Accessibility Assessment Framework

For Library Spaces

Territory acknowledgement

BCLA members are honoured to serve the diverse Indigenous Nations and communities throughout what is now known as British Columbia. As a distributed organization, BCLA staff respectfully acknowledge that our work takes place on unceded lands belonging to the kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem), qiqéyt (Qayqayt), Stó:lō (Sto:lo), xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations; and the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations of the lək̓ʷəŋən (Lekwungen) Peoples.

Foreword

Like the Province of British Columbia, we believe accessibility work should follow “nothing about us without us” and this tool is grounded in the lived experiences of people with disabilities. We know this tool will help libraries to incorporate new perspectives and principles into their work, and are excited to provide a resource that can be used by any library to advance their work on accessibility, regardless of organisational size, expertise, or resources.

The Public Libraries Accessibility Working Group (PLAWG) would like to thank the Disability Alliance of British Columbia (DABC) and the Province of British Columbia for providing the funding that made this project possible.

We are thankful to Untapped Accessibility for their partnership in the development of this tool, and to the many library staff and community members who contributed to and inspired the creation of this resource. We are grateful to work with people in public libraries throughout this province who are eager to expand their knowledge and understanding of accessibility and make their libraries work for everyone.

— Public Libraries Accessibility Working Group (PLAWG)

Key information

About PLAWG

The Public Library Accessibility Working Group (PLAWG) was formed in 2022. It's function is to support the library sector in implementing the Accessible BC Act.

This project

PLAWG produced this framework as part of the Accessible Organizations Project. This is funded by the Government of British Columbia and led by Disability Alliance British Columbia (DABC).

As the Accessible Organizations Project Hub partner for the public library sector, PLAWG hopes this framework will support libraries across the province to further their commitment to accessibility.

PLAWG partnered with Untapped Accessibility to develop this framework. Untapped is our province's leading accessibility consultancy firm. Their staff team includes accessibility consultants with lived experience of disability.

Because lived experience perspectives played a key role in shaping this resource, the framework addresses real-world barriers and priorities that can otherwise be overlooked.

Creating this framework

Literature review

The project began with a literature review. Key sources were examined, including:

- Library-specific accessibility tools and checklists
- Other site accessibility checklists (for example, school site accessibility checklist)
- Resources on disability awareness and inclusive design

For a full reference list, see the resources section of this document.

Co-design session

Untapped Accessibility consultants then engaged library professionals in a co-design session. The focus of this session was to determine the framework's structure, focus areas, and practical tools.

Learnings from this session allowed consultants to ground the framework in the day-to-day realities of library operations.

Library site visit and reviews

To test draft versions of the supplementary framework checklist, consultants visited and/or engaged libraries from four different systems. These libraries ranged in size and geographic location. Library staff with various roles were involved in testing/reviewing the resource and sharing feedback.

Lessons learned from these engagements were instrumental in creating a resource that's user-friendly and relevant to the library context.

Accessibility

This document is accessible to PDF/UA standards. For additional alternative formats, contact the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS).

Legal disclaimer

This guide provides general information only as a reference to support libraries in meeting the requirements of Accessible BC Act. Each library is responsible for understanding and complying with its legal obligations.

Creative commons

Language in this framework

The language around disability is constantly changing. And people have different preferences for terminology. To recognize this diversity, this framework uses both “person-first” and “identity-first” language. This is considered the best practice for written work.

Person-first language

Person-first language puts the person before the disability. For example, saying “person with a disability.” People who prefer this language view their disability as only part of who they are. This language is an empowering way to acknowledge that their personhood comes before their disability experience.

Identity-first language

Identity-first language puts the disability first. For example, saying “disabled person.” People who prefer this language view disability as an inherent and inseparable part of who they are. This language is an empowering way to acknowledge how central disability is to their experience of the world.

Contents

Purpose

This framework gives you guiding principles and three types of accessibility to evaluate your library spaces. Its purpose is to help you understand and anticipate the diverse needs of patrons and staff with disabilities, so you can prioritize accessibility in your physical and virtual library environments.

