating a more inclusive world.



A teenage girl, who has Down syndrome, and her grandmother smile in the backyard of their home. They are both African American.



A mother hugs her daughter and son, who is autistic. They are all laughing and are outside.

Talking with Kids About Disability: Before You Begin

When preparing to talk with kids about topics related to identity development, **equity**, and inclusion, it is important to frame discussions in ways that will maximize their understanding while, at the same time, ensuring they leave the conversation feeling valued, supported, and empowered. This guide features kid-friendly context and conversation starters centered on disability, disability inclusion, identity and intersectionality, and ableism. Before you begin, review the following tips:

1. Check in with yourself first. Take stock of your own feelings and perceptions related to the information included in this guide. Be aware of emotions that you may have when talking about these topics and acknowledge your own **biases**. If your family has been personally impacted by ableism or other forms of identity-driven **discrimination**, it may be difficult to revisit those painful experiences. Consider sharing your thoughts with another trusted adult before engaging with your own children.

2. Review the guide. Your willingness to learn the skills needed to hold complex conversations with your kids sends a powerful message. These kinds of conversations can sometimes feel overwhelming, but they are incredibly important to have. If you need support, take time to look through this guide. It will provide you with an introduction to its topic, a historical and contemporary context for why these conversations need to take place, and how you, as a family, can take action. For families in the disability community, you may already be having these conversations at home. Focus on the information that you feel is most meaningful and relevant to your child and your conversation's focus.

3. Be intentional with your language. Familiarize yourself with the terms and vocabulary within this guide; there is a glossary at the very end with clear, kid-friendly definitions. Introducing kids to the terms that surround these topics will support their language development, foster communication, ensure clarity, and build confidence.

4. Reflect on your family's values. It may be helpful to have general, more informal conversations about fairness, acceptance, and kindness. Talk with your child about your family's values like how you cultivate compassion, what makes them unique, and what you admire about others.

5. Lean in and listen. In a world full of distractions, now is the time to give kids your undivided attention. Encourage them to ask questions, and let them know you'll do your best to answer them. As you learn together, you shouldn't attempt

or expect to cover everything in a single conversation – these kinds of discussions will be ongoing!

6. Gauge what they know. Kids gain information implicitly, or informally, through their everyday experiences. Asking kids what they already know about a topic is a great starting point for conversation. Expand on what they bring up to deepen their understanding and fill in their knowledge gaps. Use clear, factual information from multiple points and perspectives. Children often notice and absorb much more than we expect.

7. Learn with them. Answer children's questions as clearly and honestly as you can in an age-appropriate and accessible way. Don't feel obligated to answer right away. Slow down, take a pause, and repeat the question. This ensures that you don't answer right away just for the sake of answering and end up providing information that is incorrect. And, if you don't know the answer to a question, that's okay! Saying "I don't know" creates an opportunity for you to learn together. If you are caught off guard by a difficult question and are unsure of how to respond in the moment, try one of these:

- "That's a really big question! Let's explore it together."
- "That's a great question. Let's find out more together."

8. Remember, kids are curious! Sometimes they may ask questions or make statements about people they interact with in everyday life. Their interest in and inquiry into identity-driven differences is natural; it's how they learn about, process, and start to understand others' experiences. If your child asks you about identity-based curiosities, try to respond in a way that recognizes and destigmatizes peoples' differences, but does not make assumptions about them. Keep it clear, direct, and straightforward, for example:

- "I can tell you're curious about her wheelchair. It is something she uses to get around."
- "You're right. He does that differently than you. That may be the way that works best for him."
- "Yes, they're communicating with each other through their body movements and facial expressions. There are lots of ways to communicate nonverbally."

If your child asks a question directly to someone with a disability, refrain from shushing them or apologizing for them. This teaches kids that acknowledging and talking about disability is wrong. Another important thing to avoid in these moments is responding for the disabled person or talking about them as if they weren't there. Instead, take cues

from them. If they want to engage with your child, encourage it! Lots of learning can happen from these conversations. It will take practice, but, over time, your thoughtful responses and mindful interactions will guide your child's empathy development.

9. Consider and validate their feelings. Learning about and reflecting on your own and others' personal experiences can be a lot! Pay attention to any emotional responses that may be evoked by the information being shared. This means not only listening to their words, but looking at their body language for cues about how they are feeling. Allow them to express how they feel and validate whatever it is they are feeling.

10. Empower them to make a difference. Exploring, learning about, and celebrating aspects of identity and inclusion can help kids feel confident, accepted, and ready to engage in meaningful change! This guide includes a list of actions you, as a family, can take to leave these conversations feeling empowered and prepared to build a more inclusive and compassionate world.

