"DIVERSABILITY CIRCUS MANUAL"

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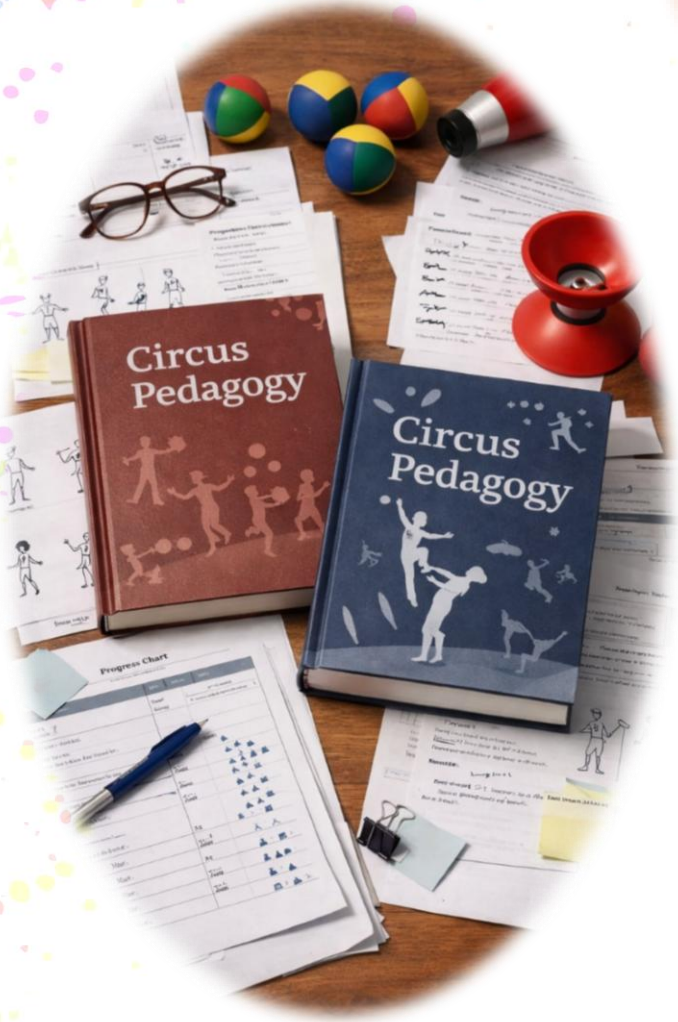
Introduction

PURPOSE OF THE MANUAL



The DiversAbility Circus Pedagogical Manual has been created to support youth workers, circus educators and social practitioners in using circus pedagogy as an educational tool with, and for young people with disabilities.

Its main purpose is to bridge two fields —Disability Care and Circus Pedagogy — by offering theoretical background and practical guidance, methods, and inspiration for those who wish to make circus activities accessible to everyone, regardless of ability.

Rather than being a technical guide to circus techniques, this manual focuses on how to teach inclusively: how to adapt, communicate, create safe spaces, and value every participant's contribution
It presents circus not as a performance goal, but as a process for empowerment, creativity, and social connection.

Through examples, pedagogical principles, and practical tools developed by the project partners, the manual invites educators to:

- Understand the principles of inclusive circus pedagogy,
- Learn how to design and facilitate workshops for mixed-ability groups,
- Discover adaptations for different needs and contexts,
- Reflect on their own practice as inclusive facilitators.

The manual is part of the Erasmus+ project DiversAbility Circus, which brings together partners from across Europe to share knowledge, develop accessible circus tools**,** and promote equality of participation in the performing arts.

It is meant to be used flexibly — you can read it cover to cover or explore specific sections.

Above all, it is an invitation to learn by doing, adapting, and creating together — to make circus a truly universal language of inclusion.

WHO IS THE MANUAL FOR ?

The DiversAbility Circus Pedagogical Manual is designed for people who work with *young people and want to use circus activities as a tool for inclusion*, creativity, and personal development.

It is primarily addressed to:

- Youth workers working with young people with disabilities or mixed-ability groups
- Circus trainers and circus artists who wish to adapt their practice to be more inclusive
- Educators and teachers interested in using circus as a non-formal learning tool
- Social workers and facilitators working in inclusive, community, or therapeutic contexts

No advanced circus skills are required to use this manual. It is suitable both for:

- Practitioners with strong circus experience but little experience in disability, and
- Practitioners with experience in disability and inclusion but little or no circus background.

The manual is particularly relevant for those working with young people aged approximately 12 to 25, including young people with intellectual, physical, sensory, or psychosocial disabilities.

The manual invites all readers to approach circus not as a performance-driven discipline, but as a flexible, creative, and human-centred pedagogical tool, adaptable to diverse abilities, contexts, and needs.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Across Europe, circus arts are long been used as a tool for education, social inclusion, and personal development. Circus activities offer unique possibilities: they are physical yet creative, non-competitive, playful, and adaptable to a wide range of abilities. Circus creates a space where learning happens through the body, experimentation, and cooperation rather than through comparison or performance pressure.

In general, young people with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing cultural, educational, and recreational activities. These barriers are often not linked to their impairments, but to a lack of adapted methods, trained facilitators, accessible environments, and inclusive pedagogical approaches.
But many youth workers and circus trainers express strong motivation to work inclusively, though, they sometimes express their lack of practical tools, training, and shared resources to support their work.

The DiversAbility Circus project was created in response to this gap. Funded by the Erasmus+ programme, the project brings together organisations with complementary expertise in:

- Circus education and artistic practice
- Youth work and non-formal education
- Disability, inclusion and accessibility

The project is based on the belief that circus is for everyone, and that inclusion is not about creating separate activities, but about adapting environments, methods, and attitudes so that all young people can participate meaningfully.

Through international cooperation, training activities, local workshops, research, and the exchange of practices, DiversAbility Circus aims to:

- Strengthen the skills of youth workers and circus trainers,
- Develop shared principles for inclusive circus pedagogy,
- Create practical, accessible tools that can be used across different contexts,
- Build a European network of organisations committed to inclusive circus practices.

This pedagogical manual is one of the key outcomes of the project. It reflects the collective learning of the partners, trainers, and participants involved, and translates project experiences into concrete guidance for those who wish to use circus as a powerful, inclusive, and empowering tool for young people with disabilities.

DEFINITIONS

DISABILITY

In the context of this manual, disability is understood not as a fixed personal deficit, but as a dynamic interaction between an individual and their environment.
This understanding is grounded in contemporary frameworks such as the social model of disability and the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) developed by the World Health Organization. These frameworks emphasize that disability emerges when barriers in the environment, attitudes, or methods limit a person's participation, rather than from an individual's impairment alone.

Moving Beyond a Medical Perspective

Traditional medical models tend to define disability primarily **in terms of diagnosis, impairment, or limitation. While** medical information can be important for health and safety, it is not sufficient for inclusive pedagogical practice.
In inclusive circus pedagogy, the focus shifts from what a person cannot do to:

- What they can do,
- How they learn and interact,
- What supports or adaptations enable meaningful participation.

Disability as a Contextual Experience

Disability is experienced differently depending on the situation. A person may face significant barriers in one context and very few in another.
For example, a young person may encounter difficulties in activities that rely heavily on verbal instruction, but experience full participation in embodied, playful, non-verbal circus activities.

This highlights the importance of context-sensitive design, where activities, space, props, and communication are adapted to reduce barriers.

Diversity of Disabilities

In this manual, the term disability includes a wide range of experiences, such as:

- Intellectual disabilities,
- Physical and mobility impairments,
- Sensory disabilities (visual, hearing),
- Neurodivergent profiles (e.g. autism, ADHD),
- Psychosocial and emotional regulation difficulties.

It is important to recognize that many young people experience multiple and intersecting needs, and that no two individuals with the same diagnosis will have the same abilities or support needs.

Disability and Participation

From an inclusive circus perspective, disability becomes relevant when it affects participation. The key pedagogical question is therefore not:
“What is this person’s disability?”
but rather:
“What might limit or support this person’s participation in this activity?”
This shift encourages facilitators to focus on participation, agency, and choice, rather than on labels.

Disability as a Source of Knowledge

Inclusive practice also recognizes that young people with disabilities bring valuable knowledge, creativity, and perspectives to the group. Their ways of moving, communicating, or problem-solving can enrich collective learning and challenge dominant norms about ability and performance.

Circus Pedagogy

What Is Circus Pedagogy?

Circus pedagogy refers to the use of circus arts as a method of education, learning, and personal development, rather than as a performance-oriented or professional training discipline. It focuses on how circus is taught and why, placing the learning process, the participant, and the group at the centre.

In circus pedagogy, juggling, balance, acrobatics, clowning, and creative performance are used as educational tools to support physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. The emphasis is not on technical mastery or artistic excellence, but on participation, experimentation, cooperation, and personal progress.

Circus pedagogy is typically grounded in:

- Non-formal education principles
- Experiential and embodied learning
- Creativity and play
- Inclusion and accessibility

Key Characteristics of Circus Pedagogy

Circus pedagogy is generally:

- Non-competitive: there are no winners or losers; progress is individual.
- Embodied: learning happens through movement, sensation, and action.
- Process-oriented: value is placed on exploration and learning, not results.
- Adaptable: activities can be modified for different abilities and contexts.
- Collective: group dynamics, trust, and cooperation are central.

Different terms are used across countries, sectors, and projects to describe similar practices. While they often overlap, they can highlight slightly different emphases.

Circus Education

This is a broad term referring to any form of teaching and learning through circus arts. It can include:

- Recreational circus classes,
- Youth circus schools,
- Pre-professional training,
- Educational or social circus projects.

Circus pedagogy can be understood as the methodological and educational approach within circus education.

Social Circus

Social circus is a term widely used to describe circus projects with explicit social objectives, such as:

- Social inclusion,
- Community building,
- Empowerment of marginalized groups, youth at risk, refugees, or people with disabilities.

Social circus places strong emphasis on social impact and transformation, often working in community or outreach contexts. Circus pedagogy is the educational foundation that supports social circus practice.

Inclusive Circus

Inclusive circus refers to circus activities designed to ensure equal participation for people with different abilities, including people with disabilities. It focuses on:

- Adapting activities, props, space, and communication,
- Valuing diversity of bodies and learning styles,
- Removing barriers to participation.

Inclusive circus is not a separate discipline, but an approach that can be applied across all circus activities. Inclusive circus relies heavily on inclusive circus pedagogy.

Adapted Circus

The term adapted circus is often used in contexts where activities are modified to meet specific needs, such as physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments. While adaptations are important, contemporary practice increasingly emphasises adapting the environment and method, rather than the person.

Circus as a Pedagogical Tool

This expression highlights circus not as an end in itself, but as a means to support learning, inclusion, and personal development. It is often used in youth work, education, and social sectors.

Despite the variety of terms, they all share a common foundation:

- Circus as a learning process,
- Participants as active contributors
- Diversity as a resource,
- Inclusion as a pedagogical responsibility.

In this manual, the term circus pedagogy is used as an umbrella concept to describe inclusive, educational, and participant-centred circus practices, regardless of the specific context or terminology used.

Inclusion

In the context of this manual, inclusion refers to the intentional creation of learning and creative environments where all young people can participate meaningfully, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, backgrounds, or needs.
Inclusion is not about placing everyone in the same activity without adaptation. It is about recognising diversity as a normal and valuable part of any group, and designing activities, spaces, and pedagogical approaches that respond to this diversity from the outset.

Inclusion as Participation, Not Presence

Being included does not simply mean being present in a workshop. Inclusion means:

- Having real opportunities to take part,
- Being able to contribute in one's own way,
- Feeling safe, respected, and valued within the group.

