



Cultivating Inclusive Practices: A Guide for Informal Learning Institutions

Foundations of Inclusive Informal Learning Environments

Creating inclusive informal learning environments is not a journey toward a fixed destination. It can't be achieved by following a simple set of steps. Instead, it is an **evolving practice** that demands long-term commitment, cultural reflection, and systemic change.

The Neuro Inclusive Learning Network (NILN) supports informal learning institutions in creating more inclusive environments for neurodiverse learners by advancing practical strategies, resources, and communities of practice that foster inclusion and belonging.

As a core tenet of this work, we advocate for **Universal Design**. This philosophy fundamentally shifts the focus from fixing the learner to changing the environment. In truly inclusive institutions, the responsibility to adapt rests with the institution, not the individual. We must dismantle the expectation that neurodiverse learners should change their behaviors to fit into our spaces.

The strategies and examples in this brief reflect this philosophy, illustrating ways organizations can design environments that anticipate and support diverse ways of learning, communicating, and participating. Together, they highlight a range of approaches that can strengthen access, participation, and belonging for neurodiverse learners in informal learning environments.



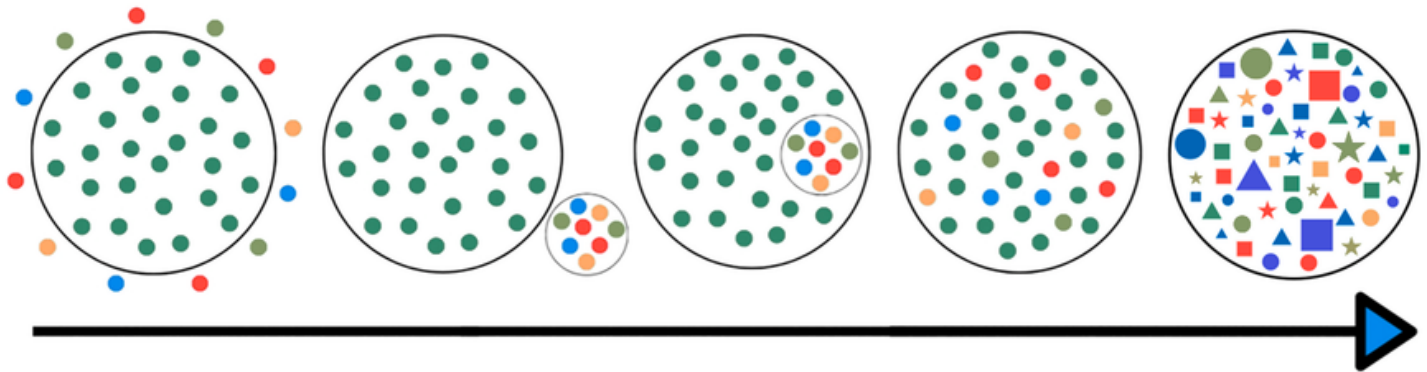
HOW WE DEFINE INCLUSION

Ensuring that people of all backgrounds and abilities can meaningfully participate in a community or environment. It moves beyond mere physical presence to create a space where every individual is valued, respected, and treated equitably, fostering a genuine sense of belonging.

The Inclusion Model

To support systemic transformation, we developed the **Inclusion Model** to help organizations critically evaluate where their current practices fall on a range of inclusive approaches and identify opportunities for growth.

The illustration below represents this continuum. The colorful dots represent neurodiverse learners, and the green dots represent neurotypical learners.



On the far left of the range, neurodiverse learners are not included at all. Moving across the continuum, the illustration shows a typical progression of inclusive practices: first, separate and distinct spaces for neurodiverse learners; then, those distinct spaces becoming part of the broader learning experience rather than existing separately.

Continuing along the range, all of the dots become interspersed, representing neurodiverse learners fully included alongside their neurotypical peers. On the far right, the illustration expands beyond dots to include different shapes, sizes, and colors. This represents the goal we are moving toward—where multiple kinds of diversity are recognized, celebrated, and seen as adding value to the vibrancy of the whole community.