Types of Disability

There are many different types of disabilities; they may be **apparent** (like using a wheelchair) or **non-apparent** (like having a learning disability), temporary or permanent, and can even change over time. Some disabilities might be related to a condition someone was born with, while others can be acquired at any point during a person's lifetime. Disabilities may be related to an injury, an illness, a mental health condition, or **neurodivergence**. Disabilities can impact movement or mobility, vision, hearing, mental health, thinking and learning, communication, and social relationships. People may have one or multiple disabilities at the same time.

The Social Model of Disability is a concept and way of thinking that suggests disability is not only something experienced by an individual. It is also an interaction, or relationship, between an individual person and society (other people and places). This means a big part of having a disability is the way others understand and treat you because of it. It can also be the way physical spaces are or aren't accessible and welcoming to different kinds of bodies, and whether people have access to the **assistive technology** they need, like mobility aids or screen readers.

A young boy with Down syndrome poses in a classroom. He is holding up his arms to flex his muscles, and show his strength and confidence.



Advocate Spotlight

Judith “Judy” Heumann (1947-2023) is an internationally recognized disability rights activist and leader and known as the “Mother of the Disability Rights Movement.” Judy had an illness called polio as a child and used a wheelchair. She was a leader in the Section 504 Sit-In of 1977, and helped develop other important disability rights laws, like the Americans with Disabilities Act. Judy was the founder of the civil rights organization, Disabled In Action, which has a mission to end discrimination against people with disabilities.

Ableism and Why It’s Important to Take Action

Ableism prioritizes and gives advantages to nondisabled people, and places value and worth on people based on society’s unfair expectations of how minds and bodies should work. Ableism leads to the discrimination against, or unfair treatment of, people with disabilities. It is a type of oppression based on the belief that disabilities are a bad thing. Many policies, laws, and social practices in the U.S., and around the world, contribute to ableism by actively excluding people with disabilities from engaging fully and equally in everyday life. This kind of ableism is called systemic (or institutional) ableism. For example, until the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, many employers were not required to provide **accommodations** for disabled workers, which meant many disabled people were not considered for jobs despite being highly qualified. Public-serving buildings and transportation, like buses and trains, were also



A young woman in a motorized wheelchair browses books at the library. She is African American.

not required to be accessible to people with disabilities. This meant that people who use wheelchairs were often unable to enter public spaces that lacked accessible entryways, bathrooms, and elevators, including schools, hospitals, restaurants, and city buses. Today, although ADA regulations dictate clear and comprehensive accessibility guidelines, you may find that there are still some buildings that are not accessible, and the regulations are not always enforced. This is an example of systemic ableism in action.

On an individual or personal level, ableist attitudes and actions can be big and overt, like teasing, mocking, or bullying someone because of their disability, or small and subtle, like questioning someone's disability because you can't see it. Disability-based discrimination is heavily influenced by what nondisabled people think or believe about disabilities, their discomfort or unfamiliarity with disabilities, and their assumptions about what people with disabilities can do. This is why it is important to slow down, reflect on your thinking, question your assumptions, and challenge ableist ideas.

No matter what, ableism is harmful. It impacts how society thinks about and responds to physical and mental differences, and creates a world where disabled people are excluded, overlooked, and underestimated because of their perceived differences. Often, ableism intersects with other types of **oppression**, like **racism** or sexism, and makes a person's experience with disability discrimination more complex and, oftentimes, more severe. This unfair and oppressive treatment can be internalized by members of the disability community, causing them to have less confidence in themselves or making them want to hide their disability.

Like all forms of discrimination, ableism is often rooted in fear, ignorance, and stereotypes that lead to **prejudice**. It assumes disabled communities need to change to fit into a nondisabled world, when, in actuality, it is the nondisabled world that needs to change to be inclusive of disabled communities. Being here, reading this will help you be a part of this change! Read on to continue learning about how you, as a family, can counter ableism, celebrate diversity, and create a better, more inclusive world.

Promoting Disability Inclusion

One of the biggest ways to take action against ableism is by committing to **inclusion** in your everyday life. Inclusion is a concept that means people with disabilities, and people of all identities, are welcomed, valued, and able to participate fully and equally in society. An inclusive practice that you may have heard about or experienced is inclusive education. In inclusive education, all learners have the right to the same learning opportunities, classrooms, and educators as their peers. This means schools and learning spaces create



A young disabled woman plays pickleball with her friend. She is Black and uses a wheelchair.

flexible environments, policies, and curricula that fit their learners' needs and abilities. This approach to education has significant social-emotional and academic benefits to students with and without disabilities; studies show that people who learn in inclusive environments have more positive school experiences, are more competitive in the workforce, and have stronger social relationships.

You also may have heard the word **accessibility**. Accessibility is about removing **barriers** in physical and

digital spaces so that everyone can access them. For example, on the playground, accessibility allows both disabled and nondisabled kids to have access to and play safely with the playground's components. An accessible playground has things like ramps with handrails, ground-level play activities, and surfaces that allow everyone to move and play safely. Digitally things like closed captions (text that can be read while watching visual media), alt text/ image descriptions (text that describes the purpose of an image to someone who



A father reads a book to his two children, one of whom has Down syndrome. They are Mexican and are sitting outside.

cannot see it), and text to speech (technology that reads text aloud) are all accessibility resources that are used across media and tech. Digital accessibility ensures that people with different disabilities can fully experience and interact with websites, social media, images and videos, e-books, films, software, and more.