This framework has two supporting resources:

Library Accessibility Assessment Tool

A practical tool for assessing the accessibility of your physical library spaces.

Library Accessibility Assessment Activity Book

Includes outlines for guided group activities that focus on applying the framework.

In scope

This framework focuses on library spaces, including:

Physical spaces

For example, your building entrances, rooms, customer service areas, staff spaces, bathrooms, etc.

Virtual spaces

For example, your website, digital catalogue, digital collections, etc.

Out of scope

The framework does not directly cover:

Service delivery

For example, how your services and programs are delivered, including service/program materials, etc.

Operations

For example, staffing, recruitment, retention, etc.

However, the guiding principles and types of accessibility that you'll learn can be applied to these broader systems.

Ways to apply the framework

You can apply this framework in a few different ways:

Accessibility audits

For example, you can conduct regular assessments of your library spaces using the supplementary audit tool.

Staff training and development

For example, you can centre staff training and development around the types of accessibility noted in this framework (see “The three types of accessibility” section).

Accessibility committee engagement

For example, you can use this framework and supplementary audit tool to guide discussion and engagement with your accessibility committee.

Policy development

For example, you can use the framework to evaluate and update your existing library policies. Or you can use it to inform the development of new policies.

For suggested activities around each of these options, see the Library Accessibility Assessment Activity Book.

Key terms and concepts

Disability

The Accessible BC Act defines disability as "an inability to participate fully and equally in society as a result of the interaction of an impairment and a barrier."

By this definition, disability does not occur by having an impairment. It arises when an impairment meets a barrier. It's the barrier that is disabling.

Impairment

According to the Act, impairment "includes a physical, sensory, mental, intellectual or cognitive impairment, whether permanent, temporary or episodic."

While the Act uses this term to describe part of the disability experience, it's not often used in the disability community. Many disabled people find it implies there's a "better" or "normal" way to be.

For this reason, the framework does not use this term. It uses disability or disabled to refer to the disability experience. For language in policy or library communications work, we recommend these terms as well.

Barrier

The Act describes a barrier as "anything that hinders the full and equal participation in society of a person with an impairment". Barriers can come from:

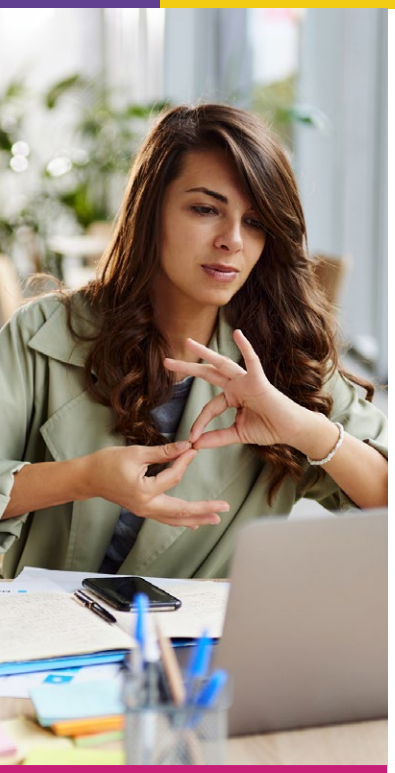
- Environments
- Attitudes
- Policies and practices
- Information and communications
- Technologies

They can also be affected by intersecting forms of discrimination.

Accessibility

Accessibility is the intentional effort and action taken to identify, remove, and prevent barriers before they impact a disabled person's full and equal participation. It includes proactive work on:

1. Identifying, removing, and preventing barriers
2. Designing products, spaces, services and job duties to be flexible, considering multiple types of engagement from the start
3. Clearly communicating the remaining barriers and the engagement/accessibility options that you've made available



Comparing accommodation and accessibility

Accommodation

Is a change or adjustment that's made to meet someone's specific needs. It's a reactive solution that occurs after someone has encountered and reported a barrier. An example is enabling captions for a virtual author talk event after an attendee requests it.

