# Understanding Ableism
## What it is and Why it Matters

NOVA SCOTIA

Welcome to Understanding Ableism. Today we're talking about ableism: what it is, why it matters, examples of how it can occur, how we can all notice it and take action to prevent it.

*Take time at the beginning of the presentation to recognize the land you are working and living on and the historical cultural communities that have and continue to contribute to it.

On the slide is an image of a group of people with visible and invisible disabilities in a park. The people include a mix of races, ages, genders, and some are using mobility devices. One person uses a service dog.

**Agenda: Understanding Ableism**

NOVA SCOTIA

- Introductions

- First voice input and language

- What are disabilities and disability in Nova Scotia.

- What is ableism and the impacts

- Real-life examples of ableism and solutions to prevent it

- More learning and resources

2

Here is an agenda of what will be covered in the presentation:
- We will take the time for brief introductions
- Explain the input of people with disabilities and the language used in the resource
- Learn what are disabilities and the context in Nova Scotia
- What ableism is and the impacts
- Review real-life examples of ableism that can happen our workplaces, schools, public spaces and communities. These are meant to show how certain behaviours, decisions, or policies can create experiences of ableism. We will also learn solutions to create more equitable, inclusive and respectful environments to prevent ableism from happening in the future.
- End with suggestions for more resources and learning

**Introductions**

- Name and role

- Share anything else you are comfortable. For example, pronouns, your experience with disability, a visual introduction of yourself.

NOVA SCOTIA

3
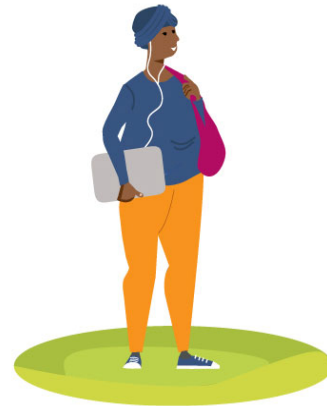
*If you have the time to go around, get everyone in the group to introduce themselves, if not, just the facilitator(s).
Introductions
- Share your name and role. For example, my name is Pam and I'm the Manager of Communications.
- Feel free to share anything else you are comfortable sharing including a visual introduction of yourself and any social identities you are comfortable sharing- such as pronouns or your experience with disability.
- This is a way to help include people who are blind, have low vision, or who may not have video. It gives people a sense of who's speaking and helps create a more welcoming and accessible space. For example, my pronouns are they/them, I have an invisible disability, and have light skin, brown hair and am wearing glasses.

On the slide is an image of a dark-skinned person holding a bag and laptop

**First Voice Input and Language**

- People with disabilities were involved and gave input into this resource.

- Language used is from the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act.

- Language is always changing and evolving.

- Person-first language and identity-first language.

---

- Before we get into the content, it is important to note that this resource was co-created and reviewed by people with a range of disabilities from across Nova Scotia.
- The language used is based on terms from the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act.
- However, it is important to acknowledge that language is always changing and evolving.
- It is most common to use person-first language, which recognizes the person first, as in "person with a disability". Although some people and communities prefer identity-first language, as in "a disabled person". Others prefer not to use the word disability at all and may identify simply as neuro-divergent, Deaf or otherwise.

## Definition: Nova Scotia Accessibility Act

**Disability:** "a physical, mental, intellectual, learning or sensory impairment, including an episodic disability that, **in interaction with a barrier**, hinders an individual's full and effective participation in society."

- To begin we will review a few definitions and some key terms. The Nova Scotia Accessibility Act defines disability as, "a physical, mental, intellectual, learning or sensory impairment, including an episodic disability that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders an individual's full and effective participation in society."
- This definition is in line with the social model of disability, which explains that accessibility barriers are part of the environment and are not a result of a person's disability.

On the slide is a graphic of a group of people of various ages and disabilities, one holding a Nova Scotia flag

**Disabilities can be…**

- physical (pain, flexibility or mobility)
- sensory (hearing or seeing)
- cognitive (learning, developmental, neurodivergence)
- neurological (multiple sclerosis or a brain injury)
- mental-health related (anxiety or depression)
- chronic health conditions (diabetes or crohn's)

*Some disabilities can be permanent, episodic or both.