In inclusive circus practice, success is not measured by technical performance, but by quality of participation and engagement.

Inclusion as a Pedagogical Responsibility

Inclusion is understood as a shared responsibility of facilitators, organisations, participants and environments, rather than as a characteristic of the individual. Inclusive circus pedagogy therefore focuses on adapting the context, not "fixing" the person.

Inclusion Through Flexibility and Choice

In inclusive circus workshops, inclusion is supported by:

- Offering multiple ways to engage in an activity,
- Allowing different roles (doing, supporting, observing, creating),
- Adapting props, space, time, and communication,
- Valuing effort, exploration, and creativity over results.

This flexibility allows each participant to find a meaningful point of entry into the activity.

Inclusion as a Dynamic Process

Inclusion is not a fixed state or a checklist. It is a continuous process of observation, adaptation, and reflection**.**

Needs can change from one day to another, and what works for one participant may not work for another. Inclusive practice therefore requires facilitators to remain attentive, responsive, and open to learning from participants themselves.

Inclusion as a Shared Experience

Finally, inclusion benefits the entire group. Inclusive circus workshops do not only support young people with disabilities; they also:

- Encourage empathy and cooperation,
- Challenge norms about ability and performance,
- Enrich creative processes through diversity.

In this sense, inclusion is not an added component of circus pedagogy, but a core value that strengthens learning, creativity, and social connection for everyone.

Understanding Disabilities

In this manual, when we talk about disability, we move beyond a purely medical or clinical way of thinking. Disability is not something that exists only “inside” a person. It appears in the interaction between a person’s characteristics and the environment around them: the physical space, the social setting, the cultural expectations, and the way activities are organised.

From this perspective, our goal is not to define people by labels, but to create environments that are accessible, fair, and welcoming. Inclusive practice focuses on removing barriers and recognising diversity as a strength rather than a limitation.

At the same time, having a general understanding of different types of disabilities is necessary for facilitators. These broad categories are not meant to define individuals or limit their potential, but instead, they serve as reference points that can help anticipate possible needs, plan adaptations, and prepare supportive learning environments.

In inclusive circus practice, categories are therefore used as tools, not as identities. They help guide observation and reflection, but they never replace listening to participants and responding to each person as a unique individual.

Overview of different disabilities

Intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disabilities involve difficulties with learning, communication, autonomy, and daily life skills. These difficulties vary greatly from one person to another.

It is important to remember that intellectual disability does not mean a lack of abilities, motivation, or desire to learn. It often means that learning happens at a different pace and through different methods. Many people learn best through concrete, physical, repeated, and meaningful experiences, especially in environments that are clear, supportive, and non-judgmental.

In inclusive circus practice, the focus shifts from what someone cannot do to how they can participate. Visual supports, simple instructions, practical demonstrations, and strong relationships based on trust are especially helpful. When properly supported, many participants bring authenticity, enthusiasm, and strong relational skills to the group.

Physical disabilities

Physical disabilities involve limitations in movement, posture, strength, or coordination. They may be present from birth or acquired later in life and can be temporary or permanent.

A common misconception is to associate physical disability with reduced independence. In reality, many people with physical disabilities have strong cognitive and communication skills. Their main difficulties often come from physical barriers, rigid organisation, or negative attitudes.

An inclusive circus environment reduces physical obstacles, allows flexible use of space and time, and offers adaptations without making people feel different. Facilitators should avoid overprotection and instead encourage autonomy, choice, and equal participation based on respect and cooperation.

Sensory disabilities

Sensory disabilities include visual, hearing, or combined impairments, in partial or total form. Their impact largely depends on how accessible the environment is and which tools are available.

Many people with sensory disabilities develop effective ways to orient themselves, communicate, and interact. Inclusive practice means recognising and valuing these strategies rather than trying to "normalise" them.

Clear communication, visual and tactile supports, attention to rhythm and pacing, and conscious use of space are key elements. In embodied group activities, sensory diversity can become a source of shared learning and deeper awareness.

Neurodevelopmental disabilities

Neurodevelopmental disabilities include conditions such as autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, and related profiles. They affect how people perceive, process, and respond to information.

These differences involve both challenges and strengths. Sensory sensitivity, need for routine, intense focus, or alternative communication styles can become resources when supported appropriately.

Inclusive practice involves creating predictable structures, offering flexibility, allowing time for self-regulation, and recognising individual talents. In supportive environments, neurodivergent participants often contribute creativity, original thinking, and unique problem-solving approaches.

Considerations When Working with Young People with Intellectual Disabilities

Working with adolescents and young people with intellectual disabilities means focusing on people rather than diagnoses. Intellectual disability affects cognitive functioning, but it also involves communication, emotional regulation, autonomy, and adaptive skills. These aspects vary greatly from one individual to another.

An inclusive approach shifts the perspective from asking why a person cannot do something to asking how the context can be adjusted to support participation. When an instruction is not understood, it may be more helpful to simplify it, demonstrate it physically, or break it into smaller steps rather than repeating it in the same way.

Young people with intellectual disabilities often learn best through concrete, meaningful, and embodied experiences. Clear structure, predictable routines, and relational safety create conditions in which learning becomes possible.

Creating the Right Conditions

Several elements support participation:

Flexibility and Observation
Profiles differ widely in language, attention, autonomy, and emotional regulation. Observing how each person enters an activity and adapting timing or method accordingly helps avoid rigid expectations. It is useful to avoid language that implies comparison, such as "this is easy" or "everyone can do it." More inclusive phrasing might be: "There are different ways to try this."

Concrete Experience
Abstract explanations are often more accessible when connected to action. Showing before explaining, offering short experiences first, and naming what happened afterward can make learning clearer. Simple invitations such as "Let's try it together once" are often more effective than long explanations.

Structure and Predictability
Clarity reduces cognitive load and anxiety. Explaining how an activity begins and ends, announcing transitions, and naming breaks supports orientation. Statements like "We'll do this for a few minutes, then we'll pause" help participants feel secure.

Participation and Competence
Participation is not the same as performance. Recognising effort, persistence, and strategy strengthens confidence. Specific feedback such as "You found your own way" or "You kept trying" supports a sense of competence without comparison.

Educational Relationship
A calm, consistent, and non-judgmental adult presence supports emotional regulation. When difficulties arise, it can be helpful to explore what is needed rather than interpreting behaviour negatively. For example: "Let's see what could help right now."

Accessible Communication
Communication benefits from short sentences, one instruction at a time, and gestures or demonstrations. Observing actions often gives better information than asking, "Did you understand?".

Group Dynamics
The group can be a powerful resource, but facilitators need to prevent automatic substitution or over-helping. Encouraging participants to ask before helping and recognising diverse contributions supports equality.

Autonomy and Choice
Autonomy grows through small, meaningful choices. Offering alternatives and respecting refusals strengthens dignity and engagement. For example: "Would you like to try now or later?"

Considerations When Working with Young People with Physical Disabilities

When working with young people with physical disabilities or motor impairments, it is important to recognise that there is no single way of moving, positioning, or participating. Physical disabilities may affect strength, coordination, posture, endurance, balance, or range of movement, but each person experiences these differences in their own way.

Many barriers to participation come not from the impairment itself, but from environments, activities, and expectations that are designed for only one type of body. In inclusive circus practice, the aim is not to ask the person to adapt to a fixed activity, but to adapt the activity and the environment so that different bodies and movement patterns can participate meaningfully.

Physical disability does not automatically mean reduced autonomy. Many young people with motor impairments have strong cognitive, social, and communicative abilities. Respecting this diversity is central to inclusive facilitation.

Creating the Right Conditions

Several elements are especially important:

Space and Accessibility

Participation is supported when the environment is easy to navigate, movement pathways are clear, and materials are accessible. Small adjustments in layout, equipment, or positioning can make a significant difference to comfort, independence, and confidence.

Movement Diversity

There is no single correct way to stand, sit, balance, transition, or move through an activity. Allowing different body positions and encouraging participants to find what works for them supports dignity, ownership, and fuller participation.

Pacing and Energy

Fatigue, pain, or fluctuating endurance may shape how and for how long a young person can take part. Flexible timing, planned pauses, and permission to change position or rest can help sustain engagement without turning adaptation into something exceptional.

Support and Safety

Safety is essential, but overprotection can reduce confidence and autonomy. It is important to ask before offering physical help, agree on how support will be given, and make space for participants to do as much as they can in their own way. This helps build trust while respecting independence.

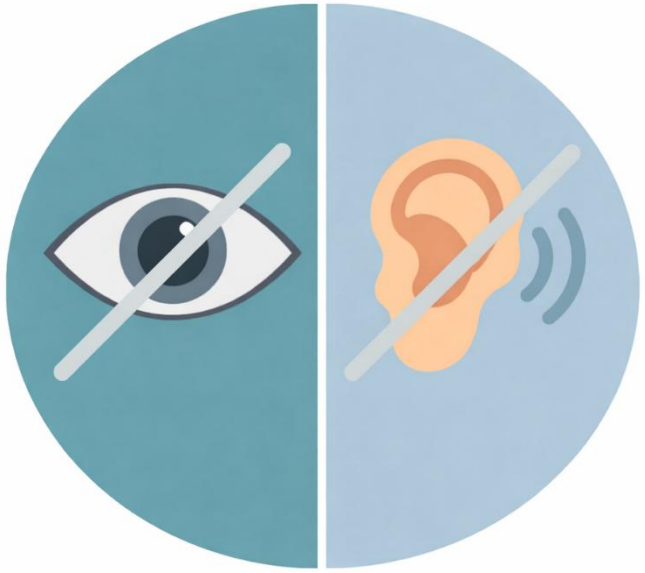
Language and Interaction

Inclusive language should focus on participation rather than performance. Recognising effort, strategy, creativity, and contribution rather than speed, strength, or appearance helps create a more respectful and balanced group culture.

Autonomy and Respect

Respect for autonomy is central. Asking before touching, not moving assistive devices without permission, and addressing the young person directly all contribute to emotional safety and mutual respect. These gestures may seem simple, but they strongly influence whether participation feels empowering or controlling.

Considerations when working with Young People with sensory sensitivities



When working with young people with sensory disabilities, it is important to recognise that sensory disabilities may involve visual impairment, hearing impairment, or combined sensory differences, in partial or total form. Their impact depends not only on the impairment itself, but also on how accessible the environment, communication, and activities are.

Many young people with sensory disabilities develop effective ways of orienting themselves, communicating, and interacting with others. Inclusive practice begins by recognising and valuing these strategies rather than expecting participants to adapt to environments designed for only one sensory mode. The aim is not to "normalise" participation, but to make participation accessible in different ways.

In circus and group activities, barriers often arise when information is given through only one channel. If instructions rely only on speech, only on visual demonstration, or only on following others from a distance, some participants may be excluded unnecessarily. Inclusive facilitation means paying attention to how information is shared, how space is organised, and how participants can orient themselves and feel secure in the activity.

Creating the Right Conditions

Several elements are especially important:

Accessible Communication

Young people with sensory disabilities may access information in different ways depending on whether they have visual impairment, hearing impairment, or combined sensory differences. Communication should therefore be clear, consistent, and adapted to how the young person best understands the activity, whether through speech, gesture, sign, touch, or a combination of methods.

Space and Orientation

For young people with visual impairment or combined sensory differences, participation is supported when the environment is easy to understand and navigate. Clear pathways, stable placement of materials, and a consistent room layout can increase confidence, independence, and safety.