The whole community benefits from accessibility! As you might be noticing, a big part of accessibility is providing different options for how people can engage and participate. This flexibility reduces barriers and increases opportunities for everyone in a community. Accessibility takes into account that people have different needs and ways of doing things, and that those needs can change over time.

Just remember, while accessibility is a necessary component of inclusion, it's not enough on its own! Committing to inclusion is a lot like being a good friend. It might mean inviting your neighbors for dinner and making sure you serve food that everyone can enjoy, or checking which of your local parks are accessible before you go with a friend who uses a wheelchair. Maybe you and your project partners at school have learning disabilities like dyslexia or ADHD, and so you take the opportunity to get curious and try a new way of working together. It could also mean describing a painting at the museum to a family member who cannot see.

Each person's experience with their disability is unique to them, and all aspects of their identity overlap to shape their needs. To practice inclusion, you need to listen to and learn from the disability community, reflect on and challenge societal expectations and assumptions, and celebrate everyone for exactly who they are!

Advocate Spotlight

Ed Roberts (1939 - 1995) is known as the "Father of the Independent Living Movement." As a teenager, he had polio, an illness that paralyzed him from the neck down. Ed was the first student with significant disabilities to attend the college, UC Berkeley. While there, he helped start the Physically Disabled Students Program – the nation's first student-led program to support students with disabilities. Later, with the help of other activists, Ed started the Center for Independent Living, a support center run by and for people with disabilities to promote **self-determination**.

History of Disability Activism

Throughout history, **activism** against ableism has changed our world for the better! People engage in activism when they want to bring about political or social change. They are called activists, and they work hard to make their society a more fair, inclusive, and equitable place.

The saying, "Nothing About Us Without Us," has a long history in the disability rights movement. It means that disabled people should always be included in the decisions and policies that impact them. Explore some of the major disability rights events that have taken place throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. After reading, consider how you can learn more! What other important examples of activism should be included in this timeline?



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882 - 1945) sits at a desk in an office. He has a pen in his hand and a paper on the desk in front of him.

1960: First Paralympic Games

The Paralympic Games is a major sports competition for athletes with disabilities. The first Games took place in Rome, Italy, with 400 athletes from 23 countries around the world competing in games like table tennis, wheelchair basketball, fencing, archery, and more. Today, the Paralympic Games takes place every four years, and has become one of the largest international sports competitions.

1935: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Social Security Act

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the 32nd U.S. president. He had a physical disability and used a wheelchair. While in office, he passed the Social Security Act of 1935, which, to this day, provides financial support and health insurance to millions of retired, unemployed, and disabled Americans.



Three paralympic medalists, Claire Cashmore of Great Britain, Katarina Roxon of Canada and Ellen Keane of Ireland, celebrate on the podium at the medal ceremony for the Women's 100m Breaststroke at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. They are cheering and holding their arms with limb differences in the air in celebration.

1973: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

An important law that protects disabled people's civil rights. It says that disabled people should be treated fairly and have equal access to government jobs, public schools and buildings, transportation, and government funded programs. It also made it illegal to discriminate against someone because of their disability.



A young woman wearing a yellow dress and smiling confidently in front of a yellow background. She is a wheelchair user.

1970: Heumann v. Board of Education of the City of New York

Judy Heumann, a disabled woman, sued the New York City Board of Education after she was denied a teaching license because of her disability. She won the case, and became the first wheelchair user to teach in New York City. Judy was a lifelong activist and advocate, and went on to be known as the "Mother of the Disability Rights Movement."

1975: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Parents in Pennsylvania sued the state because their disabled children were not allowed to go to school with nondisabled children. To make their argument, the lawsuit used *Brown v. Board of Education*, another important court case from 1954 that decided it was illegal and unfair to separate schools by race. The court case led to what is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a law that makes sure children with disabilities have the same educational rights and opportunities as nondisabled students.

1977: Section 504 Sit-In

Hundreds of disability activists, all with different backgrounds and disabilities, held a protest inside a government building. They refused to leave until the government agreed to enforce a law, called Section 504, that made it illegal to discriminate against someone because of their disability. This type of protest is called a sit-in. Two of the leaders of the sit-in were Judy Heumann and Brad Lomax, a disability activist and member of the Black Panther Party. The Panthers supported the sit-in by bringing daily hot meals to the activists. After activists stayed in the office for a month, the government finally agreed to protect and expand the rights of disabled people.



Demonstrators in wheelchairs protest peacefully in the lobby of a Federal Building.



Hundreds of students block the entrance to Gallaudet University in protest.

