



THE CENTRE FOR THE ARTS IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT  
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

# THE DISABILITY AWARENESS AND EMPATHY BUILDING TOOLKIT

# The Disability Awareness and Empathy Building Toolkit

Poppy Baktis

Miranda D'Amico

The Centre for the Arts in Human Development

Faculty of Fine Arts, Concordia University

ISBN 978-0-88947-497-0

## Foreword

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide you with information and activities to help you to raise awareness about people with disabilities. Raising awareness about this often stigmatized and marginalized group of people will help your students see that diversity is part of life and of society and that it takes many different kinds of people to make up our world. “Different” does not mean less, it does not mean unequal – it simply means different.



This toolkit has been developed by the Centre for the Arts in Human Development (CAHD). The Centre for the



Arts in Human Development at Concordia University, established in 1996, is an educational, clinical, and research centre serving adults with developmental disabilities and other special needs populations. Located at the Loyola Campus of Concordia University in Montréal, Québec, the Centre is under the auspices of the Department of Creative Arts Therapies in the

Faculty of Fine Arts. Unique in Canada, the Centre uses four types of creative arts therapies—art, drama, music and dance/movement—to promote autonomy, improve self-confidence and social skills, and enhance overall quality of life for its participants.

Since 1996, the CAHD’s team of creative art therapists, theatre artists, and social scientists have been producing and researching theatre with adults who have a wide variety of developmental disabilities. In 2006, CAHD received a three-year grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to produce an ethnodrama in order to evaluate the impact of this type of performance on attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities. **Ethnodrama** is an innovative research method through which the real-life experiences of a specific group of people are dramatized. The result was a theatrical production entitled “It’s a Wonderful World”, involving all of the arts: drama, music, dance, and the visual arts, based on the life experiences of the participants of the Centre. It was performed for a variety of audiences and was warmly received. The entire process was filmed and the highlights were made into a DVD entitled “In Their Own Voices”.

During the 2008-2009 academic year, the Centre was given permission from the Lester B. Pearson School Board, an English school board in Québec, to do research in several of



its schools, the aim of which was to evaluate the efficacy of viewing the DVD on students' attitudes towards people with developmental disabilities. Through the DVD and follow-up discussion, students were given the opportunity to empathize and understand what it is like to live with developmental disabilities and were provided with an educational experience in de-stigmatization, acceptance, and social inclusion.

This toolkit is then the extension of the goals of our research. We believe that this toolkit can be well-adapted to any classroom and will potentially go far in helping to empower students to play a role in building a just and healthy society by promoting inclusive values towards the culture of disability. Through this toolkit, we hope to help encourage openness to diversity in society and engender an awareness of human dignity at all levels in our communities.

It is important that people learn to

1. see the person first and not their disability or difference
2. focus on people's abilities rather than their disabilities
3. be aware that people with disabilities have rights, hopes, dreams, and goals just like anyone else.

Historically, people with intellectual disabilities have been deprived of "the dignity and value attached to the status of being human" (Ward & Stewart, 2008, p. 297). They have been seen as living lives that have less value and at times have been denied the right to live within their own communities, to marry, have children, work, receive an education, and in some cases, to receive life-saving medical treatment (Ward & Stewart, 2008). We hope that through awareness and knowledge, future generations will treat people with disabilities with the respect and dignity that they rightly deserve.

The focus of this toolkit is on intellectual and developmental disabilities as the mandate of the Centre for the Arts in Human Development is to provide services to this population.

This toolkit was designed to help your students learn about people with disabilities – how they live, work, and feel. The goal is to show how they are truly full members of our society and are deserving of respect and recognition from everyone.

Whether you use all or part of this toolkit depends on your time restrictions, but it is hoped that you will take the time to incorporate some of the ideas into your classes. The introduction to the Québec Education Program states that the program sets out to "prepare the citizens of tomorrow to meet the challenges of a pluralistic society that welcomes diversity..." (Québec Education Program [QEP], 2005, p. 2). The role of our schools is to

prepare students to contribute to a society that is just and democratic, and as such using this toolkit will help you to fulfill this mandate.

**Within this toolkit you will find the following materials:**

- 1. “In Their Own Voices” – the DVD created from the highlights of the ethnodramatic production entitled “It’s a Wonderful World”, which was co-written and performed by adults with developmental disabilities at Concordia University’s Centre for the Arts in Human Development.**
- 2. Discussion questions pertaining to the DVD and/or questions to initiate conversations on this topic.**
- 3. Activities and assignments grouped by subject area, noting the competencies addressed from the Québec Education Program.\***
- 4. Resources: articles and information to be used with the toolkit**
- 5. A list of books that deal with disabilities either by theme or by having characters that have disabilities.**
- 6. A list of movies that deal with disabilities either by theme or by having characters that have disabilities.**
- 7. A list of websites for further information.**
- 8. Guest speakers in the Montreal area – actors from the play – who would be available by invitation to participate in a Q & A after showing the DVD in your classroom. Contact CAHD at 514-848-8616.**

\*While the Québec Education Program standards are noted at the end of each activity, the competencies described are applicable to other educational environments.