Visual Access

For young people with hearing impairment, it is important that the facilitator, other participants, and key actions remain visible. Positioning in the room, clear demonstration, and avoiding talking while turned away can make a significant difference to understanding and involvement.

Rhythm and Pacing

Information may need more time to be received and processed, especially when communication happens through more than one channel. A clear rhythm, slower transitions, and short pauses can help participants stay oriented and engaged without feeling rushed.

Predictability and Safety

Safety is closely linked to predictability. Knowing where things are, how an activity begins, what happens next, and how transitions are managed can reduce uncertainty and help participants feel more secure in movement-based activities.

Group Awareness

Inclusion also depends on the group. Other participants may need support to communicate clearly, respect shared signals, and become more aware of different sensory ways of accessing the activity. This helps create a more cooperative and respectful environment.

Participation and Autonomy

Young people with sensory disabilities should be supported as active participants, not treated mainly as recipients of help. Respecting their preferred ways of communicating, moving, and receiving support helps strengthen confidence, autonomy, and meaningful participation.

Considerations When Working with Young People with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities

Working with adolescents and young people with neurodevelopmental disabilities means focusing on people rather than diagnoses. Neurodevelopmental disabilities may include autism, ADHD, and other developmental profiles that can affect attention, communication, sensory processing, emotional regulation, social interaction, or flexibility. These aspects vary greatly from one individual to another.

An inclusive approach shifts the perspective from asking why a person is struggling to asking how the environment, the activity, or the way of guiding it can be adjusted to support participation. When a young person seems overwhelmed, distracted, or resistant, it is often more helpful to look at pace, clarity, sensory load, or structure than to repeat the same demand in the same way.

Many young people with neurodevelopmental disabilities participate best when activities are clear, predictable, and flexible. A calm atmosphere, consistent routines, and respect for different ways of engaging can help create conditions in which participation, confidence, and learning become possible.

Creating the Right Conditions

Several elements support participation:

Individual Differences

Neurodevelopmental disabilities include a wide range of profiles, and each young person will have their own way of communicating, focusing, reacting, and engaging. Attention, sensory processing, social interaction, and emotional regulation can vary greatly. Careful observation helps facilitators respond to the person in front of them rather than relying on assumptions.

Clear Communication

Communication is often most effective when it is short, direct, and consistent. Giving one instruction at a time and supporting speech with gesture or demonstration can make activities easier to understand and follow.

Structure and Predictability
A predictable structure can help many young people feel safer and more settled. Knowing how the session begins, what comes next, and when breaks or transitions will happen can reduce uncertainty and support attention.

Sensory Environment

Some young people may be more sensitive to noise, light, touch, movement, or crowded spaces. Paying attention to the sensory atmosphere and reducing unnecessary stimulation can make participation more comfortable and manageable.

Rhythm and Transitions
Fast changes of activity can be difficult, especially when they happen without warning. A steady rhythm, clear transitions, and enough time to shift attention can help participants stay engaged and regulated.

Participation and Competence

Participation does not have to look the same for everyone. A young person may need to observe first, go more slowly, take a break, or join through an adapted version of the activity. Recognising effort and persistence helps build confidence without comparison.

Educational Relationship

A calm, consistent, and non-judgmental adult presence can offer an important sense of safety. When difficulties arise, it is often more helpful to ask what the young person needs than to interpret behaviour negatively.

Group Dynamics

The group can be a valuable source of connection and support, but it can also feel demanding or overstimulating. Supporting turn-taking, shared attention, and respect for personal space helps make group participation safer and more accessible.

Autonomy and Choice

Autonomy often grows through small, meaningful choices. Offering alternatives, allowing time before joining, and respecting preferences can strengthen confidence, dignity, and engagement.

Considerations when working with mixed groups

Working with mixed groups, where young people with different abilities and ways of functioning participate together, requires careful attention to group culture, structure, and facilitation style. A mixed group is not simply a collection of individuals; it is a dynamic system in which inclusion or exclusion is shaped moment by moment through language, expectations, and relational practices.

An inclusive approach begins with the idea that diversity is normal. The goal is not to make everyone participate in the same way, but to create conditions where different ways of engaging can coexist without hierarchy. Inclusion in mixed groups depends on designing contexts that are flexible, respectful, and clear.

Creating the Right Conditions

Several elements can support participation in mixed groups:

Designing for Variability from the Start

Activities are more inclusive when they are planned with diversity in mind from the beginning, rather than adapted afterward. Offering multiple ways to engage and avoiding a single "correct" way of participating helps prevent exclusion. Language such as "Choose the option that works for you" supports autonomy and flexibility.

Avoiding Implicit Hierarchies

Mixed groups can easily develop unspoken hierarchies based on speed, strength, communication style, or visible ability. Facilitators play a key role in distributing attention evenly and recognising different forms of contribution. Valuing effort, cooperation, strategy, or creativity — not only performance — supports group balance.

Building a Shared Group Culture

Inclusion depends not only on structure but also on culture. Making certain principles explicit can help shape group norms. For example, encouraging participants to ask before offering help, normalising adaptations, and valuing cooperation over competition contribute to mutual respect.

Managing Pace and Transitions

Participation rhythms often vary. Some participants need more time to begin, others need breaks, and others move quickly between activities. Clear beginnings and endings, gradual transitions, and flexible pacing help avoid comparison-based pressure. Statements such as "Everyone follows their own pace" reinforce acceptance.

Flexible Roles and Meaningful Participation

In mixed groups, meaningful participation does not mean everyone does the same thing. It means each person has a recognised and valued role. Allowing role rotation and adapting responsibilities helps prevent fixed positions that may reinforce imbalance.

Clear and Accessible Communication

Communication should be understandable to all without being infantilising. Direct language, demonstrations, and checking understanding through action rather than words alone create common ground.

Responding to Conflict Constructively

Differences in communication styles or sensory experiences may lead to misunderstandings. An inclusive approach involves naming situations calmly, avoiding blame, and supporting dialogue. Framing behaviour as a signal rather than as intention helps maintain respect.

To support facilitators in translating understanding into concrete practice, this manual is accompanied by a set of profile cards focusing on different types of disabilities. These cards highlight common challenges, potential strengths, and practical facilitation strategies that may be useful in inclusive circus contexts. They are designed as working tools rather than diagnostic references.

The profile cards are not intended to define individuals or reduce people to categories. Every young person is unique, and their abilities, needs, and interests evolve over time and across situations. Instead, the cards offer general reference points that can help facilitators anticipate possible barriers, recognise existing resources, and reflect on how activities and environments can be adapted.

Used flexibly, these cards can support preparation, team discussion, and ongoing reflection. They may help facilitators ask the right questions, explore alternative approaches, and develop more responsive and respectful practices. Above all, they are meant to encourage curiosity, openness, and continuous learning in the process of building inclusive circus spaces.

The Value of Circus for Young People with Disability

A BIT OF HISTORY

To better understand the value of circus for young people with disabilities today, it is helpful to briefly look at how social and inclusive circus practices developed.
Circus pedagogy first developed as a way to support social inclusion, especially with young people facing difficult life situations. Early social circus projects used circus activities to build confidence, cooperation, and a sense of belonging through shared creative experiences.

As these projects grew, practitioners began to see that circus could also be a powerful learning tool. Activities were adapted to help participants develop social skills, emotional awareness, and learning abilities. Circus workshops started to appear in many different places, such as community centres, youth clubs, prisons, and refugee projects.

From the early 2000s, circus also began to be used in special education, healthcare, and disability support settings. Teachers, therapists, and youth workers started using juggling, balance, and movement activities to support motor skills, concentration, self-confidence, and social interaction among young people with disabilities. This led to the development of more therapeutic and developmental approaches within circus practice.

Today, inclusive and therapeutic circus continues to grow through international exchange and shared experience. These practices form the foundation of the work presented in this manual and show how circus can support learning, well-being, and inclusion in many different contexts.

Benefits of circus: what participants experience while practicing circus

Circus activities offer young people with disabilities a unique space to explore movement, creativity, and relationships in a way that respects individual rhythms and abilities. Through juggling, balance, acrobatics, or creative play, participants are invited to discover what their bodies can do, how they learn best, and how they can express themselves within a group.

Because circus is flexible and open-ended, it allows each young person to engage in their own way: by trying, adapting, observing, supporting others, or inventing new approaches. Success is not defined by technical performance, but by participation, effort, and personal progress.

In this environment, young people with disabilities can experience autonomy, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging. They are encouraged to take initiative, make choices, and develop confidence through concrete, embodied experiences. Circus becomes not only an activity, but a meaningful space for learning, empowerment, and social connection.

Because it is, playful and non-competitive, circus often increases motivation and sustained engagement. Participants are encouraged to challenge themselves without external pressure to outperform others. This creates a positive learning environment where curiosity and enjoyment drive progress.

For young people with disability, practicing circus offers a wide range of possibilities to develop physical, cognitive, emotional, and social abilities. Because circus combines movement, creativity, and cooperation, it provides a holistic learning experience that goes beyond technical skill acquisition.

The effectiveness of circus in inclusive settings can be understood through six key pedagogical principles.

1. Embodied Learning and Physical Development

Circus is fundamentally an embodied practice. Learning takes place through movement, sensation, and coordination. Participants develop balance, motor planning, spatial awareness, strength, and fine and gross motor control.

For young people with disabilities, this embodied approach supports:

- Safer movement patterns,
- Improved body awareness,
- Increased physical confidence,
- Greater autonomy in everyday activities.

Physical development in circus is progressive and adapted, allowing repeated practice without excessive pressure.

2. Cognitive Development Through Action

Circus activities stimulate important cognitive processes such as attention, sequencing, memory, anticipation, and problem-solving. Many exercises require participants to plan actions, adapt strategies, and learn from feedback.

Learning through action helps young people:

- Strengthen concentration,
- Improve task persistence,
- Develop flexible thinking,
- Gain confidence in learning.

For participants who struggle with abstract instruction, this concrete learning style is particularly effective.

3. Emotional Development and Self-Regulation

Circus practice supports emotional growth by providing repeated experiences of effort, challenge, and success. Participants learn to manage frustration, cope with mistakes, and celebrate progress.

Over time, young people develop:

- Greater emotional resilience,
- Improved self-esteem,
- Stronger motivation,
- Better emotional regulation.

Because mistakes are normalised, participants learn to see difficulties as part of learning rather than as personal failure.

4. Social Development and Cooperative Skills

Many circus activities rely on cooperation, shared responsibility, and mutual support. Participants learn to communicate, negotiate roles, respect boundaries, and build trust.

Through partner and group work, young people develop:

- Social awareness,
- Empathy,
- Collaborative problem-solving,
- Sense of belonging.

These skills often transfer to school, family, and community contexts.

5. Structured Progression and Skill Development

Circus offers clear, visible pathways for learning. Skills are broken down into accessible steps, allowing participants to experience steady progress.

The "low threshold, high ceiling" structure enables:

- Early success,
- Sustained challenge,
- Long-term engagement.

This supports persistence and long-term learning habits.

6. Creativity and Identity Development

Creative exploration allows young people to experiment with movement, rhythm, and expression. By inventing variations and personal styles, participants strengthen their sense of agency and identity.

This creative process supports:

- Decision-making,
- Autonomy,
- Self-expression,
- Confidence in one's ideas.

Young people begin to see themselves as capable learners and creators.

TESTIMONIALS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Mišo (through the voice of his Support person)

"For Mišo, it was a very positive experience characterized by "sparkling eyes" and a deep sense of engagement. He managed to perform movements and tasks that exceeded the team's initial expectations, which was a highlight for everyone involved. However, the pace of the day was a significant factor; for Mišo, the schedule felt a bit too fast at times. Because he is navigating life with autism, he found his "emotional safety" through consistency—he was visibly happy if the place and the people did not change throughout the session."