1988: "Deaf President Now" Protest at Gallaudet University

Gallaudet University is a college for Deaf and hard of hearing students. After it made the decision to hire a hearing person as president over two Deaf candidates, students led a protest to show the importance of having a Deaf president. As a result of their activism, I. King Jordan was hired as the school's first Deaf president in its 100-year history. This event brought national attention to advocacy efforts by and for the Deaf and hard of hearing community.

1990: "Wheels of Justice" March and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

More than 700 disability activists participated in the Wheels of Justice March in Washington, D.C., to express their support for a drafted, or proposed, law called the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). At the end of the march, some disability activists gathered on the steps of the U.S. Capitol building, left their mobility aids, and crawled up the stairs to show the important need for accessibility laws; this became known as the "Capitol Crawl." A few months later, the ADA was officially signed into law, making it a requirement that all public buildings and transportation be accessible to people with disabilities.

2004: First Disability Pride Parade

Chicago hosted the first Disability Pride Parade as a way to bring together, recognize, and celebrate the disability community. Today, celebratory events take place every July in cities nationwide for Disability Pride Month.

1999: Olmstead v. L.C.

Lois Curtis and Elaine Wilson lived in hospitals for many years because their local communities did not have the services to support their developmental and mental health disabilities. They knew this was unfair and filed a lawsuit that found, under the ADA, people with disabilities have the right to live in and receive services from their communities. This has been called the most important disability civil rights decision in the history of the United States, because it makes sure millions of disabled Americans have the community-based services they need.



Two people dance in celebration during a Disability Pride Parade in New York in 2017. One is in a wheelchair and the other is moving next to them holding their hand. A person is in the background playing the tuba. They are all wearing red.

2015: First Disability Pride Month

Disability Pride Month takes place every July to celebrate and honor disabled people. It began in July of 2015, during the ADA's 25th anniversary, and has continued as an annual celebration throughout the United States.



Seven athletes compete in the Women's 100m race at Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.

2006: Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was the first international human rights agreement focused on people with disabilities. Its purpose is to affirm and protect the rights of people with disabilities around the world.



A nonbinary person with autism smiling and wearing a rainbow striped shirt. A rainbow colored light shines on their face.

2020: Wethe15 Campaign launches at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games

Wethe15 is a human rights campaign focused on ending discrimination against disabled people, who make up 15% of the world's population. To reach audiences around the world, the campaign launched at the Tokyo Paralympic Games in 2020. Building on the principles of the U.N.'s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Wethe15 engages with governments, businesses, and the public to improve the lives of disabled people around the world.

Taking Action: Discussion Guides

What can you do as a family to advocate for and celebrate disability inclusion?
Read on for ideas and activities to spark discussion and exploration!

Exploring Identity and Intersectionality



Disability: The ways your mind and body work. How you communicate and move through the world in relation to societal expectations.

Gender identity: A personal feeling of who you are – a boy, girl, both or neither. Your gender might also be reflected in the pronouns you use.

Race, Ethnicity: Race and ethnicity is based on a combination of physical traits, like your skin color, eyes, and hair, as well as your ancestry, family history, country, and religion.

Culture: The meaningful things you share with your family and community, including food, creativity, music, games, holiday traditions, and more.

Interests and hobbies: The things you love to do and learn about.

Where I live: The place(s) you call home, like your country, state, city or town, and neighborhood.

Age: The number of years since you were born.

Languages I use: The ways you communicate and express yourself.

And more: Anything else that makes you who you are!

Identity is all the things that make up who you are, like your gender, your race, ethnicity, and culture, the languages you use, your disabilities, your hobbies and interests, and much more. Every part of your identity is important – they are what make you who you are! Some may be external, or clear to you and other people, while others may be internal, only seen and understood by you. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a scholar and civil rights advocate, created the term **intersectionality** to describe the way aspects of a person's identity, like their race, gender, and disability, interconnect to shape who they are and how they experience the world.

Aspects of identity also combine to create a person's unique experiences with **power**, **privilege**, and discrimination. Power is the ability to impact other people through your actions and decisions; and privilege means having certain advantages or rights that are withheld or unavailable to others. For example, a privilege might be living next door to your community's



A family with two young children play at the edge of the water on a beach in England. The older child is a wheelchair user.

fresh water lake, while power would be having the ability to control who gets to access and enjoy the lake. Neither privilege or power are inherently bad or good in this example, but each comes with responsibility to be aware of how your actions impact others. Parts of your identity may give you different kinds of privilege and power. At the same time, some aspects of your identity may also cause you to experience discrimination or unfair treatment.

Thinking about identity and intersectionality can help you understand how everyone experiences the world in their own unique way. It is also a way for you to start noticing and countering discrimination. When you connect and build relationships with other people who share aspects of your identity and experience, you may start to feel a sense of belonging to a greater community of people.