## Intellectual Disability

**Objective:** To experience what it is like for someone with an intellectual disability to perform everyday tasks

**Materials:** Paper, pencils

### Instructions:

At the end of any class ask your students to write personal responses to what they have learned using only two-syllable words. Ask them to place their names and the date at the top of the page. Allow them only about two minutes to complete this activity and then collect their responses. Explore how this activity made them feel by asking:

1. Did they find it frustrating or were they annoyed at having been asked to do something that they knew they could not succeed at?
2. Were they embarrassed that they found it difficult, did they give up?
3. What strategies could have helped?  
More time, working with partners, teacher assistance, reference materials...
4. Relate the way they felt to the way that some people with intellectual disabilities feel when doing things in their daily lives that most of us take for granted.

In the discussion that follows it is important to really emphasize the strategies that could have been used to help them to complete this task, and relate this to the idea that by using supports and different strategies people with intellectual disabilities are able to learn and complete tasks as well.



Adapted from Barnes, Ellen, Carol Berrigan, and Douglas Biklen "What's the Difference: Teaching Positive Attitudes Towards People with Disabilities", Syracuse, NY: Human Policy Press, 1978.

## Autism

**Objective:** To demonstrate how some people with autism are bothered by noises and movements in their environment that most people do not notice

**Materials:** Ruler/index card, text, any book

### Instructions:

Divide the class into groups of five, giving each person a task:

**Person 1:** Person with autism. You are expected to listen to the text that is being read to you and will be asked comprehension questions about the text.

**Person 2:** You stand behind Person 1, rub the edge of your ruler/index card softly and repeatedly against the back of his/her neck.

**Person 3:** Take the book and move quite close to Person 1 and begin reading loudly from the book.

**Person 4:** Gently pat Person 1 on the head and shoulder repeatedly.

**Person 5:** In a normal tone of voice, read the text to Person 1. Do not try to speak over the other noises. Once you are done ask the questions.

If there is sufficient time try to ensure that everyone has a chance to play Person 1 before you discuss this activity.

Questions to ask:

1. How did it feel to have so many distractions?
2. Were you able to concentrate and answer the questions?
3. What might have helped you?

Adapted from: "Disability Awareness Activity Packet", Bev Adock and Michael A. Remus, 2006.



## WE CAN!

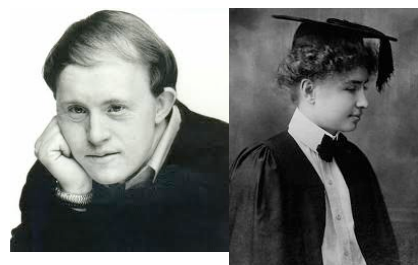


This assignment looks more closely at disabilities in general rather than strictly focusing on intellectual and developmental disabilities. It could be interesting for your students to research

and identify the various people with disabilities who have made important contributions throughout history. They



should not be limited in their search. The people that they identify could come from many areas and fields, from science to entertainment; the only criteria is that the person is identified as having made a contribution or an impact in their field. This assignment can be presented in a variety of ways – oral, paper, presentation, skit, etc.



## Competencies Addressed:

### Elementary

BAL1 Media Literacy  
BAL2 Citizenship and Community Life  
CC1 To use information  
CC4 To use creativity  
CC5 To adopt effective work habits  
CC6 To use information and communications technologies  
CC9 To communicate appropriately  
EF1 To read and listen to literary, popular and information based texts  
EF2 To write self-expressive, narrative and information based texts  
EF3 To represent his/her literacy in different media  
GHC4 To investigate social realities from a historical angle  
ER1 Reflects on ethical questions  
ER3 Engages in dialogue

### Secondary

BAL1 Media Literacy  
BAL2 Citizenship and Community Life  
CC1 To use information  
CC4 To use creativity  
CC5 To adopt effective work habits  
CC6 To use information and communications technologies  
CC9 To communicate appropriately  
EF1 To read and listen to literary, popular and information based texts  
EF2 To write in a variety of genres for personal and social purposes  
EF3 To represent his/her literacy in different media  
HC1 Examines social phenomena from a historical perspective  
HC2 Interprets the social phenomena using the historical method  
HC3 Constructs his/her consciousness of citizenship through the study of history  
ER1 Reflects on ethical questions  
ER3 Engages in dialogue



Photos: Karen Gaffney, Temple Grandin, Stephen Hawking, Ellen, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Chris Burke, Helen Keller, Rudely Interrupted.