He felt most supported when the team used physical movements and visualizations to explain tasks. It was crucial for him to know exactly where an exercise started and where it ended; without this clarity, he could feel alone or confused. Having one person speak to him at a time and allowing for long repetitions of the same exercise was the key to his success. This gave him the necessary time to process the "how-to" and ultimately gave him the feeling that he was truly capable of practicing the circus arts.

Lea (through the voice of her support per person)

"For Lea, the DiversAbility project was a journey of building trust and overcoming internal barriers. At 15, she is navigating the emotional turbulence of puberty, which makes her experience quite different from the older participants. Her biggest challenge was the "waiting time" between exercises; during these gaps, she tended to overthink and become fearful of the next task. It was vital for her to stay in the physical space to see that there was nothing to be afraid of, which eventually allowed her to finish her exercises with confidence."

"The use of the four emotion cards was an essential tool for her. Since she is still developing the ability to verbally express her internal processing, these symbols allowed her to communicate her feelings fluently. Even when she showed a "sad" face, the team's decision to keep working with her gently helped her transition through the fear. She benefited greatly from trying exercises with significant help first, then gradually reducing the assistance. By the end of the day, she was so comfortable that she was even looking forward to meeting and playing with new people the next day."

Adam (from his point of view as support person)

"It is essential to recognize the target group for whom this project was designed. Spending time with a person with a disability allows one to better understand the everyday challenges they must overcome. What may seem entirely natural and effortless to one person can evoke fear, panic, and a range of negative emotions in another."

"For this reason, it was crucial that everyone involved in the project was well informed about each participant's diagnosis and individual personality. We successfully created a welcoming and, above all, safe environment—not only for Mišo and Lea, but for all participants. It was particularly important that there was ALWAYS one designated person whom the participants could fully trust."

"This project supported my professional development, enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of those in my care, and helped me grow personally as well. The skills acquired through the project "The Value of Circus for Inclusion" are ones I actively apply in my professional practice and will continue to use in the future."

From Understanding to Action: Planning Circus Practice

How Circus Supports Long-Term Development

When circus activities take place regularly in a safe and inclusive environment, they can support meaningful development for young people with disabilities. The impact goes far beyond learning tricks or having fun. Over time, circus can influence how participants move, focus, manage emotions, build relationships, and see themselves.

Understanding these possible areas of impact helps facilitators make conscious choices. Instead of simply selecting activities, they can ask: What do we want to support? Physical confidence? Emotional resilience? Social connection? Being clear about these intentions makes workshop design more purposeful and meaningful.

The four dimensions presented below offer a simple framework to guide this reflection. They help facilitators identify what they aim to develop and design circus activities that truly support growth, participation, and autonomy.

Physical Impact: Building Autonomy, Body Confidence, and Sensory Awareness

Regular inclusive circus practice supports the long-term development of functional motor skills such as balance, coordination, strength, flexibility, and body awareness. Through activities like juggling, balancing, acrobatics, and aerial work, participants gradually learn how their bodies move, respond, and interact with space and objects.

Circus activities also stimulate sensory perception. Touch, vision, hearing, rhythm, and movement are constantly engaged, helping young people become more aware of their sensations and better able to interpret bodily signals. Over time, this supports improved orientation, posture, and self-regulation.

Repeated and well-adapted experiences of success help participants develop safer movement patterns and a more positive relationship with their bodies. Learning at their own pace, in a supportive environment, reduces fear of failure and encourages exploration. This often leads to greater confidence in physical abilities and increased motivation to engage in movement.

For many young people with disabilities, this physical and sensory development contributes directly to greater autonomy in daily life. Improved coordination, body awareness, and self-trust can support everyday activities such as moving in public spaces, handling objects, participating in leisure activities, and caring for oneself. Over time, participants develop a stronger sense of bodily competence and independence.

Cognitive Impact: Supporting Learning, Attention, and Problem-Solving

Inclusive circus activities actively stimulate key cognitive processes such as attention, memory, sequencing, anticipation, and problem-solving. Many circus skills require participants to observe carefully, plan movements, try different strategies, and adjust their actions based on immediate feedback. Learning takes place through repetition, experimentation, and embodied exploration rather than through abstract instruction.

Over time, this way of learning helps participants develop stronger concentration and greater mental flexibility. As they practice focusing on tasks, following simple sequences, and responding to changing situations, they gradually improve their ability to sustain attention and organise their actions. Problem-solving becomes part of everyday practice, as participants learn to find alternative ways to succeed when something does not work at first.

Circus also supports the development of effective learning strategies. Participants become more comfortable breaking tasks into smaller steps, asking for support when needed, and persisting through challenges. Mistakes are experienced as part of the learning process, not as failure, which encourages curiosity and resilience.

For many young people with disabilities, this leads to an important shift in how learning is perceived. Those who may have experienced repeated difficulties in formal education often discover that they are capable of learning, adapting, and progressing when learning is concrete, playful, and paced according to their needs. This renewed confidence in learning can extend beyond the circus context and support engagement in other educational and everyday situations.

Emotional Impact: Building Resilience, Self-Esteem, and Emotional Regulation

One of the most important long-term impacts of inclusive circus practice is its influence on self-image and emotional well-being. Through repeated experiences of achievement, recognition, and enjoyment, participants gradually develop stronger self-esteem and a more positive sense of self-worth. Feeling capable, valued, and supported helps young people build confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Circus activities normalise mistakes as a natural part of learning. In a playful and non-judgmental environment, participants are encouraged to try, fail, adjust, and try again. Over time, this process supports the development of resilience and helps young people manage frustration, disappointment, and uncertainty more effectively. They learn that difficulty is not a sign of failure, but an invitation to explore new strategies.

Inclusive circus practice also supports emotional regulation. Participants become more aware of their emotions and bodily signals and learn ways to calm themselves, ask for support, or take breaks when needed. This growing emotional awareness contributes to a greater sense of safety and self-control.

Many young people experience reduced anxiety and increased motivation to engage in unfamiliar or demanding activities. As confidence grows, participants are more willing to take positive risks, express themselves, and approach new challenges with curiosity rather than fear. These emotional skills often transfer to other areas of life, supporting well-being beyond the circus context.

Social Impact: Strengthening Communication, Independence, and Relationships

Inclusive circus activities are built on cooperation, shared responsibility, and mutual support. Partner and group exercises naturally create situations in which participants communicate through words, gestures, rhythm, and movement. Over time, young people learn to express their needs, listen to others, and adapt their behaviour within a group.

Through repeated collaborative experiences, participants develop stronger social skills and greater confidence in interacting with peers and adults. They learn how to negotiate roles, respect personal boundaries, give and receive help, and contribute to shared goals. These everyday social interactions support the development of stable and meaningful relationships.

Circus practice also encourages growing independence within a supportive group context. Participants are gradually invited to take responsibility for their own materials, manage parts of activities, make choices, and support others when appropriate. This balance between support and autonomy strengthens self-confidence and reduces dependence on constant adult guidance.

For many young people with disabilities, inclusive circus offers rare opportunities to experience themselves as active contributors rather than passive recipients of support. Being recognised for effort, cooperation, and creativity reinforces a positive group identity and sense of belonging. These experiences often extend beyond the circus setting, supporting participation in school, community life, and social relationships in everyday contexts.

Impact on Identity and Empowerment: Seeing Oneself as Capable and Valued

Beyond physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development, inclusive circus practice can deeply influence how young people with disabilities see themselves and their place in the world. Through regular participation in meaningful activities, participants are given opportunities to experience themselves as active, competent, and creative individuals.

Being recognised for effort, perseverance, creativity, and contribution helps shift self-perception from "someone who needs constant support" to "someone who can act, learn, and participate." Over time, these experiences strengthen self-confidence and encourage greater initiative. Young people become more willing to express their ideas, preferences, and boundaries, and to take responsibility for their own learning.

Inclusive circus environments also promote a sense of agency. Participants learn that their choices matter and that their voices are valued within the group. This supports the development of self-advocacy and autonomy, helping young people communicate their needs, seek appropriate support, and make informed decisions.

This growing sense of empowerment often extends beyond the circus setting. Increased confidence, self-belief, and willingness to engage in new experiences can support participation in education, community life, and social relationships, contributing to a more positive and active role in society.

Main Categories of Circus Disciplines

The positive effects of circus practice do not happen by accident. They grow out of the activities facilitators choose and the way these activities are adapted, supported, and shared with participants.
Each circus discipline invites young people to use their bodies, their thinking, their emotions, and their social skills in different ways. Some activities naturally build physical confidence, others strengthen attention and learning, while others create strong spaces for expression, creativity, and connection. Becoming aware of these tendencies helps facilitators make more thoughtful and confident choices when planning inclusive workshops.
The following five categories offer a practical overview of the main circus disciplines and how they often support the long-term development of young people with disabilities.
It is important to remember that no activity fits into only one box. Every circus discipline touches several areas of development at the same time. What truly makes the difference is not the activity itself, but how it is facilitated, adapted, and connected to the needs, interests, and strengths of each participant.

Juggling and Object Manipulation (Including Functional Juggling)

This category includes balls, scarves, rings, plates, diabolo, poi, functional juggling boards, and everyday objects.

Object manipulation activities strongly support cognitive development. They require attention, sequencing, anticipation, and constant adjustment. Participants learn by trying, observing results, and adapting their movements, which encourages active problem-solving and flexible thinking.

These activities also develop fine motor skills, coordination, and hand–eye coordination. Emotionally, they support patience and persistence, as participants learn to cope with drops and mistakes in a supportive environment.

Functional juggling approaches, which use rolling, sliding, or simplified throwing movements, are especially valuable for inclusive practice. They allow participants with different physical and cognitive abilities to experience success and progression. Clear roles such as helper, rhythm leader, or material manager also support social participation.

Balance and Aerial-Based Activities

This category includes, rola bola, walking lines, unicycle, stilts, walking globe, and low aerial elements when safely installed.

Balance and aerial activities strongly support physical and sensory development. They help participants improve posture, coordination, body awareness, and spatial orientation. Through repeated practice, young people learn to trust their bodies and understand how they move in space.

These disciplines also have a strong emotional impact. Overcoming fear, maintaining balance, or completing a challenge can greatly strengthen self-confidence. Cognitive skills such as planning, anticipation, and self-monitoring are also involved.

When carefully adapted and supported, balance activities contribute to autonomy and help participants feel more secure and confident in movement.

Partner and Group Acrobatics

This category includes counterbalances, supported balances, pyramids, mirroring exercises, and collective shapes.

Partner and group acrobatics are especially powerful for social development. They require trust, communication, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Participants must listen to each other, respect boundaries, and adjust their actions to others.

These activities also support physical strength and coordination, as well as emotional self-esteem. Taking different roles—such as base, flyer, or supporter—helps participants experience themselves as valuable members of the group.

Because success depends on mutual consent and cooperation, partner acrobatics are strong tools for building relationships and group cohesion in inclusive settings.

Clowning, Theatre, and Improvisation

This category includes comic play, character work, improvisation games, expressive movement, and storytelling.

Clowning and improvisation strongly support emotional development and self-expression. They offer safe spaces for exploring emotions, identity, and vulnerability through play. Participants learn that it is acceptable to be different, make mistakes, and express themselves creatively.

These disciplines also strengthen social skills through shared humour and collective imagination. Cognitive skills such as quick decision-making, adaptation, and creative problem-solving are regularly activated.

By turning mistakes into material for play, clowning helps reduce fear of failure and supports emotional resilience and confidence.