People in the disability community use the word “disabled” to affirm who they are, connect with each other, and honor that disability is a natural part of being human. Some may use **identity-first language**, meaning they describe themselves as a disabled person, e.g., an autistic person. Others may use **person-first language**, meaning they describe themselves as a person with a disability, e.g., a person who is autistic. Some people choose not to reference their disability at all, or have other terms or phrases they like to use. It is important to remember that everyone has the right to choose how they describe themselves and the different aspects of their identity – their preference may even change over time. If you’re unsure what language someone uses, ask them what they prefer and use it! This may take practice, but it’s important. Doing so shows respect for who they are!

Here are a few important things to keep in mind:

- If it is someone you’ve just met, they may not time to feel comfortable answering such a personal question. Get to know them first! Introduce yourself and share a bit about who you are, your likes, and interests.
- You can always ask someone if it’s okay to ask them about their identity. This gives them the opportunity to decide if and what they want to share – this is called consent!
- Sometimes, a person may not want to share information about a part of their identity and that’s okay. Remember, a person gets to decide how much or how little they share with you.



An Asian teenager and her coach share a fist bump while playing wheelchair tennis. They are both wheelchair users.

Family Discussion Starters

Take a moment to think about your identity and the communities you belong to.

- What are some of the words you use to describe yourself and the different aspects of your identity?
- What are some parts of your identity that influence your everyday experiences?
- If you're unsure what language someone uses to describe their disability, it's best to ask them what they prefer.

How might you ask someone you know about this? Here are a few examples:

- How do you like to talk about your disability?
- What words do you use to describe your disability?
- What words or phrases make you feel happy, confident, and understood?

Building Empathy

Empathy is a special skill that helps you understand other people's feelings and experiences so you can support them in the way that they need. It is an important part of relationship building, a way to connect with people across differences, and even helps counter biases, stereotypes, and forms of discrimination, like ableism. Like any skill, empathy develops over time and with lots of practice!

There are four key parts to empathy:

1. **Perspective-taking**; this means considering how someone is feeling or thinking from their point of view.
2. **Being judgment-free**; this means really paying attention to what someone is saying and learning about who they are and what they experience.
3. **Recognizing emotions**; Recognizing emotions; this means naming, or identifying, the emotions someone experiences and relating them to feelings you've had before.
4. **Communicating your understanding**; this means sharing that you are there to support and care for the other person. Here are a few examples:
 - "Just checking in. How are you doing?"
 - "It sounds like you are feeling [insert feeling]. Is this true?"
 - "What do you think would be most helpful to you?"
 - "You are going through a lot right now. I am here if you want to talk."

It can be hard to imagine how another person feels, especially if their experiences are different from your own. It can also be difficult to know how to respond. Remember, it takes practice! Meeting new people, learning about them, and listening to their stories and experiences is a meaningful way to build your empathy.

Pause for Perspective:

What's it like Living with a Chronic Illness?

When a friend asked Christine Miserandino what it was like to live with a non-apparent chronic illness, she came up with a way to describe her experience using what she had in front of her — spoons. Each spoon, she said, represented a certain amount of energy. People who don't have a chronic condition or disability have lots of spoons, meaning they have lots of energy, but people with chronic illness, chronic pain, or other disabilities, may have a limited number of spoons, meaning they have limited amounts of energy. Daily activities, like getting dressed, making a snack, or standing at a bus stop, deplete or "take away" her spoons. Every day, she has to manage the number of spoons she has, being careful not to use too many. It takes a lot of planning and consideration based on all sorts of factors, like how rested she feels, how much pain she's in, or how much she has to do.

Today, Christine's way of explaining her experience with chronic illness is known by many as the "Spoon Theory" and it is commonly used as a way to help people without lived experience understand what it is like to live with a chronic condition or other disability. For people with lived experience, the spoon theory provides an opportunity to express complicated, and often personal experiences, in a simple way. It also offers an opportunity to connect and share solidarity with people who have similar experiences, and to practice self-empathy. In fact, many people with chronic illnesses even refer to themselves as "Spoonies" as a way to identify themselves and connect with others!



An African American family with three young children walking together and smiling on a playground. The daughter has caudal regression syndrome and is using a wheelchair. She is in the middle between her parents. Her twin brothers are holding their parents' hands.

Imagine you have 12 “spoons” of energy to use throughout your day. Think about your daily activities and how many spoons (or how much energy) they take.

- How many spoons are left at the end of your day?
- What kind of activities take more spoons?
- How does this number change if you have a busier day?
- What happens to your day if you run out of spoons?



A multi-generational family of five adults and one child smile and laugh outside. They are all Afro Latino. One of the adults, a man, is a wheelchair user.

Empathy isn't just something you show to other people; it is also something you show to yourself. Self-empathy is about recognizing, understanding, and communicating your emotions,

showing yourself kindness, and considering your own needs. For those with chronic illness, chronic pain, or other disabilities, self-empathy is an especially important skill to practice. Ableism can cause lonely feelings that can influence how someone thinks and feels about themselves; showing compassion, kindness, and empathy for who you are is a way to grow your confidence, and self-acceptance. You are fantastic just as you are!

