

This document was prepared by Meredith Carson for the Spring 2026 Princeton Seminary class, *Strategies for Inclusion*. Meredith Carson is Creative Director of Triad Pride Performing Arts' *Theatre for All*, Wilmington, North Carolina.

General Advice for Inclusion in Theatre Arts:

1. Remember- Disability is DIVERSE! If you've met one person with a disability...you've met **one person** with that disability. Each person is a unique individual.
2. Establish a connection before diving into creative work. Get to know the folks in your group and introduce yourself first.
3. Model/Demonstrate rather than instruct– this applies to social and theatre skills.
 - YOU are part of the company. Don't hold your own talent back in rehearsal and on stage. We all rise to meet each other when we perform at our highest level.
4. For many neurodivergent individuals, a lack of eye contact does not mean a lack of focus or interest.
5. Many individuals with disabilities are comfortable with (& even rely upon) physical touch and redirection on and offstage—just ask first to establish the actor's level of comfort.
6. It's totally okay to redirect off-task behavior or a train of thought that has gone off the rails—not every idea is a great idea.
7. When communicating with someone who is non-speaking,
 - Remember to be inclusive (of course)—never assume they cannot understand what is being said. (Non-speaking does not equal non-verbal. Include them in the conversation even if they do not speak. Do not speak as though they are not there.
 - Use simple sentences.
 - Ask yes or no questions—agree on a gesture to communicate (like nodding or hand gestures)
 - Use pictures, writing or objects to aid with communication and to record ideas.
8. Not everyone can read, but there are many forms of *written* communication. Many non-readers like to have a “script” with symbols or drawings to refer to.
9. During downtime, mingle and socialize (after taking care of your own needs). Many adults with disabilities live for the social opportunities and interactions that theatre provides.

Treating Adults with Disabilities Like Adults: A Guide to Dignity and Respected

(Adapted from Gigi's Playhouse training materials. gigisplayhouse.org)

Assume Capability

Adults with disabilities are capable of doing many things, just like any other adult. Whether it's holding a job, living independently, voting, or being an active member of society, start by assuming they can handle it. Give them the same opportunities you would anyone else.

Use Age-Appropriate Language

Speak to adults with disabilities in the same tone and manner you would use with any adult. Patronizing or “baby talk” is not only unnecessary, but also disrespectful. They are adults and deserve to be spoken to as such.

Promote Independence

Encourage and support their independence. Rather than immediately offering to help, let them try tasks on their own—allow them the space to act on their own. Be there to assist only when asked or needed.

What NOT to Do

Don't Ignore Boundaries

Adults with disabilities have boundaries like anyone else. Respect their personal space, preferences, and autonomy. Don't assume you know what they want or need without asking.

Don't Infantilize

Avoid treating adults with disabilities like children. We don't need to call them “cute” or act “surprised” when they talk about an adult topic. They have adult interests, needs, and desires. Infantilizing them undermines their autonomy and potential.

Don't Over-Help

While it's natural to want to lend a hand, offering too much help can strip someone of their independence. Instead, be available if needed but allow them the time and space to complete tasks on their own.

Let's remember that every adult—regardless of their abilities—deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. When we approach adults with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, etc. with this mindset, we create a more just and compassionate society where everyone can thrive and be included.