Creative Circus and Collective Performance

This category includes devising processes, group compositions, themed projects, short performances, and shared creations.

Creative and performance-based activities strongly support social and emotional development. Through collective creation, participants build a sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and group identity.

These activities also engage cognitive skills such as planning, sequencing, and storytelling, and physical skills depending on the chosen acts. Participants learn to organise ideas, cooperate with others, and work towards a common goal.

Presenting work to others—formally or informally—can strengthen self-confidence and provide meaningful recognition. It validates participants' efforts and supports identity development.

Using Circus Discipline to Support Development

These five categories are not meant to limit creativity. Many activities overlap several areas of development and can be combined within one workshop.
Facilitators are encouraged to use these categories as orientation tools rather than fixed classifications. They help answer practical questions such as:

- Which activities best support our current objectives?
- Which disciplines match participants' abilities and interests?
- How can we balance physical, cognitive, emotional, and social learning?

By linking developmental goals with appropriate disciplines, facilitators can design workshops that are more purposeful, inclusive, and supportive of long-term growth.

Circus Discipline \ Impact	💪 Physical	🧠 Cognitive	💛 Emotional	🤝 Social	🌱 Identity
Juggling & Object Manipulation	⭐⭐⭐	⭐⭐⭐	⭐⭐	⭐	⭐⭐
Balance & Aerial Activities	⭐⭐⭐	⭐⭐	⭐⭐⭐	⭐	⭐⭐
Partner & Group Acrobatics	⭐⭐⭐	⭐	⭐⭐	⭐⭐⭐	⭐⭐
Clowning / Theatre / Improvisation	⭐	⭐⭐	⭐⭐⭐	⭐⭐	⭐⭐⭐
Creative Circus & Performance	⭐⭐	⭐⭐	⭐⭐	⭐⭐⭐	⭐⭐⭐

Legend

⭐⭐⭐ = Strong ⭐⭐ = Moderate ⭐ = Supportive

Defining Meaningful Objectives

Designing inclusive circus activities begins with understanding who is in the group and what each participant needs in order to grow. While the previous sections have explored the potential impacts of circus practice, facilitators are now invited to reflect on how these impacts can become concrete and meaningful goals for individual young people.

Setting appropriate objectives is not about applying predefined programmes or fixed progression paths. It is about listening, observing, and gathering information in order to build realistic and supportive learning environments. This process combines different sources of knowledge: general understanding of disabilities, individual profiles, direct observation, and dialogue with the people who know the young person best.

For circus teachers, this means learning to look beyond technical performance and to consider emotional, social, and developmental aspects of participation. For caregivers, educators, and support staff who use circus as a learning tool, it means discovering how artistic and physical activities can support broader developmental goals.

Both perspectives are valuable and complementary. Inclusive practice emerges when artistic, educational, and care-based approaches meet in respectful collaboration.

Working with Assistants, Families, and Support Staff

Inclusive circus practice does not take place in isolation. Many young people with disabilities are supported daily by assistants, educators, family members, therapists, or specialised professionals. These people often have a deep understanding of the young person's habits, sensitivities, strengths, routines, and challenges. They know what helps the person feel safe, motivated, and confident, and what situations may create difficulty or stress.

When this knowledge is shared respectfully, it becomes a valuable resource for facilitators. It helps transform circus activities from well-intentioned initiatives into meaningful developmental experiences.

At the same time, it is essential to remember that the young person remains at the centre of the process. Collaboration should never replace direct contact, observation, and relationship-building with the participant. The goal is not to speak about the person without them, but to better understand how to support their participation and autonomy. Whenever possible, young people should be involved in discussions about their own goals, preferences, and needs.

Working with multiple adults around a participant can sometimes be complex. Each person may have different responsibilities, priorities, and perspectives. A family member may focus on emotional well-being, an assistant on safety and daily functioning, a therapist on rehabilitation, and a circus facilitator on learning and creativity. These perspectives are all legitimate and useful, but they may also lead to misunderstandings if they are not shared and discussed openly.

For this reason, clear communication is essential. Taking time to clarify roles, expectations, and intentions helps prevent confusion and frustration. It is helpful to agree on basic questions such as: What is the purpose of the circus activity? What level of independence is encouraged? When should support be offered? When should space be given? How are difficulties handled?

Respectful collaboration is based on listening and mutual recognition of expertise. Assistants and families are experts in the young person's daily life. Facilitators are experts in movement, creativity, and group processes. Neither perspective is superior. Inclusive practice emerges when these forms of knowledge are combined.

Regular exchange can take place in formal meetings, informal conversations before or after sessions, written notes, or short check-ins. What matters most is continuity and trust. Over time, this shared reflection helps build a coherent and supportive educational environment.

Through dialogue with assistants, families, and support staff, facilitators can gather valuable information about areas such as:

- The young person's level of autonomy in daily activities
- Communication preferences and difficulties
- Attention span and learning rhythm
- Emotional reactions to stress, change, or failure
- Social relationships and peer interactions
- Sensory sensitivities and comfort zones
- Motivation, interests, and sources of enjoyment
- Current personal or educational goals

This information complements what facilitators observe directly in sessions. Observation remains essential: how does the participant enter the space? How do they react to challenges? When do they disengage? What supports re-engagement? How do they relate to others? Combining external input with personal observation leads to a more complete understanding.

This information gathering process help guide the creation of meaningful developmental objectives. This is a central part of inclusive pedagogy. Objectives are not imposed from outside; they emerge from real needs, strengths, and aspirations.

For example:

- If a young person often becomes discouraged when a task is difficult, an emotional objective may focus on persistence and self-regulation through progressive challenges.
- If initiating interaction is difficult, a social objective may involve structured partner exercises and shared roles.
- If coordination limits participation in daily life, physical objectives may guide the choice of balance, manipulation, or functional movement activities.
- If attention fluctuates, cognitive objectives may prioritise short sequences, rhythm-based tasks, and gradual extension of focus.

These objectives are not fixed once and for all. They evolve over time as participants develop and circumstances change. Regular dialogue with support persons helps facilitators adjust goals realistically and responsibly.

For circus teachers, this process encourages looking beyond technical progress and performance. It invites them to consider how each activity contributes to broader development. A simple juggling exercise may support emotional confidence, social interaction, and cognitive organisation, depending on how it is designed and facilitated.

For caregivers, educators, and support staff who use circus as a learning tool, this approach highlights the educational potential of artistic and physical activities. Circus becomes more than entertainment: it becomes a structured space for growth, experimentation, and empowerment.

Collaboration also involves negotiating boundaries. Assistants may sometimes feel tempted to intervene too quickly. Facilitators may sometimes underestimate support needs. Open discussion helps find balanced approaches that promote both safety and autonomy. Asking questions such as "Would you like help now?" or "Do you want to try alone first?" supports shared responsibility.

Language plays an important role in this collaboration. Phrases that invite dialogue are more productive than directives. For example:

- “What usually helps them stay focused?”
- “How do they react when they feel frustrated?”
- “What makes them feel confident?”
- “What are they working on at the moment?”
- “What would be a good next step?”

Such questions encourage collective reflection and prevent rigid thinking.

Emotional aspects should not be overlooked. Families and assistants may carry worries, hopes, and sometimes fatigue. Facilitators may feel pressure to “do well” or “get results.” Acknowledging these emotions helps build trust and prevents unrealistic expectations. Inclusive work is a long-term process, not a quick solution.

When facilitators, families, assistants, and participants work together in this way, objective-setting becomes a shared and meaningful process. It is no longer about following predefined programmes, but about building personalised pathways for development.

This collaborative approach helps ensure that circus activities are not only accessible, but also purposeful, coherent, and supportive of long-term autonomy, confidence, and participation. It reinforces the idea that inclusion is not achieved by isolated actions, but through sustained relationships and thoughtful educational choices.

The Participant Development Map

One way to help facilitators define objectives is to use the Participant Development Map. It is a simple tool to turn information into clear, realistic objectives and concrete circus strategies. It is not a diagnosis sheet. Think of it as a "planning map" that you update over time.

Step 1 — Collect information

Use three sources:

1. What you already know (disability profiles / previous experiences)
2. What support persons know (assistants, families, educators, therapists)
3. What the young person shows and says (preferences, fears, motivations)

Aim for practical information, such as:

- What helps them stay calm and engaged?
- What makes things harder (noise, waiting, touch, complexity)?
- What are their current goals outside circus (autonomy, confidence, communication, etc.)?

Step 2 — Start with the "Current Abilities & Capacities" column (observation first)

According to the collected information, fill the Abilities column for each domain in simple, concrete language.

Tip: Write what you know, not what you assume.

When filing the column, try to answer shortly the questions about:

- Movement: Does the person has difficulty with walking, movement, or fine motor skills? What kind of difficulty? How much difficulty?
- Sensory perception: Does the person has difficulty with one of their senses (sight, hearing)? What kind of difficulty? How severe is the difficulty?
- Learning: Does the person has difficulty acquiring new knowledge? How much difficulty?

- Problem solving: Does the person has difficulty understanding complex, abstract tasks? How much difficulty?
- Attention: Does the person has difficulty maintaining attention. How much difficulty?
- Emotional regulation: Does the person has difficulty managing emotions? How much difficulty?
- Communication: Does the person has difficulty with speech, language, or social communication? How much difficulty?
- Independence: Does the person has difficulty performing everyday activities independently? How much difficulty?
- Social relationships: Does the person has difficulty forming or maintaining relationships? How much difficulty?
- Creativity/strengths: What are the person's strengths that foster their development.

Step 3 — Choose 2–4 priority learning area (don't try to do everything)

The template covers many learning areas (physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional, social, creativity). You don't need goals in every row.

Choose priorities based on:

- The young person's needs
- Your workshop goals
- The context (time, space, staffing)
- What will make the biggest difference for participation right now

A common approach is:

- 1 physical/sensory focus
- 1 cognitive focus (attention or learning)
- 1 emotional or social focus

Step 4 — Write the "Learning & Participation Objectives" as small, reachable next steps

Use "next step" goals rather than big outcomes. Good goals are:

- Specific
- Observable
- Realistic in your timeframe
- Positive (what you want to build, not what you want to stop)

Examples:

- Physical/movement: "Increase balance confidence by exploring 3 stable positions."
- Attention: "Sustain engagement for 5 minutes with short, repeated tasks."
- Emotional regulation: "Practice a calm 'reset' routine after a mistake."
- Communication: "Use one consistent signal to request help or a break."
- Independence: "Set up and pack away own prop with minimal prompting."

Step 5 — Select Relevant Circus Disciplines and Props

At this stage, the aim is to connect each learning and participation focus with appropriate circus disciplines or props. In the *Circus Activity & Facilitation Plan* column, facilitators identify which tools or practices may best support the chosen learning objective.

This step does not involve designing the activity in detail. Adaptations, progression, and facilitation strategies are addressed later using dedicated planning tools. Here, the goal is simply to choose realistic and meaningful starting points for further planning.

For each priority objective, write one or two relevant disciplines or props, for example:

- scarves, balls, rings, plates, diabolo
- balance line, rola bola, walking line
- partner balances, mirroring exercises
- functional juggling boards

Keep entries short and practical.

Before confirming your choice, ask yourself:

- Does this discipline naturally support the chosen objective?
  (for example: balance for autonomy, passing for cooperation, scarves for attention)
- Is it appropriate for the participant's current abilities and experience?
- Can it be adapted later if needed?
- Does it offer more than one way to participate?

If the answer is mostly "no," consider selecting a different discipline. The aim is to choose a starting point that offers real potential for success, engagement, and development.