Accessibility

Is when we design and plan for everyone from the start. It involves proactive efforts to prevent barriers before they create problems for disabled people. An accessible approach to the virtual author talk would be to enable captions from the beginning and communicate this accessibility feature to all attendees.

Which is more important?

While the goal of the Accessible BC Act is full accessibility, accommodation will always play an important role. Both should be valued and prioritized.

As we improve the way we design with accessibility in mind, the demand for individual accommodation will decrease. This ultimately saves time and resources down the line.

Accommodation requests also offer valuable insight into greater accessibility improvements. Each one presents an opportunity to address a broader gap. For instance, if someone asks for captions on a specific video, you can meet that need. Then to take it a step further, you can ensure you add captions to all videos moving forward. The caption accommodation has now become a general accessibility practice.

Part one

Guiding principles

Guiding principles

This framework focuses on five guiding principles:

1. Accessibility from the start
2. Intersectional approaches to accessibility
3. Flexible and adaptable accessibility
4. User-centred approaches to accessibility
5. Naming what you know about accessibility

Together, these principles represent core values that can steer your library's accessibility work. They should offer clarity and direction to you and your teams, especially when choices aren't clear.

Ultimately, the principles are meant to:

- Help your teams stay aligned on accessibility work
- Guide your decision-making around accessibility
- Support a shared culture and approach to accessibility

Principle 1: Accessibility from the start

There's a misconception that accessibility is merely a synonym for approachability. In library settings, accessibility is also used to describe spaces and services that are inclusive to the needs of different community groups. For example, immigrants or people who are unhoused. In the context of disability inclusion, these definitions are inaccurate. To make true progress towards accessibility, you need to understand and use the term correctly.

Accessibility is the **proactive effort and action** of identifying, removing, and preventing barriers for disabled people. For true inclusion, accessibility must be part of how you plan and design your library spaces.

Although many of us are aware of the importance of accessibility and have longstanding commitments to creating inclusive spaces, the practice of identifying, removing, and preventing barriers doesn't always get the priority it requires. It'll take effort, teamwork, learning, and commitment to make it a top priority.

Accessibility from the start focuses on centring this proactive effort and skill building. It allows you to take meaningful steps towards dismantling the barriers in your library spaces. By considering accessibility from the start, you can create libraries that truly serve everyone.

? Guiding questions to help you apply this principle

1. Who might be excluded by this space – and why?
2. Are we building accessibility in from the beginning, or reacting to barriers after they arise?
3. When access barriers are reported, are they resolved for that one person only? Or are they addressed so that others won't encounter the same barrier in the future?
4. Have we involved people with disabilities in our design, feedback, or decision-making processes?
5. What are we doing to continuously learn, adapt, and improve our approach to disability inclusion?

Principle 2: Intersectional approaches

Diversity of disability

As you take on accessibility work, you must recognize that disability is not a single, fixed experience. It is diverse and deeply shaped by individual circumstances, environments, and identities. Understanding this diversity helps avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

Here are some examples of how disability may differ:

- **Apparent disabilities** may involve mobility aids, prosthetics, or physical differences that others can easily see.
- **Non-apparent disabilities** can include things like chronic pain, mental health conditions, neurodivergence, or autoimmune diseases. These are often misunderstood or overlooked because they are not immediately apparent.
- **Permanent disabilities** are ongoing and typically lifelong. For example, spinal cord injuries, low vision, and deafness.
- **Temporary disabilities** impact functioning in a way that's expected to improve with time. For example, a broken bone, recovery from surgery, short-term memory loss from a concussion, or temporary mental health challenges.
- Some people experience **episodic or fluctuating disabilities**. For example, multiple sclerosis, lupus, migraines, addiction challenges, or other mental health conditions that cause cycles of mood changes. With these types of disabilities, there can be "episodes" of symptoms or experiences that vary in severity and frequency. And they can occur between periods where there are no symptoms or challenges. People might seem "fine" one day and face major barriers the next.