6

There is no one experience of disability, which can vary from person to person. Here are a few examples of the types of disabilities someone may experience:

Disabilities can be:
- physical such as experiences of pain, and limited flexibility or mobility
- sensory such as limited hearing or vision
- cognitive, such as differences in learning, development or neurodivergence
- neurological such as multiple sclerosis or a brain injury
- mental health related such as anxiety or depression
- Or chromic health conditions such as diabetes or crohn's.

People can experience one or multiple disabilities, and these can be permanent, episodic, or both. Which means their experiences and barriers can change from day to day.

**Disability in Nova Scotia**

We have the highest rate in Canada **at 37.9%** or **2 in 5 Nova Scotians** report living with at least one disability.

• Some disabilities are visible, and some are not.

• Disability can affect anyone, at any age.

• A person's race, culture, gender, age, income, and other identities affect how they experience the world living with a disability.

• Disability can impact a person's daily life, including their physical and emotional health.

7

To set the context, we need to understand that ableism affects a large portion of our population. Based on the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability, we have the highest rate of disability in Canada, with 2 in 5 Nova Scotians report living with a disability.

- Some disabilities are visible, and some are not.
- Disability can affect anyone, at any age.
- A person's race, culture, gender, age, income, and other identities affect how they experience in the world living with a disability.
- Disability can impact a person's daily life, including their physical, and emotional health.

Disability is much more common than people think.

**Ableism can be…**

- Unfair treatment because someone has a disability.

- Intentional or unintentional discrimination of people with disabilities.

- Actions or barriers that affect the everyday lives of people with disabilities.

- Harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of disability.

Now to understand Ableism. Ableism can be one or more of the following:
- Unfair treatment because someone has a disability.
- Intentional or unintentional discrimination of people with disabilities.
- Actions or barriers that affect the everyday lives of people with disabilities.
- Harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of disability.

Ableism can be like racism, sexism, islamophobia, and heterosexism, as the effects include an entire group of people. Although just as other identity groups are diverse, the experiences of ableism and its effects on people with disabilities can also differ.

On the slide is an image of person with a head scarf and prosthetic leg holding a crutch

## Impacts of ableism: excludes people with disabilities from activities and opportunities

NOVA SCOTIA

- leads to unequal treatment.

- benefits those without disabilities.

- views disability as something to "fix".

- makes incorrect assumptions about what people can or cannot do.

- prevents disabled people from sharing their unique contributions and experiences.

9
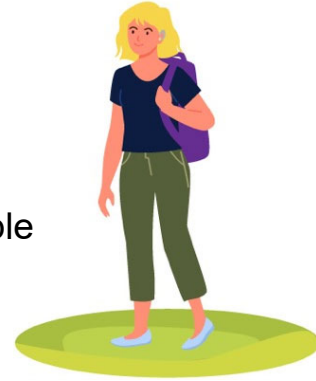
The harm is in the impacts of ableism.  It excludes people with disabilities from activities and opportunities.
Ableism:
- leads to unequal treatment.
- benefits those without disabilities.
- views disability as something to "fix".
- makes incorrect assumptions about what people can or cannot do.
- prevents disabled people from sharing their unique contributions and experiences.

On the slide is an image of a young person holding a backpack

**Ableism:**

- Can limit opportunities

- Is all around us

- Is in the words we use

- Comes from a lack of awareness

- Is deeply rooted

- Often goes unnoticed

- Treats disability as a problem

- Silences disabled people

The next part of the presentation will share eight ways to help us understand ableism through examples and solutions on how to prevent it from happening.

Ableism:
- Can limit opportunities
- Is all around us
- Is in the words we use
- Comes from a lack of awareness:
- Is deeply rooted
- Often goes unnoticed
- Treats disability as a problem
- Silences disabled people

**Examples of Ableism**

Let's look at some real-life examples of how ableism shows up in different environments as we take a deeper dive into each message. We will explore each one individually with real-life examples of how it may show up in different environments and ways to prevent it.

The picture on the slide is three people are sitting and talking at a table in an office. One person is in front of a laptop, another is wearing a headscarf, and another is in a power wheelchair.