Step 6 — Reflect and Update After Each Session (5–10 Minutes)

After the workshop, take a short moment to update the profile based on observation and experience.

In particular, review:

- *Current Abilities & Capacities*: What did the participant manage today? What improved? What remained difficult?
- *Activity Choices*: Did the selected discipline or prop support the objective? Was it engaging and accessible?

Keep notes brief and concrete. The aim is to build a living document that reflects progress and informs future planning.

Step 7 — Share and Review with Support Persons When Relevant

When assistants, families, or educators are involved, the profile can also support regular dialogue and coordination.

Use it to structure simple exchanges such as:

- "Here is what we are currently working on."
- "Here is what seems to work well in circus."
- "Do you observe similar progress elsewhere?"
- "Is there anything new we should take into account?"

This shared reflection helps align circus practice with broader educational and developmental goals, and ensures that objectives remain realistic, meaningful, and consistent across contexts.

From Individual Profiles to Group Practice: Group Composition and Dynamics

Inclusive circus workshops always take place in group settings. Even when facilitators use individual planning tools, activities are shared, collective, and shaped by interactions between participants. For this reason, effective facilitation requires moving constantly between individual understanding and group awareness.

The Individual Development Map helps identify each participant's strengths, needs, and learning priorities. However, facilitators must also consider how these individual profiles come together to form a living group. A group is more than the sum of its members. It has its own rhythm, energy, relationships, and challenges.

This section explores how facilitators can use individual information to understand group composition and make informed pedagogical choices.

Step 1 — Map the Group Profile

After completing individual profiles, facilitators are encouraged to look at them collectively and identify patterns.

Ask yourself:

- Which development areas appear most frequently? (attention, balance, emotional regulation, communication, etc.)
- Are there several participants with similar support needs?
- Are some participants particularly confident or independent?
- Are some participants more withdrawn, anxious, or easily overwhelmed?
- How diverse are the abilities and rhythms within the group?

This overview helps create a "group profile" that highlights both shared needs and diversity.

A simple way to do this is to note, for each participant, their 2–3 main priorities, and then look for common themes.

Step 2 — Observe Group Dynamics in Practice

Beyond individual profiles, facilitators must observe how participants interact in real situations.

Pay attention to:

- Who initiates interaction?
- Who follows or waits?
- Who seeks adult support frequently?
- Who avoids group tasks?
- Who takes leadership roles?
- How conflicts or frustrations appear?
- How the group reacts to noise, waiting time, or change?

These dynamics often influence learning more than individual abilities alone.

Step 3 — Identify Shared Learning Priorities

Once individual needs and group dynamics are understood, facilitators can define shared priorities for the group.

A group priority is an area of development that:

- concerns several participants,
- affects overall participation,
- can be addressed through collective activities.

Examples:

- Improving attention through short, rhythmic tasks
- Building trust through partner work
- Supporting emotional regulation through predictable routines
- Encouraging communication through role-based games

Group priorities do not replace individual objectives. They provide a common direction for session planning.

Step 4 — Balance Collective and Individual Needs

Inclusive facilitation requires balancing what is good for the group and what is important for individuals.

This balance can be achieved by:

- Offering multiple entry levels within the same activity,
- Providing optional challenges,
- Allowing different roles (performer, helper, observer),
- Adapting pacing and intensity,
- Using flexible grouping.

For example, in a passing exercise, some participants may pass two scarves, others three balls, while some focus on rhythm. Everyone participates in the same activity, but in different ways.

Step 5 — Choose Priorities for Each Phase of the Project

Group priorities may evolve over time. Facilitators are encouraged to define priorities for each phase of the workshop cycle.

For example:

- First sessions: safety, trust, routines, engagement
- Middle phase: skill development, cooperation, autonomy
- Later phase: creativity, performance, leadership

Revisiting priorities regularly helps maintain coherence and responsiveness.

Step 6 — Use the Group Profile to Guide Planning

When preparing sessions, facilitators can ask:

- Which group priority are we supporting today?
- How does this activity connect to individual profiles?
- Who may need additional support?
- Who could take a supportive role?
- What adaptations might be needed?

This reflective habit ensures that planning remains intentional and inclusive.

Taking Resources into Account: Equipment, Space, and Facilitation Competences

Inclusive circus practice is not only about understanding participants and defining meaningful objectives. It also requires a realistic assessment of the resources available in each context. Even the most relevant developmental goal cannot be supported effectively if the necessary equipment, space, or facilitation skills are missing.

For example, a participant may benefit from activities that strengthen confidence and body awareness, and trapeze might seem like an ideal choice. However, if the facilitator does not have sufficient experience with aerial disciplines, if there is no safe installation point, or if appropriate equipment is unavailable, this option becomes impractical and potentially unsafe. In such cases, choosing another discipline that supports the same objective is a more responsible and effective approach.

Before finalising activity choices, facilitators are encouraged to reflect on three key dimensions: material resources, physical environment, and professional competences.

1. Material Resources: What Equipment Is Available ?

Start by reviewing the props and materials that are realistically accessible.

Ask yourself:

- Which juggling, balance, acrobatic, or creative props do I have?
- Are they in good condition and suitable for inclusive use?
- Do I have enough for group work?
- Can they be adapted if needed?

Limited equipment is not necessarily a barrier. Scarves, soft balls, floor tape, mats, chairs, or everyday objects can often be used creatively. What matters is choosing activities that fit what is actually available.

2. Physical Environment: What Does the Space Allow ?

The characteristics of the space strongly influence what can be done safely and comfortably.

Consider:

- Size and layout of the room
- Ceiling height and fixing points
- Floor surface and safety
- Noise level and lighting
- Accessibility (ramps, toilets, entrances)

Some disciplines require specific conditions. Aerial work, large acrobatics, or fast-moving activities may not be suitable in small or crowded spaces. In such cases, ground-based balance, object manipulation, or partner work may be more appropriate.

3. Facilitation Competences: What Are My Strengths as a Facilitator ?

Inclusive practice also depends on the facilitator's skills, experience, and confidence.

Reflect honestly on:

- Which disciplines do I master well?
- Which ones do I feel less secure with?
- Where do I need support or training?
- When should I ask for help or collaborate with others?

Working within one's competence is not a limitation. It is a professional and ethical choice that ensures safety, quality, and trust.

4. Matching Objectives with Available Resources

Effective planning happens at the intersection of three elements:

- Participant needs and priorities
- Available resources
- Facilitator competences

Good practice means finding solutions where these three elements meet.

For example:

- If autonomy is a priority but no aerial equipment is available → balance paths, stilts with support, or rola-bola alternatives can be used.
- If assertiveness is a goal but partner acrobatics feel unsafe → role-based juggling games or group leadership tasks may be more suitable.
- If communication is a focus but space is noisy → visual and rhythm-based activities may be preferred.

The objective remains the same; the path changes.

5. Being Creative Within Real Limits

Inclusive facilitation is not about doing everything. It is about doing the right things in the right conditions.

Working with limited resources encourages creativity, flexibility, and innovation. Many effective inclusive workshops are built on simple materials and clear structures rather than complex equipment.

What matters most is not the sophistication of the tools, but the quality of the learning experience.

By taking equipment, space, and competences into account, facilitators ensure that objectives remain achievable, safe, and meaningful. This realistic approach protects participants, strengthens professional confidence, and supports sustainable inclusive practice.

Inclusive circus grows not from perfect conditions, but from thoughtful choices made within real contexts.

How to Set Up a Circus Workshop

Throughout this manual, we have explored why circus can be such a powerful tool for the development and inclusion of young people with disabilities. We have looked at who we work with, what impact we can aim for, and how to define meaningful objectives based on individual and group needs.

We have also focused on preparation: understanding participants, using the Participant Development Map, clarifying learning priorities, and checking available resources. All of this work helps facilitators answer an essential question before each workshop:

“Am I ready?”

In this chapter, we explore in detail how to design, organise, facilitate, and evaluate inclusive circus workshops. We will look at how to plan activities, manage risk and safety, structure sessions, support communication and participation, and reflect on practice.

You will also find practical tools, examples, and guiding questions to help you adapt your work to different contexts and groups.

Creating a Safe and Welcoming Environment

Building a Safe and Supportive Group Atmosphere

"Do people feel safe and welcome here?"

A safe and supportive social environment is essential for inclusive circus practice. Before young people can explore movement, balance, or coordination, they need to feel emotionally secure, respected, and accepted. When participants feel safe and valued, they are more willing to try new skills, take creative risks, and learn from mistakes. Without this sense of safety, participation becomes limited and confidence cannot grow.

Warm Welcome

Everything begins with the welcome. A calm, friendly, and respectful introduction helps young people feel that they belong. Taking time to greet each participant by name, offering a smile or simple gesture, and briefly explaining the session creates reassurance and inclusion.

Predictability and Routine

Predictability and routine are especially important for young people with disabilities. Clear schedules, repeated session structures, and familiar rituals reduce anxiety and build confidence. Over time, participants learn the rhythm of the session and feel more secure.

Group Agreements

Group agreements help build a respectful and inclusive culture. Together with participants, facilitators can establish simple rules such as listening when someone speaks, helping each other, accepting mistakes, and respecting personal space. Repeating these agreements regularly helps reinforce shared values.

Clear and Supportive Transitions

Transitions between activities require careful attention. Sudden changes can be confusing or stressful, especially for participants who need time to adjust. Well-managed transitions are clear, gradual, and supportive. Short warnings, familiar signals, and simple explanations can help participants prepare for what comes next.

Visual and Physical Cues

Visual and physical cues can also support orientation during transitions. Placing equipment in specific areas, using coloured mats to mark stations, or showing the next activity visually can make the structure easier to understand. Moving together as a group can also reduce confusion and increase security.

Active-to-Calm Transitions

Transitions from active to calm moments deserve special care. After energetic games or stimulating tasks, participants may need time to slow down. A short breathing exercise, gentle stretching, or a quiet moment in a circle can help regulate energy and support a calmer return to focus.

Trust and Emotional Safety

Emotional safety grows through trust and consistency. Facilitators should be reliable, patient, and attentive. Responding calmly to mistakes, offering encouragement, and showing that support is available helps participants feel secure enough to try, pause, and try again.

Supportive Adult Presence

A calm and non-judgmental adult presence plays an important role in the atmosphere of the group. When a participant struggles, it is often more helpful to stay close, simplify, or offer another way of joining than to put pressure on them. This helps create a culture of trust rather than fear of failure.

In inclusive circus practice, the social environment is as important as the activities themselves. Warm welcomes, familiar rituals, shared agreements, carefully guided transitions, and supportive relationships create the conditions for learning and creativity. When young people feel safe, included, and trusted, they are more able to participate, build confidence, and enjoy circus in their own way.

Creating a Safe and Inclusive Physical Environment

"Is the space safe, comfortable, and accessible for everyone?"

The physical environment plays a crucial role in inclusive circus practice. A well-organised, calm, and accessible space helps young people feel secure, focused, and ready to participate. When the environment is adapted to their needs, participants can concentrate on learning and exploring movement. When it is confusing, noisy, or unsafe, stress increases and engagement decreases.

Space and Personal Distance

The size of the working area and the distance between participants need to be carefully considered. Each participant should have enough personal space to move freely and safely, especially when using props such as balls, clubs, plates, or balance equipment. Overcrowded spaces increase the risk of collisions and can also create anxiety or sensory overload. Clear working zones can help participants understand where to stand, move, and practise.