Intersectionality

Disabled people also experience overlapping and interconnected forms of discrimination based on other marginalized aspects of their identities. For instance, race, gender, sexuality, and class. This experience of compounding discrimination is what scholar Kimberle Crenshaw coined as intersectionality.

According to the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability:

- Disabled women were more likely than disabled men to experience barriers
- 2SLGBTQ+ persons with disabilities were more likely than their non-2SLGBTQ+ counterparts to experience barriers

A report by the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies also highlights the unique challenges faced by disabled people with intersecting identities. It underscores how overlapping identities can exacerbate discrimination and limit access to essential services.

In other words, intersecting forms of discrimination can compound and impact people in unique ways. For example, a Deaf immigrant visiting a library may face communication barriers and challenges related to language and cultural differences.

A trauma-informed lens

Another important consideration for accessibility work is trauma. For people with disabilities, trauma can be associated with moving through an ableist and inaccessible world that treats them as "less than" or a problem to be solved. For many, there's more specific trauma associated with the medical system, social experiences, and community services. Disabled people can also be traumatized by other occurrences in life, unrelated to their disability.

This principle is about acknowledging all layers of the disability experience, and welcoming, centring, and believing the most marginalized members of your disability community.

? Guiding questions to help you apply this principle

1. Whose experiences are currently centred in our accessibility efforts? Whose are missing?
2. How might overlapping identities shape a disabled person's experience in our library spaces?
3. How are we ensuring people with disabilities who experience multiple forms of marginalization and/or have histories of trauma have a voice in our processes?
4. How are we designing spaces to support a broad range of access needs – not just the most apparent or familiar ones?

Principle 3: Flexibility and adaptability

Accessibility looks different for everyone. In fact, one person's access need may be another person's barrier. For example, someone with low vision may need bright light in a space to read wayfinding signage. But bright lights may be overstimulating for someone with sensory sensitivities.

For true disability inclusion, you need to treat accessibility as a practice of being flexible and offering options for how people engage, contribute, and participate. When you offer multiple ways to participate, you give people the freedom to shape their experience based on their own needs and preferences.

This principle focuses on the idea that accessibility is more than removing barriers. It's about creating access for all kinds of disability experiences.

? Guiding questions to help you apply this principle

1. What options are we offering people to engage, participate, and contribute within our spaces? Are they flexible and inclusive of different needs?
2. How might one access solution create a barrier for someone else? How can we offer alternatives?
3. Do our spaces allow for flexibility without requiring people to "prove" or explain their disability?
4. Are we actively seeking feedback from people with a variety of disability experiences to understand what "access" means for them?

Principle 4: User-centred approach

Although accessibility standards, checklists, and guidelines are a helpful starting point, you need to design your spaces with the needs of users at the forefront. This involves directly engaging with disabled people to understand:

- How they interact with your library environment
- What supports their inclusion

This principle centres the idea that the people most impacted by barriers are the best equipped to help solve them. In the library context, a user-centred approach might include:

- Co-designing spaces with disabled patrons and staff
- Gathering regular feedback through accessible formats
- Involving community members and staff with disabilities in decision-making processes

This principle also recognizes that accessibility is not static. People's needs will evolve, and the patrons and staff that use your spaces will change over time. By continuously learning from library users, you can create more responsive, flexible, and empowering spaces.

? Guiding questions to help you apply this principle

1. How are we actively and continuously involving disabled patrons and staff in the design and evaluation of our spaces?
2. What barriers might exist in our current spaces? How do we learn about them from the people most affected?
3. Are our accessibility feedback mechanisms accessible? Can community members and staff easily give feedback?
4. In what ways are we building ongoing relationships with disabled community members and staff?

Principle 5: Name what you know

Pursuing accessibility can feel like a daunting task. There's so much to learn. And the more you learn, the more you realize how deeply embedded barriers are.

Although it can feel like meaningful progress is out of reach, doing the work to understand and uncover barriers in your space is a major step in the right direction. It allows you to be transparent about the known barriers you have.