## Ableism can limit opportunities

It can prevent access to services, activities, and choices for people with disabilities.

- For example, a funding program might only accept paper applications.

- This can make it difficult for people with vision and mobility disabilities.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

12

Ableism can limit opportunities for people with disabilities.
It can prevent access to services, activities, and choices.
- For example, a funding program might only accept paper applications.
- This can make it difficult for people with vision and mobility disabilities as the application might not be in a format that they can read, and it requires people to either mail or submit applications in person.
Can you think of a better approach or solution? Pause for discussion.

**Instead, the program could**

- Offer different ways to apply, so people can use accessible technology tools.

- Provide help completing the application for those who need it.

13

---

Instead, the program could
- Offer different ways to apply so people can use accessible technology that works for them. Options could include digital forms that are accessible for screen readers, the ability to apply by phone or other ways. Offering information in multiple formats can benefit everyone.
- It is also important to provide help for those who need it. Such as offering contact information of staff for those who might need support or have questions when applying.

The image on the slide is a picture of a person using their phone to communicate with someone behind a desk.

## Ableism is all around us

Organizations and events can be ableist without realizing it.

- For example, an art exhibit includes only self-guided audio tours.

- This means that Deaf and hard of hearing people miss important details and cannot access the same information as everyone else.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

14

Ableism is all around us

Organizations and events can be ableist without realizing it.

- For example, an art exhibit includes only self-guided audio tours.
- This means that Deaf and hard of hearing people miss important details and cannot access the same information as everyone else.

Can you think of a better approach or solution? Pause for discussion.

**Instead, the art exhibit could**

- Share information in various formats to make sure everyone can access the content.

- This could include signage, digital information, or videos in American Sign Language.

NOVA SCOTIA

Instead, the art exhibit could
- Share information in various formats to make sure everyone can access the content.
- This could include signage, digital information (such as through a website or app), or videos in American Sign Language.

Providing information in multiple formats, such as accessible printed or digital materials is important. When you consider and plan for the different ways that people access information, everyone will have the same opportunities.

The image on the slide is a group of people at an Art Gallery. One person is using a walker next to another person who is holding a pamphlet. In the background three people are looking at a painting on the wall.

**Ableism is in the words we use**

16

Ableism is in the words we use

Certain words or language can make people with disabilities feel unwelcome or disrespected.

• For example, school staff call the new accessible parking "handicapped spots".

• This may offend people with disabilities since the word "handicap" is often used to explain a disadvantage. It can assume there is something wrong with those who use this parking.

Can you think of a better approach or solution? Pause for discussion.

**Instead, the school could**

- Educate staff on why language can be harmful and to notice the words they choose.

- Have posters on inclusive language within the school.

- Bring in a speaker from the disability community to share their experiences.

Instead, the school could
- Educate staff on why language can be harmful and to notice the words they choose.
- Have posters on inclusive language within the school.
- Bring in a speaker from the disability community to share their experiences.

The words we use matter. Using respectful, inclusive language shows care and prevents harm to others. It also reminds everyone the meaning behind their words, and the effect this can have on those around us.

The image on the slide is a picture of young child playing with books at a table. A teacher is sitting next to them talking to the child.

**Ableism comes from a lack of awareness**

Many people do not understand what living with a disability is like. As a result, the needs of people with disabilities can be forgotten.

- For example, the local municipality invites a speaker to make a public presentation. There is no ramp to the stage, and the speaker, who uses a wheelchair, must present from the floor.

- This creates difficulty for both the speaker and the audience.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

18

Ableism comes from a lack of awareness
Many people do not understand what living with a disability is like. As a result, the needs of people with disabilities can be forgotten.
- For example, the local municipality invites a speaker to make a public presentation. There is no ramp to the stage, and the speaker, who uses a wheelchair, must present from the floor.
- This creates difficulty for both the speaker and the audience who came for the presentation.
Can you think of a better approach or solution? Pause for discussion.

**Instead, the municipality could**

NOVA SCOTIA

- Plan for and ask about the accessibility needs of both the speaker and audience in advance.

- Share information from speakers in various ways, such as closed captions, American Sign Language, or images with described audio.