Little acts of self-empathy can go a long way. Next time you are experiencing big, sad, or overwhelming feelings, try:

- Saying kind words to yourself; affirmations like, “I believe in myself” or “I am amazing just as I am” can help you build confidence and celebrate who you are.
- Comforting your mind and body; rest when you need to, give yourself a hug, count to ten, or take a few deep breaths!
- Sharing your emotions; talking with a loved one can help you process what you're feeling. It also lets you know you are not alone!

Family Discussion Starters

- Why do you think it is important to learn about and consider other people's feelings and perspectives?
- What are a few ways you can show empathy to others? Think: listening and responding!
- What kinds of things do you do to show yourself empathy?
- Have you ever tried any of the little acts of self-empathy on the list above? Which ones will you try in the future?

Thinking Inclusively: Inclusive Spaces & Design

Getting to know yourself and others better, and practicing empathy, can be part of understanding different perspectives and expanding your own. As you start to see yourself more connected to others, you'll also begin to notice how everyone is connected to and impacted by the places where we spend time.

Inclusive design is a way of creating and doing things so that people of all identities (including aspects of disability, race, gender, age, size, language, and more) are able to access them fully and equally. This includes places like buildings, classrooms, parks, streets and walkways. It includes objects like toys, furniture, vehicles, devices, and appliances, and digital tools like software, apps, and media content. And it even includes how a lesson or topic is taught in school, and the different ways people are invited to learn and participate.



A little girl smiles and waves on a playground. She has Down syndrome.



A young girl plays on an accessible playground in England. She uses a wheelchair and is pulling herself and having fun on the climbing frame.



A playground is an example of a place made especially for kids. Playgrounds have bright colors, lots of different ways to have fun and be creative, things to climb on, soft surfaces to move on, and places to explore and rest. They also often have different sized equipment that kids of all ages and sizes can play on. But, sometimes, playgrounds don't consider the needs of kids (and their family members) with disabilities.

A Japanese father, who is a wheelchair user, and his two children are laughing at the park.

At inclusive playgrounds, all kids can play! The Playground for All Children, located in Queens, NY, was the first playground in the U.S. constructed for children's diverse needs and

abilities. For 40 years, it has been a model for other inclusive playgrounds throughout the country and the world. It features play equipment like slides and swings, a suspension bridge, a water play area, adjustable height basketball hoops, and a sensory garden. Everything is accessible by stair-free pathways with textured surfaces and braille signage. Designers of inclusive playgrounds pay close attention to the ways kids play and move on a playground, and work to meet needs that are physical, social-emotional, sensory, communicative, and cognitive. Some design essentials include: full ramp and pathway access, upper body play equipment, different levels of play equipment, cozy places to play and rest, and shaded seating.

Family Discussion Starters

- Are there places you spend time in that feel like they were made just for you? What makes them feel this way?
- How can public spaces, like parks, schools, and playgrounds, be more accessible for kids and families in your community? Think about the ways people enter and travel through a space, the types of signage and language(s) that are posted, and the colors and textures that are used.
- Now, think about the playground you play at most often. What are the ways you play and interact there? What kind of things would need to change to make sure all kids could play?

Celebrating Community

It's important to find ways to celebrate who you are and the communities that surround you. The Disability Pride movement is a great example of how celebrating ourselves and others in our community can grow kindness and acceptance. This movement encourages people with disabilities to be exactly who they are, connects them together through community, and uplifts the many contributions disabled people have made to society and culture, throughout history and today. Like all social movements, Disability Pride is about people coming together in **solidarity** and celebration. Solidarity means showing up and showing support for other people and feeling a sense of unity with others.

Celebrating and showing solidarity with your communities can involve big actions, like going to a parade, or small actions, like hanging a sign in your window. It can also mean sending your friend a note of encouragement, or checking on them when they're sad. Celebrating and supporting yourself can happen in big and small ways, too, like throwing yourself a party or saying kind words to yourself through affirmations.

Family Discussion Starters

- How do you celebrate who you are? What are some ways you've celebrated others?
- When you think about being in solidarity with others, how do you show up? How do people show up for you?
- How does it feel to receive love and support from people in your communities? How do you feel when you give love and support to others?

Review, Reflect, and Reimagine: Family Reflection Journal

Use these activities to reflect together on all that you read, explored, and learned.

Identity Splat

Intersectionality is all the ways that different parts of your identity overlap to shape who you are and how you experience the world. Creating an identity map can help you celebrate all the unique things that make you, you! It also gets you thinking about how aspects of your identity connect with power and privilege. Using Nickelodeon's identity splat, write, draw, color, or share the different aspects of your identity.