This is called "naming what you know" about accessibility. This practice also includes naming any accessibility features you can offer. These things are crucial to helping people with disabilities know what to expect when entering and engaging with your space. This allows them to make informed decisions about their engagement and plan and prepare as needed.

This principle serves as a reminder that "naming what you know" is an important accessibility practice in and of itself.

Part two

The three types of accessibility

The three types of accessibility

To assess the accessibility of your library, you'll want to consider three types of accessibility:

1. Physical
2. Sensory
3. Social-emotional

This section unpacks each type using fictional examples and first-person stories that highlight relevant barriers. It also includes reflection questions to prompt your thinking and application.

Physical

Physical accessibility considers how people with disabilities can access, navigate, and use your library spaces. It looks at things like:

- **Entry and exit** – for example, doors, type of door lock, ramps, elevators, etc.
- **Layout and movement pathways** – for example, hallways, room/space layout, etc.
- **Furniture and other necessities** – for example, bathroom stalls, washing areas, garbage cans, desks/workspaces, seating options, etc.
- **Wayfinding and other signage** – for example, signs, maps, symbols, and other design features that help people navigate and orient themselves in a space, etc.
- **Emergency response** – for example, emergency alerts and notifications, printed and digital emergency information, evacuation routes, muster points/safe areas, etc.

Case study

Navigating the library with my scooter and service dog

My name is Sam. I have low vision and mobility challenges. I use a motorized scooter to get around and I also have a service dog named Riley.

I have worked at my local library for years. I'm moving soon and I've been lucky enough to be offered a position at the branch in my new neighbourhood! But during my first shift, I encountered several barriers.

Entry and navigation

Getting into the building was the first challenge. The automatic door button was located too high and off to the side, behind a garbage can. I had to maneuver my scooter awkwardly to press it, while making sure Riley wasn't caught behind me. The delay on the door's closing mechanism was only a couple seconds, so I had to rush to get myself and Riley inside.

Once inside, I noticed that the directional cues on the floor relied heavily on text. There were arrow markings accompanied by small text with light-coloured font. Because the floor was shiny, it was nearly impossible for me to read.

Because of these issues, I had a hard time finding my way to my new manager's office. In the end, I had to ask the library assistant to escort me to the proper area.

Then, to get into my manager's office, I had to go through another set of doors. Because these didn't have an automatic door opener, I had to go back to the front area to find the library assistant to ask for help again. They were very friendly, but I still felt annoyed that I had to double back on my route.

Layout and furniture

When I checked in with my manager, they took me to a meeting space for orientation. The layout of the area was tight. There was not a lot of room to move between the chairs and tables. Maneuvering my scooter meant making tight turns and backing up in a space that wasn't designed for mobility devices.

I was also nervous about settling into the space for a few hours because there wasn't a good spot for Riley to lay down without being in the way. At one point, I bumped into a shelf, and several books fell. I felt embarrassed in front of my new manager.

Front desk

On my way out, I stopped by the front desk to introduce myself to my new colleague. The desk was too high for me to make eye contact with the person sitting on the other side. The interaction was awkward because they couldn't really see me. I felt embarrassed as I left the library.

To me, physical accessibility isn't just ramps and elevators. It's about dignity and autonomy. I want to be able to show up at work and participate as my full self.

Broadening understanding of physical access

Like Sam says, physical accessibility is more than providing ramps and elevators for people with mobility disabilities. Although these are crucial features of a physically accessible space, there's much more to consider.

For someone with low vision

Physical accessibility means creating environments that are easy to navigate using high contrast, or non-visual cues. This includes:

- High-contrast and glare-free signage.
- Clear, unobstructed pathways.
- Tactile walking surface indicators (see section 4.4.5 in CSA/ASC B651:23 for more information).
- Plain text descriptions of barriers and accessibility features on the website so they can plan and prepare for their visit.
- Emergency alerts with tactile and/or auditory cues.

For someone who is Deaf

Physical accessibility includes clear visual communication and environmental cues. This can involve:

- Visual wayfinding supports, such as clearly marked signs, maps, and icon-based directions.
- Open sightlines for lip reading or sign language.
- Text-based communication options.
- A portable induction loop system installed at service desks.
- Visual delivery of emergency notifications, such as flashing alarms, screen-based messages, and SMS alerts.

