

Universal Design In Autism Research and Practice

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Why Universal Design

We are accidentally leaving too many people out
with our current models and methods

Universal Design is not compromise if
compromise is defined by everyone losing something

The goal of Universal Design is for everyone to gain something

Things to know when thinking about Autistic people

Identity First vs Person First Language: I am Autistic vs I am a person with Autism

Statistics range from 80%-90%+ of Autistic adults preferring Identity First language

Deficits Model vs Social Model: Autism as a list of problems, deficits, disabilities vs Autism seen as a valid neurotype with a range of unique abilities and possible environmental and societal barriers and disabling factors

Statistics models are not many for preference between Deficits and Social models, but those that exist suggest a strong preference among Autistic adults for the Social Model

When thinking about the Autistic community

No two Autistic people are alike

Many Autistic people do not have intellectual disabilities

Masking hurts autistic people, emotionally and physically

Many Autistic people are neurodivergent in at least one other way

It is widely held that between 20%-25% of the world population is neurodivergent and between 1%-4% are Autistic

Autism and ADHD are commonly missed in girls and women, leading to large speculation that these numbers are low

* Trigger warning for ideation: Autistic people at risk

Statistics for life expectancy in Autistic adults range from about 10-20 years less than non-autistic people, with the lesser expectancy being in autistic people with intellectual disabilities

In both the US and the UK, studies says that more than 60% of autistic adults report thinking about suicide

And many studies list this as the number one cause of early death

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11042491/>

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/our-research/research-projects/understanding-suicide-in-autism>

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging: DEIB

Why is DEIB not working well

Is DEIB needed in 2025

What might make DEIB work better for those who oppose it

Universal Design

Definition: “Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size or disability. This includes public places in the built environment such as buildings, streets or spaces that the public have access to; products and services provided in those places; and systems that are available including information and communications technology (ICT).”

<https://universaldesign.ie/about>

More information: <https://www.section508.gov/blog/Universal-Design-What-is-it/>

The Basics

- Who are you trying to serve
- Of them, who is least likely to be able to participate
- Design **with**/for them
- Leave no one out of the final design

Examples?

A ramp into a building?

An elevator?

Dimmable LED lights?

Handicapped restroom stalls?

Example: Physical Space

- 1) [Equitable Use](#) - The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.
- 2) [Flexibility in Use](#) - The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
- 3) [Simple and Intuitive Use](#) - Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills or current concentration level.
- 4) [Perceptible Information](#) - The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.
- 5) [Tolerance for Error](#) - The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
- 6) [Low Physical Effort](#) - The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.
- 7) [Size and Space for Approach and Use](#) - Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture, or mobility.

From: <https://www.section508.gov/blog/Universal-Design-What-is-it/>

In Practice

An Australian interior design architecture firm shows one of their projects based on the principles of Universal Design



Where can Universal Design be applied in your own work?

- Physical environments
- Inner-office communications
- Work “social” environments, like networking and work parties
- Surveys
- Powerpoints and other visual aids
- What else?

Can you see Universal Design being helpful in your work

What is your project or perceived need?

Who's getting left out right now?

What could you do to increase participation?

Universal Design in all you do

What other parts of your life can you see
the concept of Universal Design being helpful?

Get clear on the goal

What does the finished project look and function like

- This is theoretical and will develop over the planning process
- Mission statements, values statements, vision statements, and other brief, written/communicated concepts can help planning stay on track and hold the project accountable

Establish a unified commitment to leaving no one out

- This takes patience and a truly open mind to hearing criticism and pushback
- Consider belonging above inclusion
- Full participation is not always completely achievable, but if you want the most people to benefit, this priority must be checked at every stage of the project

Know your audience, user, client, subject

Personal research, market research, getting to know a range of people within your target is imperative

Invite those with the most barriers to participation to tell you what they would need to be able to participate

Check in with your target audience for feedback throughout the project or research

Be willing to pivot if feedback uncovers barriers

No project will take into account every single possible barrier, but a Universal Design mindset is a great start to benefitting the most people

Helpful Resources

Center for Excellence in Universal Design

<https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design>

National Autistic Society, United Kingdom

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

Autistic Self Advocacy Network, United States

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

Autistic Doctors International, UK based with global participation

<https://autisticdoctorsinternational.com/>