Floor Surface and Physical Safety

The floor surface is an important part of both safety and comfort. Mats can be placed under balance equipment or acrobatic activities to reduce the risk of injury. Tape lines on the floor can help guide walking exercises, define stations, or make movement routes more visible. Chairs or benches nearby can also support participants who need regular breaks or physical support during the session.

Noise Management

Noise levels should be managed carefully. Facilitators should keep background music low when possible, switch it off during explanations, and avoid sudden loud sounds. Giving a warning before clapping, starting music, or making a strong group signal can help participants prepare and feel more in control.

Lighting and Visual Comfort

Lighting also affects comfort and concentration. Spaces that are too dark, too bright, or exposed to strong sunlight can lead to visual discomfort and fatigue. Soft and even lighting makes it easier for participants to see equipment, demonstrations, and each other clearly. Small changes, such as closing blinds, adjusting lamps, or moving an activity to another part of the room, can improve comfort significantly.

Access Pathways and Circulation

Clear access pathways are essential for safety and inclusion. Walkways should remain free of bags, props, and unused equipment. Entrances, exits, and emergency routes must always stay accessible. For participants using wheelchairs, walkers, or support persons, wide and unobstructed paths are especially important. Storing equipment along walls and marking circulation routes can help prevent confusion and accidents.

Observation and Ongoing Adjustment

Preparing and adapting the physical environment requires continuous observation and flexibility. Facilitators should regularly notice how participants use the space and adjust it according to their needs. Small changes, such as moving equipment, adding visual markers, or creating clearer zones, can have a strong effect on comfort, safety, and participation.

Quiet Corner and Rest Area

A quiet corner or rest area is another important part of an inclusive physical environment. A small area with mats, cushions, chairs, or soft lighting can allow participants to rest without feeling excluded. This space may also include sensory support objects such as soft balls, textured materials, weighted cushions, stress toys, noise-reducing headphones, or visual calming tools. Access to this area should be open and normalised.

Creating a Supportive Sensory Environment

"Can participants regulate their sensory experience?"

Inclusive circus practice involves constant sensory stimulation: movement, sound, light, proximity, objects, and social interaction. For many young people with disabilities, managing this information requires significant effort. A supportive sensory environment does not expect participants to adapt to a fixed level of stimulation. Instead, it creates flexible conditions that allow each person to regulate how, when, and how much they engage.

Managing sensory sensitivities therefore means designing activities and settings that can be experienced at different intensities without losing their meaning. When participants can adjust their level of involvement, they are more likely to remain calm, focused, and motivated.

Designing for Regulation from the Start

Many sensory difficulties can be reduced through thoughtful preparation. Facilitators can divide the space into areas with different levels of activity, such as a dynamic practice zone, a calmer observation area, and a rest space. Avoiding overcrowding and overlapping exercises reduces sensory pressure.

For example, instead of running several loud or fast-paced activities in the same area, facilitators can create separated stations with visible boundaries. Participants can then choose where and how to engage.

It is also important to begin sessions with moderate sensory intensity and increase stimulation gradually. Starting immediately with loud music, fast movement, or complex coordination tasks can overwhelm some participants and limit their participation.

Proposing Sensory-Sustainable Activities

Inclusive circus exercises should not impose a single level of sensory exposure. Activities should be presented as invitations rather than obligations.

Facilitators can offer implicit variations by providing different props, distances, speeds, or degrees of challenge. Participants may, for example, choose between scarves and balls, work closer to or further from others, or practise at different rhythms.

An effective structure is not "everyone does the same exercise at the same time", but rather a setting in which the equipment is available, the space is clear, the action is visible, and participants enter when they feel ready. This approach allows each person to regulate their own sensory involvement while remaining part of the group.

Supporting Self-Regulation During Activities

Signs such as slowing down, stepping aside, changing posture, or reducing interaction may signal the need for regulation. Self-regulatory movements such as walking, rocking, stretching, or pausing should be accepted as normal and healthy responses.

Maintaining a stable, calm, and non-invasive voice supports emotional safety. As further developed in the Communication section, explanations and feedback should be clear, gentle, and adapted to the group's state.

The implicit message should always be: *you can remain involved without having to endure discomfort.*

Avoiding Unintentional Overload

Some well-intentioned reactions can unintentionally increase sensory stress. Raising one's voice to regain attention, physically redirecting someone without consent, or questioning why a participant stopped can intensify overload.

Similarly, interpreting withdrawal as lack of motivation may lead to inappropriate pressure. In most cases, stepping back is a form of self-protection rather than disengagement.

Respecting these signals supports long-term participation, trust, and emotional safety.

Sound, Rhythm, and Voice

Sound management is important for comfort and safety. From a sensory perspective, it also strongly influences emotional regulation.

Facilitators should limit continuous or very loud music, avoid shouting over background noise, and create regular moments of quiet activity. Visual or gestural signals can often replace verbal calls when gathering the group.

For example, raising a coloured card, using a familiar hand signal, or clapping softly in a rhythm can be more effective and less intrusive than shouting.

Physical Contact and Bodily Consent

Circus activities often involve partner or group work, but physical contact should never be assumed.

Exercises should be designed so that contact is optional. Participants should be able to choose interpersonal distance and positioning. Facilitators must always ask before touching and remain attentive to non-verbal signs of discomfort.

Respecting bodily consent supports trust, autonomy, and emotional safety. It is also an essential educational competence in inclusive practice.

Breaks, Pauses, and Exit Options

From a sensory perspective, participants also need to know that spontaneous individual pauses are legitimate. When someone steps away, rests, or observes, no explanation should be required. Knowing that leaving and re-entering is allowed reduces anxiety and makes long-term participation easier.

Understanding Sensory-Related Behaviours

Inclusive facilitation requires interpreting behaviours as information rather than problems.

For instance:

- Agitation may indicate overload
- Avoidance may signal a need for distance
- Rigidity may reflect rising tension

Instead of asking "Why are they not participating?", facilitators should ask:
"What is making it difficult for them to stay?"

This perspective encourages empathy, adaptation, and constructive responses.

Creating Balanced and Predictable Sessions

"Do people know what's happening and when?"

The way time is organised is as important as the activities themselves. Clear structure, balanced rhythm, and predictable routines help young people feel secure, focused, and autonomous. When participants understand what is happening and when, they can manage their energy, attention, and emotions more effectively.

Structuring time does not mean making sessions rigid. It means creating a flexible framework that supports participation while allowing individual adaptation.

Designing a Predictable Session Flow

A clear and repeated session structure helps participants orient themselves and feel confident. Knowing how a session usually unfolds reduces uncertainty and allows young people to prepare mentally and physically.

A typical inclusive session flow may include:

- Arrival and settling in
- Warm-up
- Exploration of skills
- Focused practice
- Creative or playful phase
- Cool-down
- Reflection and closing

This sequence does not need to be identical every time, but keeping a familiar rhythm helps participants recognise where they are in the process.

For example, beginning each session with the same welcome and warm-up routine and ending with a calm reflection circle creates strong reference points.

Managing Duration and Pace

Each activity should be adapted to the group's attention span, physical capacity, and emotional state. Activities that are too long may lead to fatigue or frustration, while activities that are too short may prevent meaningful engagement.

Facilitators should observe how participants respond and adjust duration accordingly. Some young people may need more time to understand instructions, organise their bodies, or feel confident enough to try. Allowing preparation time before starting is therefore essential.

Pace should remain flexible. Slowing down explanations, repeating demonstrations, or extending practice time can support deeper learning and inclusion.

Alternating Active and Calm Phases

A balanced rhythm between energetic and calm moments helps regulate attention and emotional states. Continuous high-energy activity can lead to overload, while too many passive moments may reduce motivation.

Inclusive sessions should alternate between:

- Active phases (running games, juggling, dynamic exercises)
- Moderate phases (skill practice, partner work)
- Calm phases (stretching, breathing, reflection, quiet play)

For example, after an energetic group game, a short stretching or breathing activity can help participants recover before moving on.

This alternation supports physical recovery and emotional regulation.

Breaks and Transition Time

Breaks are an essential part of inclusive session design. They should be planned in advance and presented as a normal and positive element of practice.

In addition to scheduled breaks, participants should be allowed to take individual pauses when needed, as discussed in the Sensory Environment section.

Transitions between activities also require sufficient time. Rushing from one task to another can create confusion and stress. Clear verbal warnings, visual cues, and short preparation moments help participants adjust.

For example: "We will finish this exercise in two minutes and then move to balancing."

Allowing time to tidy equipment, change positions, or mentally prepare supports smooth transitions.

Supporting Attention and Preventing Fatigue

Many participants experience fluctuations in concentration and energy. A well-structured rhythm helps them stay engaged without becoming exhausted.

Facilitators should pay attention to signs of tiredness, restlessness, or disengagement and adapt accordingly. This may involve shortening an activity, introducing a break, changing pace, or switching to a quieter task.

Short movement breaks, water pauses, or moments of observation can help participants recharge without leaving the learning process.

Using Repetition and Routine

Repetition plays a key role in building confidence and independence. Repeating session structures, warm-up routines, and closing rituals helps participants internalise the rhythm of practice.

Over time, this familiarity allows young people to anticipate what comes next, organise themselves more independently, and feel more in control of their participation.

Routine does not limit creativity. On the contrary, it provides a stable base from which creativity can emerge.

Designing Adaptable Activities

"How can one activity include everyone?"

Designing adaptable activities means recognising that, as a facilitator, you can shape learning situations so that every participant can take part, whatever their abilities, rhythms, confidence, or support needs. Inclusive practice is not about creating different activities for different people, but about designing shared experiences that offer multiple ways to participate and progress.

In an inclusive circus workshop, participants move between moments of individual exploration and moments of collective engagement. Well-designed activities balance differentiation and integration, allowing young people to work alone, with others, or in groups, while remaining part of the same learning process.

Inclusive design does not require complex systems. It often begins with simple questions: Can this task be done in different ways? Can the equipment be adapted? Are there different possible roles? Can participants choose their pace and level of challenge?

Facilitators should aim to design activities that allow participants to succeed with the least amount of assistance possible. Support is sometimes necessary, but it should encourage independence rather than replace it. Clear structures, accessible tools, and flexible pathways help reduce reliance on constant guidance and build confidence and autonomy.

In this section, we present a simple method to help facilitators design inclusive workshops. We explore the main elements that can be adapted, including:

- Tools, equipment, and props (for example, juggle boards, scarves, or modified objects)
- Tasks and learning pathways, with multiple entry points and step-by-step progression
- Roles and participation, offering different ways and levels of involvement
- Communication, focusing on how and what to communicate clearly and inclusively
- Group structure and dynamics, balancing differentiation and integration and understanding basic group phases
- Creativity and fun, as essential drivers of motivation and engagement

By reflecting on these elements, facilitators can design activities that function as flexible frameworks rather than fixed instructions. Each participant can then engage at a level that feels both safe and challenging.

At its core, adaptable activity design follows a simple principle: one activity can offer many ways to succeed. When autonomy, choice, and inclusion are built into activities, circus practice becomes meaningful, motivating, and accessible for everyone.

Key Areas for Adaptation: Tools / Equipment / Props

"How can equipment support participation rather than limit it?"

Tools and props are never neutral. Their weight, size, texture, speed, and complexity directly influence how accessible an activity is. The same object can either create barriers or open possibilities, depending on how it is chosen and used.
Adapting equipment is often one of the most effective and immediate ways to make an activity inclusive. With small adjustments, facilitators can transform a difficult task into an achievable and motivating experience.

Two main approaches can be used and combined: adapting the use of existing circus props, and using or creating tools that are specifically designed for young people with special needs.