For someone who uses a walker

Physical accessibility means ensuring spaces support safe, independent movement without causing strain or barriers. This can include:

- Wide, non-slip pathways that allow for easy maneuvering.
- Automatic doors with accessible push buttons.
- Sturdy seating and rest areas at regular intervals.
- Minimal door thresholds or level changes between rooms to reduce trip hazards.
- Accessible emergency muster point and evacuation route with firm, level surface, no steps or obstructions, and enough space for people using mobility aids to wait safely and comfortably.

? Questions to help you assess the physical accessibility of your library spaces

1. Can all patrons and staff move through our library spaces independently, comfortably, and safely?
2. Are there multiple ways for people to access, navigate, and use our spaces?
3. Does the design and layout of our library reduce barriers and support ease of use for everyone – not just people with apparent disabilities?
4. Have we planned for inclusive emergency procedures that ensure all patrons and staff can receive alerts, evacuate safely, and reach designated muster points?

Sensory

Like physical accessibility, sensory accessibility ensures that anyone who relies on different senses to move through the world can navigate our libraries with ease. It also means people with sensory sensitivities can access and participate in all aspects of a library without experiencing pain or discomfort.

In an article on the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower website, Jason Slocombe describes how buildings and environments can strongly affect the senses. For example, bright lights, loud noises, strong smells, or crowded layouts can be overwhelming or even painful for some people. Making spaces more sensory-friendly means thinking about these things so everyone can feel safe, calm, and included.

Sensory accessibility considers things like:

- **Lighting** – for example, natural light versus artificial light, adjustable lighting, surface glares, reflections, etc.
- **Colour and design** – for example, colour and design choices, use of patterns, consistency in design, visual clutter, etc.
- **Sound** – for example, sound reflection and absorption, background noise, the availability of quiet zones, etc.
- **Smells** – for example, artificial and natural scents in the space, ventilation, scent-related policies, etc.
- **Temperature and tactile elements** – for example, room temperature, textures of surfaces and furniture, availability of sensory-friendly materials, opportunities for touch-based engagement, etc.
- **Regulation** – for example, how people can regulate themselves in a space, etc.

Case study

Moving through the library as an Autistic person

My name is Amara, and I'm Autistic. I love learning, and libraries have always felt like a place where I could pursue my interests without pressure. I have a great time talking with the librarians and going in depth with them about my interests. But even though libraries are quieter than most public spaces, they can still be overwhelming in ways people don't always realize. Especially for someone like me, who experiences sensory input more intensely.

I usually try to go to the library on weekdays during the day so it's less busy. Recently, I went on a day when there was a school tour that I didn't know was happening. This caused many unexpected sensory barriers.

Sound and lighting

As soon as I entered, I heard more voices and footsteps than I'm used to. The kids' shoes were squeaking and shuffling on the floor. It wasn't overly loud, but it layered over the humming fluorescent lights. Together, everything created a constant stream of input I couldn't filter out.

Usually, I can tolerate the lighting. But today, because of the additionally sensory input, the bright lights reflecting off the polished floor was too much. It wasn't just uncomfortable. The lights physically hurt my eyes and made it hard to focus.

Navigation

The tour had stopped in the path to my favourite workspace. Even though I come here all the time, I now wasn't sure which way to go to get around them. There were no clear visual maps or labels, and signs were small or filled with too much text. I had to ask for help, but the desk was in another noisy open area. I struggled to block out all the surrounding conversations. By the time I got directions, I was already overstimulated and feeling anxious.

Workspace

I tried to find a new workspace, but most areas were open concept. There were no quiet or low-traffic zones. I sat near a window, but the constant motion of people walking past kept pulling my attention away. There was also the sound of a squeaky door opening and closing every few minutes. I wore noise-canceling headphones, but the mix of lights, sounds, and visual clutter was still too much.