Color, write, draw, stick or glue the things that make you who you are. Create a splat-tastic sign that shows off all the special pieces of your identity. Identity aspects include family, friends, communities, passions and activities, race, ethnicity and culture, gender identity, and disability.



Family: Your parents, step-parents, guardians or foster parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, aunts & uncles. The people who are there for you and make you feel loved.

Friends: They may not be related to you but they sure feel like family. These are the pals who make you feel seen. The ones you confide in, play, and laugh with.

Communities: Your school, out-of-school program, neighborhood, and town. The places and groups you're a part of, where you learn and grow.

Gender identity: A personal feeling of who you are – a boy, girl, both or neither. Your gender might also be reflected in the pronouns you use.

Race, Ethnicity and Culture:

Race, Ethnicity: Race and ethnicity is based on a combination of physical traits, like your skin color, eyes, and hair, as well as your ancestry, family history, country, and religion.

Culture: The meaningful things you share with your family and community, including food, creativity, music, games, holiday traditions, and more.

Disability: The ways your mind and body work. What are some ways you communicate and move through the world? Do you have a disability? Are you neurodivergent?

Passions & activities: What do you love to do and learn about?

Pause and think about all the parts of your identity. Then, list...

- The parts of my identity I am most aware of: _____
- The parts I am least aware of: _____
- The parts I want to learn more about: _____
- The parts that give me privilege or power: _____
- The parts that are misunderstood or overlooked by others: _____

Ways I Learn, Communicate and Move



Two friends read a book while playing together. They are smiling and one of the girls has no hair due to alopecia.

Take turns answering questions about the way you learn, communicate, and move your body!

Learn:

What are some of the ways you like to learn?

Reading, playing, making art, listening, writing!

Add your own!



Three Deaf teenage friends work together on an assignment. They are communicating in sign language and laughing.

Communicate:

What are some of the ways you like to communicate? Sign language, assistive technology, verbal language, body language, pictures!

Add your own!



A young person wearing headphones dances and waves their arms. They are an amputee, and are in front of a colorful patterned wall in their room in Brazil.

Move:

What are some of the ways you like to move your body? Playing games and sports, dancing, stretching, swimming, laughing!

Add your own!

Inclusive Places and Spaces

Imagine a place especially designed for you. What does it look like? What would you do in this place? How does it fit you and your needs? Draw, write, or share your ideas with a loved one.



Now, think about the place you designed. How could your place be designed to fit the needs and abilities of all kids? Draw, write, or share your ideas with a loved one.



Pod Pals

In an inclusive world, everyone feels supported and celebrated for who they are. Think about the friends, family, teachers, and community members who you can always count on to make you feel safe, secure, and loved. When you want to share a moment of celebration and joy, or disappointment and sadness, who do you reach out to? This is your pod!

First, write your name in the inner circle. Then, write the names of your pod pals – the people you feel connected to – in the smaller, outer circles (you can add as many circles as you want). This is a cool way to recognize the people who show up for you!



Glossary of Key Terms

Ableism

Discrimination, prejudice, or unfair treatment against people with disabilities. It can occur between individuals and within social systems. Ableism prioritizes and gives advantages to nondisabled people, and places value and worth on people based on the ways their bodies and minds work.

Accessibility

The quality of a place, object, or activity being easily entered, used, or understood by all people, regardless of disability status.

Accommodation

A way to adjust or modify something for a person with a disability in order to increase their access, meet their needs, and benefit equally to those who do not have a disability. Often refers to modifications that take place within a work or learning environment.

Activism

The actions people take to support others, and to bring about change to policies, laws, or rules that are unfair or unjust.

Assistive Technology

Any equipment, device, software, or system that supports a person's functioning and participation, including movement, communication, learning, and working.

Apparent and Non-apparent Disabilities

Apparent disabilities are those that are generally, or more easily, perceived by others. For example, a person using a mobility aid or a person with a limb difference. Non-apparent or less apparent disabilities are those that are not always perceived by others. For example, a person with a learning disability or a person with chronic fatigue. The same disability may be more or less apparent at any given time, based on an individual's experience with the disability.

Barrier

Factors in a person's environment that limit how they can function, interact, and participate. For example, barriers experienced by disabled people can include physical spaces that are not accessible, negative attitudes toward people with disabilities, not having the assistive technology a person needs, and social policies and programs that are not inclusive of people with disabilities.

Bias

A tendency to favor or oppose a particular thing or group of people. Some people might be biased against a certain race, ethnicity, culture, or religion because they have been told negative things about that group.

Culture

Practices, beliefs, values, and creative expression, shared by a community or group of people, which is often seen as important and has been done over a long period of time. Culture is something all people and communities participate in.

Disability

Disability includes differences in how a person's body or mind works compared with other people; how these differences interact with systems and environments; and the impact on people's experiences. These interactions can result in participation barriers in all aspects of community, such as work, play, learning, and faith.