Importantly, the Inclusion Model is not intended to suggest that there is a single path or a one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion. Rather, it is a tool for reflection, helping organizations recognize where they are today and identify opportunities to create environments where all learners experience meaningful participation and belonging.



REFLECT

As you review the Inclusion Model, consider:

- Where does your organization currently fall along the continuum?
- Which practices already support inclusion?
- Where are there opportunities to move toward greater participation, belonging, and accessibility?

Separate Autism-Friendly Practices

APPROACH 1

One strategy for supporting inclusion is to offer “autism-friendly” practices that provide separate experiences for neurodiverse learners. These practices include accommodations specifically designed for visitors with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or sensory processing needs. In general, the language used to describe these accommodations explicitly targets individuals and families with ASD or sensory processing needs and may not reflect the broader range of visitors who could benefit from the same offerings.

The purpose of these approaches is to reduce feelings of self-consciousness and isolation while building a sense of community by intentionally responding to specific access needs. Examples include sensory-friendly spaces, quiet rooms, and designated times when exhibits and programs are adapted to be less overwhelming. These offerings matter. For many families, they provide a sense of safety, understanding, and belonging. They can also serve as an important entry point for visiting, especially for families who may not yet feel confident that the institution is prepared to welcome them.

At the same time, sensory-friendly spaces and designated times should be understood as one part of a broader inclusion strategy, not the endpoint. When these approaches are the only way visitors with ASD and their families can participate, institutions may unintentionally reinforce separation rather than belonging. Families may receive the message that they are welcome only in certain places, at certain times, or under special conditions. True inclusion requires both: dedicated spaces and experiences that honor specific needs, and ongoing efforts to make the broader museum, zoo, or learning environment more accessible, flexible, and welcoming for everyone.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLE

“Play Your Way”

The **Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose** hosts the *Play Your Way* program, an evening event specifically for children ages 2–15 with ASD. The program is intended to provide a relaxing and enjoyable opportunity for guests to engage in hands-on learning. Staff are specifically prepared to ensure a successful experience for children with ASD and their families. The program also provides an opportunity for families to connect with one another and learn about other local resources to support children with ASD.

The benefit of these programs is that they build internal community among families of children on the autism spectrum. One next step could include a set of strategies to move toward shared experiences that take place during regular operating hours.



Integrated Autism-Friendly Practices

APPROACH 2

This set of strategies makes accommodations available within shared spaces during typical operating hours. Rather than creating a separate experience, these practices integrate supports into the everyday museum, zoo, or learning environment. While designed with visitors with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and sensory processing needs in mind, these accommodations are available to all visitors. In this way, interaction among people with differing needs, preferences, and abilities becomes expected, normalized, and part of the shared experience.

The purpose of these approaches is to help visitors with ASD and their families feel a greater sense of comfort, autonomy, and belonging within the regular rhythms of the institution. Supports such as visual schedules, sensory maps, quiet seating areas within exhibit spaces, flexible participation options, clear wayfinding, and staff prepared to respond to different needs help visitors navigate the experience with greater confidence. These accommodations can serve as familiar anchors or "home bases" without separating visitors from the broader community.

By integrating supports into the everyday visitor experience, institutions communicate that neurodiversity is a natural and valued part of the community—not an exception that must be accommodated separately or after hours. This approach also reflects the principles of Universal Design: when shared spaces are designed with visitors with ASD and sensory processing needs in mind, the result is often a better experience for everyone. Clearer communication, flexible engagement, calmer environments, and more predictable experiences benefit visitors with ASD while also supporting children, caregivers, older adults, visitors with other disabilities, and anyone seeking a more accessible and welcoming place to learn.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLE

Multi-Sensory/Snoezelen Room



The **Miami Children's Museum** offers a *Multi-Sensory/Snoezelen Room* as part of the museum facilities. This space utilizes controlled lighting and visuals to create a calming environment specifically designed to reduce agitation and anxiety, while also engaging users, stimulating reactions, and encouraging communication. A space like this can be a vital functional tool for children on the autism spectrum to feel a sense of calm and belonging, it remains open to the general public, allowing any visitor to benefit from a moment of sensory regulation.