19

Instead, the municipality could
- Plan for and ask about the accessibility needs of both the speaker and audience in advance.
- Share information from speakers in various ways, such as closed captions and American Sign Language, or images with described audio.

Accessibility needs to be part of every event plan to make sure everyone is treated fairly and feels welcomed. This may mean finding out and offering different ways for people to engage and understand. Event organizers may not realize that their actions can be ableist because they do not consider the experiences of people with disabilities.

On the slide is picture of a group of people seated in a theatre. Multiple people in the audience use mobility devices, several are also wearing masks. At the front, an individual is providing sign language interpretation.

## Ableism is deeply rooted

Not considering people with disabilities is part of our history. We can find it throughout society, affecting our thoughts and the ways we do things.

- For example, a recreation club is planning public meetings to get feedback on a new community trail. These meetings are planned on weekday afternoons in spaces that are not accessible.

- This set up makes it difficult for some people to attend and contribute their ideas.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

**Instead, the recreation club could**

- Offer more ways to give feedback, including online meetings, focus groups, or surveys.

- Hold in-person meetings in accessible locations at various times of the day and week. This should include information on accessible transportation options.

21

Instead, the recreation club could
- Offer more ways to give feedback, including online meetings, focus groups, or surveys.
- Hold in-person meetings in accessible locations at various times of the day and week. This should include information on accessible transportation options.

To get feedback from a variety of perspectives, we need to realize that the processes we use will affect who can participate. When we offer different ways to contribute, it makes it easier for everyone to give their input, which will include more people with different life experiences.

On the side is a picture of two people seated at a boardroom table with pens and notebooks.

## Ableism often goes unnoticed

It can make life harder for people with disabilities to go about their everyday life in schools, jobs, and public spaces.

- For example, a health care centre has self-check in stations for appointments that have many steps through a touch screen.

- These stations can be hard for people to use who have low vision, a cognitive disability, or those who can't use their hands.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

Ableism often goes unnoticed

It can make life harder for people with disabilities to go about their everyday life in schools, jobs, and public spaces.

- For example, a health care centre has self-check in stations for appointments that have many steps through a touch screen.

- These stations can be hard for people to use who have low vision, a cognitive disability, or those who can't use their hands. Sometimes tools and devices are designed for the "average" user and can ignore the needs of those who are not able to use them in the same way.

Can you think of a better approach or solution? Pause for discussion.

**Instead, the health care centre could**

NOVA SCOTIA

- Make sure the stations provide information in various formats, including other ways to check in for appointments.

- This could include large font, audio cues, and assistance from staff if necessary.

- Have user testing of the stations before they are offered to the public.

Instead, the health care centre could
- Make sure the stations provide information in various formats, including other ways to check in for appointments.
- This could include large font, audio cues, and assistance from staff if necessary.
- Have user testing of the stations before they are offered to the public.

We need to recognize that not everyone is able to use tools and services the same way. It is important to consider how to make things easier to use in the design and planning of public services and processes.

The image on the slide is a picture of two people communicating in sign language near a ticket counter. In the background is a person behind the counter to assist them.

**Ableism is when disabilities are treated as a problem**

News, social media, movies, and jokes can portray disabilities in a negative way.

- For example, a film festival promotes a movie where the main character, who has a mental illness, is portrayed as the villain.

- This story can be harmful and reinforce negative or untrue stereotypes about mental health that do not reflect lived experiences.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

Ableism is when disabilities are treated as a problem
News, social media, movies, and jokes can portray disabilities in a negative way.
- For example, a film festival promotes a movie where the main character, who has a mental illness, is portrayed as the villain.
- This story can be harmful and reinforces negative or untrue stereotypes about mental health that do not reflect lived experiences.
Can you think of a better approach or solution? Pause for discussion.

**Instead, the film festival could**

- Encourage and promote the real-life stories of people with disabilities through their film choices.

- Involve people with disabilities in decision-making. This could include screening films, mentoring, and through creative programs.

Instead, the film festival could
- Encourage and promote the real-life stories of people with disabilities through their film choices.
- Involve people with disabilities in decision-making. This could include screening films, mentoring, and through creative programs.