Disabilities can be physical, sensory, mental, emotional, cognitive, and more. Disabilities may be more or less apparent to others. Individuals may have temporary, recurring, acquired, and/or multiple disabilities. Disability is a natural part of human diversity. Many disabled individuals or groups consider disability an identity with its own culture (Disability Belongs™).

Disability Culture

Among people with disabilities, a sense of identity and belonging to a group or community. Disability culture is based on shared lived experiences, history, activism, a sense of solidarity and pride, and forms of connection and expression that include languages used, art, writing and literature, music, dance, media and more. There are many cultures within the broader disability culture, such as autistic culture.

Discrimination

Unfair treatment of one person or a group of people because of an aspect of the person or group's identity, like their race, gender, ability, religion, or culture. Discrimination is an action that can come from prejudice.

Equity

Occurs when people of different identities and circumstances are supported in the particular ways they need so that they all can access the same opportunities and achieve equal outcomes. Equity recognizes that individual differences and systemic injustice mean people have different social starting points and need different resources in order to thrive.

Euphemism

An indirect expression used to refer to something that the speaker considers upsetting, offensive, or harsh. For example, saying you were "let go" from a job is a euphemism for "fired."

Identity

The individual characteristics a person identifies with or is characterized by; identity encompasses both external and internal aspects, including, skin color, gender, disability, location, beliefs, values, heritage, and traditions.

Identity-First Language

A way to refer to a person's identity that centers their disability, or other identity aspect, as a core part of who they are. For example, a disabled person.

Inclusion and Inclusive Design

The act of creating policies, resources, programs, and spaces that are representative and accessible to people of all identities, so that everyone can fully participate and benefit.

Intersectionality

The way aspects of a person's identity, like their race, gender, and disability, interconnect to shape who they are and how they experience the world. These aspects of identity combine to create their unique experiences with power, privilege, and discrimination.

Neurodivergent

A person whose brain functions in a different way than what is thought of as "typical." This includes variations in social interaction, learning, attention, cognition, or mood.

Oppression

The restriction of human rights or unjust treatment of a group of people by those who hold power.

Person-First Language

A way to refer to a person's identity that centers the person before their disability or other identity aspect. For example, a person with a disability.

Power

The ability to influence, control, or impact other people and things through decisions and actions.

Prejudice

Having a preconceived opinion or making a decision about a person or group of people without enough knowledge or information. Prejudicial thinking is often based on stereotypes.

Privilege

An advantage, benefit, or right granted to a person or group of people, while being withheld from or unavailable to others.

Racism

The belief that one race is better than another – and having the power to create systems (e.g., educational system, legal system, etc.) that support that belief.

Self-Determination

The act of a person making decisions for themselves, and choosing and setting their own life goals.

Solidarity

Expressing support and unity with another person or group, often in response to discrimination or mistreatment.

Unconscious Bias, or Implicit Bias

The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner or in a way we are not aware of.

Kids' Reading List

Picture Books

I am a Masterpiece! by Mia Armstrong

What Happened to You? by James Catchpole

A Day With No Words by Tiffany Hammond

Daisy Doo: All the Sounds She Knew by Daisy Kent

My Brain Is Magic by Prasha Sooful

Chapter Books and Graphic Novels

Out of My Mind by Sharon M. Draper

Rolling Warrior: The Incredible, Sometimes Awkward, True Story of a Rebel Girl on Wheels Who Helped Spark a Revolution by Judith Heumann

The Chance to Fly Ali Stroker and Stacy Davidowitz

Shiny Misfits by Maysoon Zayid and Shadia Amin

Resources for Kids

- [Make Your Own Sensory Toy](#)
- [Practice Sharing How You Feel](#)
- [Be an Inclusive Youth Leader](#)
- [Build Your Self-Esteem](#)
- [Remember, You Are Not Alone!](#)

Resources for Caring Adults

- [American Association of People with Disabilities](#): an organization working to increase the political and economic power of people with disabilities
- [Caring Across Generations](#): a national organization focused on caregivers and care work
- [Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution](#): a documentary film about a groundbreaking summer camp for teens with disabilities
- [Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally](#): a book by Emily Ladau
- [Disability Belongs™](#): an organization working to end stigmas and advance opportunities for disabled people
- [National Black Disability Coalition](#): an organization working to promote disability equity in the greater Black community

- **Spoon Theory**: a personal story by Christine Miserandino that describes her experience of chronic illness and fatigue by using spoons to represent units of energy
- **Understood**: an organization providing resources to support people with learning and thinking differences

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Special Thanks

We extend our deepest appreciation to Watson Creative Consulting for researching and writing this guide, and to Disability Belongs™ (formerly RespectAbility) for providing invaluable guidance on disability inclusion and accessibility.

Watson Creative Consulting specializes in the development of culturally responsive children’s content, curricula, and storytelling.

Disability Belongs™ is a disability-led advocacy organization focused on redefining narratives of disability, developing disabled leaders, and driving opportunities for the disability community to build a more inclusive future.