As organizations continue to expand inclusive practices across shared spaces and everyday operations, inclusion shifts from being a specific "offering" to becoming part of how the organization welcomes, designs-for, and supports all visitors.

Organization-Wide Practices

APPROACH 3

In this set of strategies, inclusive accommodations are embedded into the organization's culture, design decisions, programs, operations, staffing practices, and everyday visitor experience. Rather than distinguishing between "special" and "regular" guests, the museum, zoo, or learning environment assumes that visitors will arrive with a wide range of needs, preferences, abilities, and ways of engaging. Supports are a natural part of the experience, and all visitors are encouraged to use what helps them participate most fully. Language is broad and welcoming, referring to "all visitors" or "any visitor," so accommodations are understood as standard features of a thoughtfully designed environment rather than exceptions, add-ons, or services that must be requested.

Organization-wide inclusion also extends beyond the visitor experience. It is reflected in how staff and volunteers are recruited, hired, trained, supported, and retained. This might include writing job descriptions that clearly describe essential functions without unnecessary barriers, offering flexible interview formats, providing accommodations during hiring and onboarding, training supervisors to support neurodiverse employees, and creating policies that recognize different communication styles, sensory needs, work rhythms, and support needs. It also includes ongoing professional development, inclusive supervision practices, accessible staff meetings and materials, and a workplace culture where employees and volunteers feel comfortable asking for what they need to do their work well.

The purpose of organization-wide inclusive practice is to communicate a universal welcome and create conditions where every visitor, staff member, volunteer, and community partner can navigate the environment with greater confidence, comfort, autonomy, and belonging. When inclusion is embedded across the institution, people no longer have to wonder whether they fit, whether their needs are acceptable, or whether support is meant for someone else. Instead, the organization communicates that different ways of moving, learning, communicating, resting, working, and participating are expected, valued, and part of the shared community.



REAL WORLD EXAMPLE

Re-Entrance Policy



The **Arizona Museum of Natural History**, in Mesa, Arizona, demonstrates an organization-wide approach through its flexible re-entry and rescheduling policy. Visitors can leave the museum at any time and re-enter until 5 p.m. using their dated admission receipt. If they are unable to return the same day, they may reschedule their visit at no additional charge.

This policy is a low cost, high-impact example of Universal Design because it supports a wide range of visitor needs without requiring families to disclose a diagnosis or request a special accommodation. Any visitor might use this flexibility for lunch, rest, or an unexpected change in plans, but it can be especially meaningful for neurodiverse visitors and families who may need to step away, decompress, regulate, and return when they are ready. In this way, the museum communicates that different ways of engaging with the museum are expected, respected, and built into the visitor experience.

Inclusive Practices at a Glance

The table below provides a high-level view of inclusive practices. We recommend that organizations offer accommodations from all three categories to meet the needs of a wide range of visitors through both specific and universal supports.