I know the library wasn't intentionally unwelcoming. And I can usually prepare for my needs. But today I got thrown off my routine and I had a really hard time.

Broadening understanding of sensory access

Sensory barriers aren't unique to Autism. For example,

For someone with chronic pain or migraines

Sensory accessibility involves reducing environmental factors that can intensify discomfort, such as hard seating, poor lighting, or extreme temperature. It might include:

- Offering movement opportunities within a space.
- Ensuring different lighting is available.
- Providing scent-free environments to avoid triggers for migraines.

For someone with PTSD

It means creating environments that feel safe, predictable, and non-triggering. This can include:

- Minimizing sudden loud noises.
- Avoiding harsh lighting and crowded layouts.
- Offering quiet, low-stimulation spaces.

For someone with ADHD

It means creating environments that reduce distractions and support focus and self-regulation. This can include:

- Quiet zones.
- Minimal visual clutter.
- Providing movement-friendly seating or fidget tools.

? Questions to help you assess the sensory accessibility of your library spaces

1. What sounds, lights, or visual elements in our space might be overwhelming, distracting, or physically uncomfortable for some patrons and staff?
2. Do we offer a variety of environments to support different sensory needs? For example, quiet areas, low-light zones, or spaces with minimal visual clutter.
3. Think about someone who may be sensitive to unexpected stimuli or crowded spaces. How predictable and calming is our library experience from entry to exit?
4. Are there options for patrons and staff to self-regulate or take breaks if they begin to feel overstimulated or overwhelmed?

Social-emotional

Social-emotional accessibility refers to how welcoming, inclusive, and emotionally supportive your library is. It ensures all visitors and staff feel valued, respected, and emotionally safe when accessing the space.

This type of accessibility considers:

- **Representation and sense of belonging** – for example, reflection of diverse experiences throughout the library, visual cues that indicate who is welcome and expected in the space, etc.
- **Unwritten social expectations** – for example, behaviour expectations, social norms and unspoken rules, etc.

Case study

Experiencing the library as a neurodivergent youth who uses a hearing aid

My name is Yara, and I'm 14 years old. I have a connective tissue disorder which can impact my mobility. I can't be on my feet too long without experiencing pain and getting tired.

Most people don't know about my mobility challenges. And since I'm sometimes very mobile and active, lots of people don't believe me when I say I need breaks.

I also wear a hearing aid, which helps me hear better. But it doesn't make everything perfect – especially when there's a lot of noise.

Recently, our class took a field trip to the library. Although I was excited, the experience left me feeling overwhelmed and disconnected.

Entering the library

As soon as we entered the library, I could feel the noise and energy of the group. My classmates were talking. Some were moving around quickly. Even though I could hear some of what was going on thanks to my hearing aid, the background noise made it difficult to follow along.

When the librarian started talking, I couldn't hear her clearly. I didn't know if I could ask anyone for clarification, so I just nodded and hoped I'd catch up.

Unwritten expectations

During the guided part of the library tour, it felt like we went up and down the stairs at least five times! I knew I needed to take the elevator to give my body a break, but I felt embarrassed and uncertain about asking. Sometimes people tell me I'm just being lazy.

I was also unsure about taking the elevator because it's embarrassing to be separated from the rest of my class. It's especially hard when the elevator is far away from the route everyone else is taking.

Each time we stopped at a new location, the librarian explained a different feature of the library. We had to stand there for at least 10 minutes. My back and my knees were starting to ache but no one else from my class was sitting so I felt embarrassed to ask for a chair.

When I started moving around to try to stretch my back, the librarian looked at me and said, "Wow, someone just can't stand still! I'm glad you're so excited to be here today but moving around so much might make it harder for your classmates to focus."

After the tour, we were given time to explore the library. I didn't know what the rules were. Could I sit in the quiet corner and rest? Was it okay to talk in small groups? There wasn't any clear guidance about what was expected of us in the library space. I didn't want to break any rules, but I also didn't want to get called out again if I just sat in one place for the whole open time.