Ableism shapes what we think is "normal" or "valued" and treats disabilities as something to fix, rather than part of human diversity. When people with disabilities are involved, it will change the stories and ideas that are being shared. Disabilities will be portrayed beyond the stereotypes, and disabled experiences will be accepted as a natural part of human variation.

On the slide is a group of people in a small theatre with red seats. One person uses a power wheelchair. An older person uses headphones. A young person uses assistive technology.

**Ableism silences disabled people**

This happens when people assume that someone with a disability cannot communicate or always needs help.

- In staff meeting a person with a speech disability starts to answer a question. Their coworker interrupts and tries to finish their sentence, thinking they are being helpful.

- As a result, the disabled staff member does not have a chance to express themselves and are left out of the discussion.

Can you think of a better approach or solution?

Ableism silences disabled people
This happens when people assume that someone with a disability cannot communicate or always needs help.
- In staff meeting a person with a speech disability starts to answer a question. Their coworker interrupts and tries to finish their sentence, thinking they are being helpful.
- As a result, the disabled staff member does not have a chance to express themselves and are left out of the discussion.
Can you think of a better approach or solution? Pause for discussion.

Instead, the office could
- Ensure that everyone is given the time and space to communicate for themselves in staff meetings.
- Remind all staff they should not assume others need help, unless they ask for it.

Always give people with disabilities the opportunity to speak for themselves and contribute equally to conversations, this shows respect and supports their independence. Ableist actions can stop us from valuing and learning from people with disabilities.

On the slide is a picture of an individual is communicating through sign language.

**Reflection: Any other examples of ableism?**

28

Are there times in your life that you experienced or observed ableism either at work, in your community or in public spaces? Please share these stories or examples if you are comfortable.

The picture on the slide shows one person who is standing and showing another person who is sitting how to use an assistive device.

## We Can Prevent Ableism

Ableism comes from a lack of understanding and action.

Everyone can:

- learn about disabilities and ask what people need.
- respond with respect when ableism happens.
- be open to feedback and chance.
- make our communities and spaces more accessible for all.

NOVA SCOTIA

29

All  the examples that were reviewed today show how ableism can be part of our thoughts, language and even built into the environments that we work and live in. We also reviewed some ways to prevent ableism.

As we have discussed, ableism comes from a lack of understanding and action.

Everyone can:

- learn about disabilities and ask what people need.
- respond with respect when ableism happens.
- be open to feedback and chance.
- make our communities and spaces more accessible for all.

On the slide is an image of a person wearing a ribbon skirt smiling and waving.

**Taking Action Against Ableism**

NOVA SCOTIA

What is one thing
you will do or
change?

Ableism often goes unnoticed, but we can all help change that.

We would now like to learn from you. How will you apply what you have learned today in your workplace or community? Take a minute and reflect on this question and then tell us one thing you will do differently or change after the session. Thank you for being part of this conversation. Let's keep noticing, learning, and acting.

On the slide is a group of people with visible and invisible disabilities in a park. The people include a mix of races, ages, genders, and some are using mobility devices. One person uses a service dog.

**Learn More at accessible.novascotia.ca**

NOVA SCOTIA

Videos, resources and data including:

- Introduction to Disability
- Introduction to Accessibility Barriers and Solutions
- Engaging with Persons with Disabilities
- Canadian Survey on Disability, Nova Scotia Data
- Posters, Social Media Images, etc.
- Plain Language Resource Guide
- Accessibility Plans of public sector organizations in Nova Scotia

Access includes everyone.

NOVA SCOTIA
Accessible.NovaScotia.ca

Continue your learning through the online resource hub at accessible.novascotia.ca
There are a number of videos, resources and data including:
- Introduction to Disability
- Introduction to Accessibility Barriers and Solutions
- Engaging with Persons with Disabilities
- Canadian Survey on Disability, Nova Scotia Data
- Posters, Social Media Images, etc.
- Plain Language Resource Guide
- Accessibility Plans of public sector organizations in Nova Scotia

On the slide is a picture of three children smiling playing video games, one using an adaptive controller, with the text Access includes everyone and a Government of Nova Scotia logo.