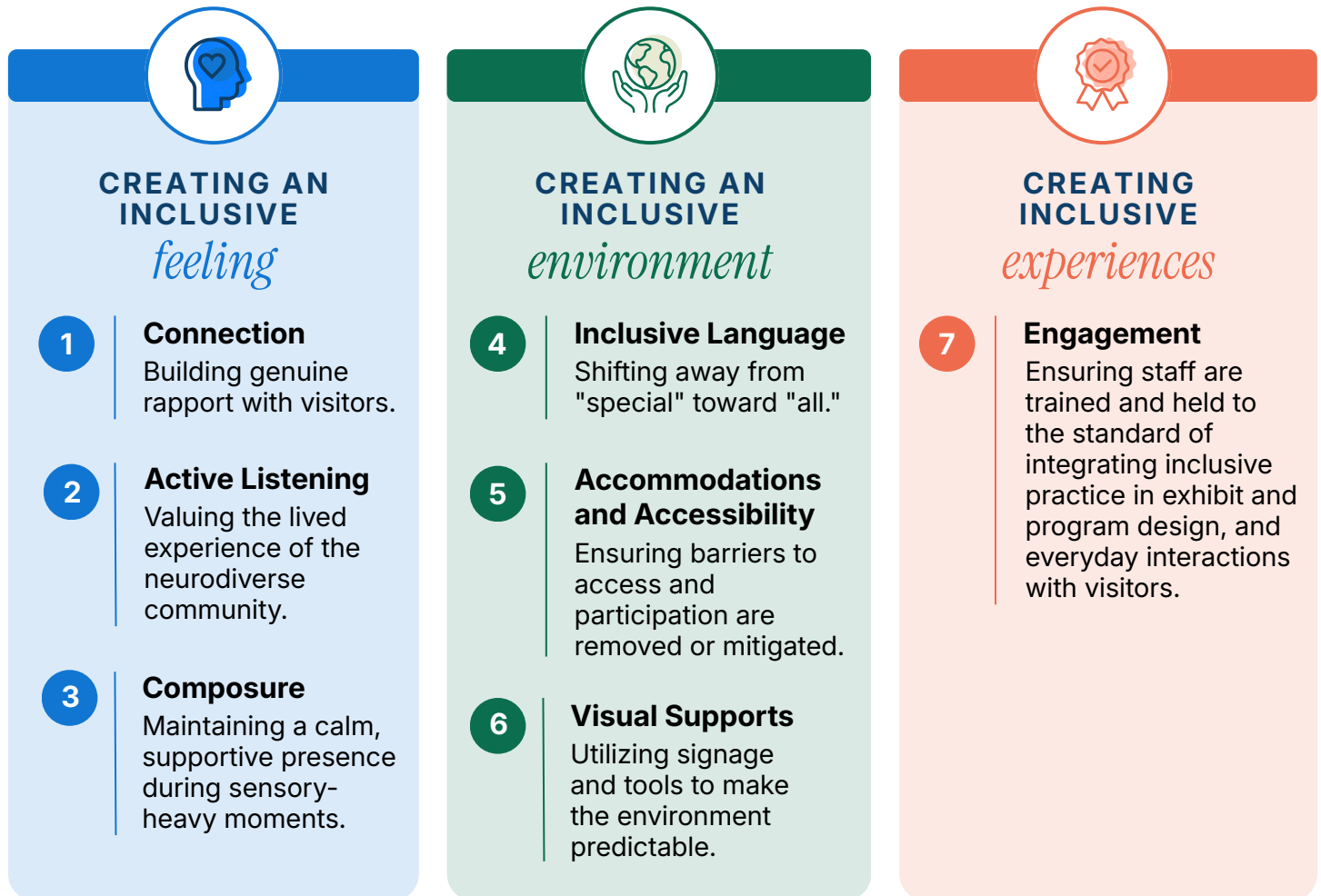
Separate practices can serve as an important entry point for families who may not yet feel comfortable in public spaces, communicating that they are specifically welcome. Integrated practices build on that foundation by welcoming neurodiverse visitors while including them as part of the broader community. Organization-wide practices cultivate a universal sense of welcome and belonging by embedding inclusion into programs, policies, and the visitor experience.

Approach	Target Audience	Primary Purpose	Key Characteristics
Separate	Exclusively designed for visitors with ASD or sensory needs	Reduce barriers; build confidence and community	Specialized programs, after-hours events, or dedicated spaces
Integrated	Specifically welcomes neurodiverse visitors while open to all	Support participation in shared experiences	Shared spaces, accommodations, and tools during regular hours
Organization-Wide	Designed for all visitors	Communicates a universal welcome for all guests	Embedded in policies, practices, and design

Moving Toward Systemic Change

To help informal learning institutions deepen their capacity for inclusive practice, we have identified **seven core competencies** that support inclusive experiences for neurodiverse visitors. Cultivating these competencies across all levels of an organization—from senior leadership to visitor services staff—helps build a culture where every visitor feels welcomed, supported, and valued.

The competencies are organized into three interconnected areas of practice:



Cultivating these seven competencies can help informal learning institutions to create the conditions where families feel so supported and understood that they can visit a museum whenever they choose. The supports that allow everyone to have an exceptional museum experience are not special requests, but are naturally available as part of a community that embraces all individuals as valuable contributors who belong at museums.

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 2314100. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

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