No representation

As part of our school's visit, we were supposed to find a book that we related to. As I wandered through the library, I looked for books that might be about kids like me. But I couldn't find any. It made me feel invisible.

Broadening understanding of social-emotional access

Social-emotional barriers are important to accessibility because they directly impact how safe, welcome, and empowered people feel when navigating your library spaces. Accessibility isn't just about physical or technical ease. It's about ensuring disabled people don't feel excluded, judged, overwhelmed, or anxious when participating.

If a person with a disability encounters unwelcoming attitudes, confusing communication, or a lack of respect for their dignity and autonomy, they may experience emotional harm or disengagement. This can even happen if physical and sensory access is provided.

A good way to increase social-emotional accessibility is to make disability inclusion a regular part of your communications. When you talk about disability freely and neutrally, you make it known that disabled patrons and staff are welcome and expected in your spaces. This helps people with disabilities feel more comfortable asking for what they need if it's not already provided.

Social-emotional accessibility can look different for everyone.

For someone with mental health challenges

It may mean accessing an environment where they don't have to hide their struggles to be able to engage. This could be accomplished by:

- Normalizing the need to regulate by providing easy access to low-stimulation regulation areas.
- Giving people control of their choices – like opting out of certain activities.
- Offering clear instructions, schedules, and expectations to reduce anxiety that comes from uncertainty or fear of making mistakes.

For someone who is neurodivergent

It could mean creating spaces where different ways of being are understood, respected, and included. Such spaces reduce the need to mask (the exhausting effort of appearing "neurotypical"). You can do this by:

- Visually showing that you understand and promote behaviours like fidgeting – for example, by offering fidget tools in common areas.
- Offering easily accessible sensory-friendly environments – like quiet spaces with adjustable lighting.
- Including posters and other library resources with visual representation of neurodivergent experiences.

For someone with a learning disability

It might mean creating a space where presenting information in different formats is normal and valued. Some strategies for doing this include:

- Incorporating visual aids, audio options, and simple written formats for all library communications.
- Circulating communications that are free of jargon and complex language.
- Encouraging questions for anyone who needs extra assistance – like, "If you need help, just ask!"

? Questions to help you assess the social-emotional accessibility of your library spaces

1. What unspoken expectations or "rules" might feel confusing, intimidating, or unwelcoming to someone who's unfamiliar with our library?
2. How do our spaces support patrons and staff who need more time to process, read, or respond without making them feel rushed or judged?
3. Do our announcements and other communications frame accessibility as a normal, expected part of the library experience? Or is it framed as an exception, or something that requires extra work for the disabled person to set in motion?
4. Are there visual indicators that our library welcomes people with disabilities? For example, accessibility symbols and disability inclusive artwork.

Conclusion

This framework offers a comprehensive and inclusive approach to assessing the accessibility of library spaces. Grounded in the five guiding principles – accessibility from the start, intersectional approaches to accessibility, flexible and adaptable accessibility, user-centred approaches, and naming what you know about accessibility – it moves beyond minimum compliance to centre the diverse realities of all library patrons and staff.

By examining accessibility through three key areas – physical, sensory, and social-emotional – this framework recognizes that access is multi-faceted and deeply influenced by individual experiences, identities, and environments. It encourages you to think proactively, design responsively, and remain accountable to the communities you serve.

Ultimately, this framework supports you in creating spaces that are centred around accessibility and inclusion for all. In doing so, it reaffirms the library's role as a place of equity, care, and inclusion for everyone.

Resources

Project Enable: ADA Library Accessibility Checklist

Accessible Libraries: Checklist: Accessibility 101

Accessible Libraries: Rick Hansen Foundation

AODA: How to Provide Accessible Library Service

DO-IT: Equal Access: Universal Design of Libraries

City of Vancouver: Accessible events checklist and resources

BC CAISE: School Site Accessibility Assessment Tool

SPARC BC: Making Space for Everyone: Accessible, Inclusive, and Safe Communities

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower: How to design spaces to better meet the needs of neurodivergent groups

Kootenay Library Federation: Accessibility Checklist