Adapting the Use of Existing Props

Most inclusive workshops rely primarily on standard circus equipment. In many cases, inclusion does not require new materials, but rather a different way of using what is already available.

Facilitators can adapt existing props by modifying how they are introduced, handled, or combined with other supports.

For example:

- Using scarves instead of balls for juggling, because they fall more slowly and give more reaction time
- Starting with beanbags or soft balls before moving to harder objects
- Allowing rolling and sliding on the floor before throwing in the air
- Playing with spinning plate with hand and finger before using sticks
- Using tape on the floor instead of a suspended tight rope
- Practising balance on wide, low beams before moving to narrower or higher ones
- Using benches, boxes, or foam blocks for balance instead of unstable objects

In these cases, the prop remains the same, but the way it is used changes. This allows participants to experience success early and build confidence.

Facilitators can also combine props with environmental supports, such as mats, chairs, walls, or partners, to increase stability and safety.

Using or Creating Specially Designed Tools

Alongside using standards circus equipment, facilitators can also choose to use or design tools that are specifically created to support young people with special needs.

This is not a replacement for traditional circus props, nor a "second option" when adaptation fails. It is simply another equally valid approach to inclusion. In many workshops, both approaches can be combined thoughtfully.

Specially designed tools can support motor control, coordination, perception, understanding, or confidence in a more structured way. They can act as stepping stones, offering clearer feedback, greater stability, or simplified movement patterns.

Examples include:

- Functional juggling tools with larger surfaces or guiding frames
- Juggling boards that help control movement and direction
- Modified handles or grips for improved stability
- Weighted or textured objects providing sensory feedback
- Enlarged targets for throwing and catching
- Visual or symbol-supported card games that structure tasks and instructions

For instance, functional juggling devices can help participants understand throwing trajectories before mastering full hand-eye coordination. Juggling boards allow users to practise rhythm and timing in a controlled way. Symbol-supported card games can guide activities step by step, increasing independence and reducing cognitive overload.

Using Alternative and Creative Materials

In addition to standard and specially designed circus equipment, facilitators can also use everyday or unconventional objects as learning supports. These materials can simplify movements, slow down actions, or make abstract skills more concrete and playful.

For example, long feathers can be used for balance and coordination exercises instead of sticks, as they move much more slowly and allow participants more time to adjust their posture and grip. Electronic tools such as BlazePods can be used to create interactive reaction, rhythm, and movement games. Although these tools are more expensive, they can offer highly motivating and creative learning opportunities when available.

Very simple materials can also be highly effective. For instance, sheets of paper placed on a table or on the floor can display basic symbols: a circle for a closed fist, a line for a straight hand, a triangle for a flat hand. Participants then tap the corresponding symbol using the matching gesture. This type of activity supports motor coordination, attention, and understanding of instructions, while remaining accessible and low-cost.

These alternative materials show that inclusive practice does not depend on sophisticated equipment. What matters most is how tools are used to support learning, exploration, and confidence. Many of these approaches will be described in more detail later in this guide.

Adjusting Key Characteristics of Props

Whether using standard or specialised equipment, facilitators should pay attention to several key elements:

- Weight: lighter objects reduce fatigue and increase control
- Size: larger objects are easier to see and catch
- Speed: slower movement supports coordination
- Texture: non-slip or soft surfaces improve grip
- Sound: quieter materials and surfaces reduce sensory overload
- Colour: high contrast improves visibility

For example, a brightly coloured soft ball may be easier to track and catch than a small, dark rubber ball. A textured handle may allow a participant to hold a prop more confidently.

Supporting Autonomy Through Equipment Choices

When adapting tools and props, the main objective is not to simplify activities permanently, but to support growing independence.

Well-chosen equipment reduces the need for constant physical or verbal assistance. It allows participants to practise, correct themselves, and experience success on their own.

For example, choosing the right prop may eliminate the need for a facilitator to hold a participant’s hands. Providing visual guides may reduce repeated explanations. Offering stable equipment may prevent repeated failures.

In this way, equipment becomes a silent support that empowers learning.

Key Areas for Adaptation: Structuring Tasks for Learning

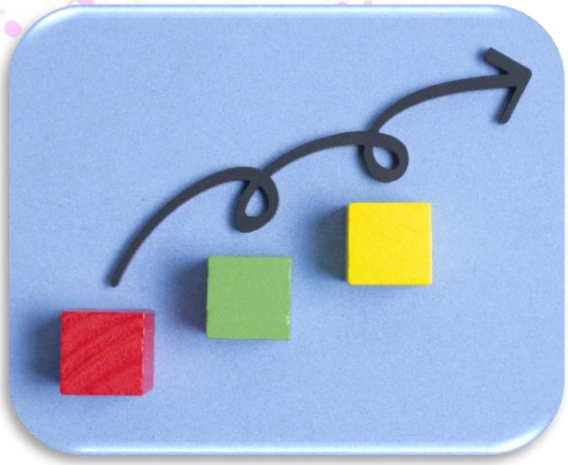
"How can the same activity work at different levels without losing its meaning?"

Adapting a task means designing one activity so that participants with different abilities, rhythms, and experiences can engage, progress, and feel successful. A central strategy is to break complex skills into smaller, accessible steps. This allows participants to begin at a level that feels manageable and to move gradually toward more demanding forms of the same exercise.

However, each task has a core principle — the fundamental idea that gives it meaning. In juggling, it may be rhythm and coordination. In balancing, it may be weight transfer and alignment. In acrobatics, it may be cooperation and trust. When tasks are adapted, this core principle should remain present.

Just as importantly, each step must be treated as a legitimate objective in itself. Entry levels should not be presented as incomplete or inferior versions of an activity. They are full circus experiences because they already contain the central idea of the task.

Step-by-step progression: Breaking tasks into meaningful stages



Most circus skills combine several abilities at once: coordination, balance, timing, strength, attention, and confidence. When all of these are required simultaneously, some participants may feel overwhelmed. Step-by-step progression makes learning more accessible by separating the skill into clear stages.

Each stage should still reflect the core principle of the task. The complexity may be reduced, but the meaning remains. Participants are not practising something "different"; they are practising the same idea in a simpler form.

This approach supports both safety and autonomy. Participants can practise each stage until it feels secure, without being rushed. Progression then becomes a natural deepening of the same principle rather than a sudden jump to something new.

Presenting stages as parallel options rather than as a hierarchy helps avoid comparison. Participants are invited to choose how they explore the same underlying concept.

For Example, in a group acrobatics activity, complex pyramids or standing balances require coordination, trust, strength, and communication. Instead of starting directly with a full structure, the task can be broken into progressive and meaningful stages.

Participants may begin by exploring individual body shapes on the floor and learning how to create stable positions. They can then work in pairs, practising simple counterbalances while sitting or kneeling. The next step may involve supported standing balances with a clear base and a spotter. Only later might the group experiment with small pyramids or short transitions between shapes.

At each stage, participants are already engaging in real acrobatic work: sharing weight, communicating, and building trust. The earlier stages are not "preparation" for acrobatics — they are acrobatics in themselves.

Because the skill is built progressively, participants gain confidence and understanding before moving toward more complex structures. This step-by-step approach allows everyone to participate safely while gradually developing towards more demanding collective forms.

Accessible beginnings and open-ended development

Inclusive tasks should be easy to enter and rich to develop. A low Entry point allows participants to experience success quickly, even if they have little prior experience or low confidence. A high Learning potential ensures that the same activity can continue to challenge and motivate those who wish to go further.

This balance is essential in mixed-ability groups. When the Entry point is too high, some participants are excluded. When the Learning potential is too low, others lose interest.

Well-designed activities make it possible for beginners and advanced participants to work side by side. The task remains the same, but the level of complexity, rhythm, and creativity can evolve over time.

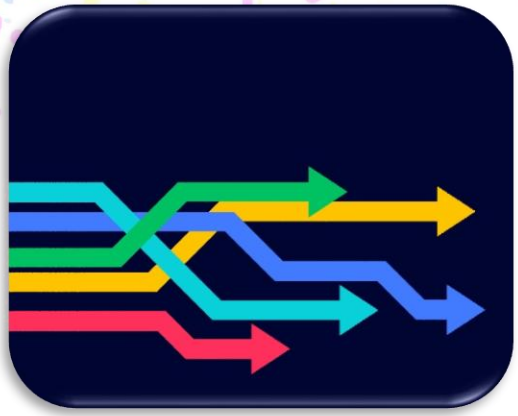
For example, during a balancing activity, a low-Entry point–high-Learning potential design allows all participants to enter the task easily while offering space for long-term development.

At entry level, participants may begin by walking slowly along a wide taped line on the floor, focusing on posture and stability. This provides an immediate experience of balance without height or risk. As confidence grows, they may move to a low beam, then to a narrower or slightly elevated beam, and later add turns, pauses, or carried objects.

Some participants may remain on the floor while others explore higher or more complex versions. All are engaged in the same activity, at different levels of intensity and challenge.

Because the activity offers both accessibility and progression, participants can work side by side without pressure to “move up,” and each person can develop at their own pace.

Multiplicity of entry points: different ways to access the same activity



Participants do not all approach learning in the same way. Some need time to observe, others learn through movement, others through interaction. Some prefer individual exploration, while others are motivated by group work.

Offering multiple entry points means creating several legitimate ways to begin and participate in an activity. These different pathways all lead to the same learning objective but respect individual preferences, energy levels, and needs.

This flexibility reduces pressure and encourages self-regulation. Participants can enter, leave, and re-enter activities according to their readiness, without feeling judged.

For example, when juggling in pair, participants may not all feel ready to begin with the same level of complexity. Designing multiple entry points allows everyone to engage in the² shared task in different ways.

Some participants may start by rolling a ball to their partner on the floor, focusing on direction and timing. Others may practise gentle underhand throws and catches with one ball. More confident pairs may explore alternating throws, add a second object, or introduce movement while passing.

Another participant might initially take the role of rhythm guide — counting aloud or clapping — before physically joining the passing. Some may observe a round before stepping in.

All are involved in the same cooperative activity, but through different forms. Because there are several legitimate ways to enter the task, participants can choose a starting point that feels safe and manageable, while remaining part of the shared experience.

This multiplicity of entry points supports inclusion without separating the group or reducing the richness of the activity.

Creativity and Personalisation: Making Space for Improvisation and Expression

Adapting a task also means leaving room for participants to shape the activity themselves. Inclusive workshops should not only offer structured pathways, but also opportunities for improvisation, invention, and personal interpretation.

Facilitators are encouraged to ask: How can participants add their own ideas, rhythm, or variations? Is there space for group invention or playful experimentation? When activities allow participants to modify movements, create small sequences, change tempo, or introduce storytelling elements, learning becomes more meaningful and motivating.

This creative space supports autonomy and engagement. Participants move from "following an exercise" to "owning an experience." For some, this may mean inventing a new way to pass an object. For others, it may mean adding a rhythm, a gesture, a character, or a short performance element. In group work, it may involve collectively designing a sequence or structure.

Creativity also helps reduce comparison. When there is no single "right way" to complete a task, participants can focus on exploration rather than evaluation. This reinforces the idea that diversity of expression is a strength and that every contribution has value.

Redefining Success: Valuing Quality, Meaning, and Engagement

Success should not be measured mainly by technical difficulty, speed, or quantity. Instead, it should be defined through engagement, effort, creativity, cooperation, and personal progress.

If juggling is about rhythm and coordination, success may be expressed through steady timing and connection.
If balancing is about alignment and control, success may be expressed through focus and stability.
If acrobatics is about cooperation and trust, success may be expressed through communication and mutual support.

When success is linked only to performance level, participants with higher support needs may feel constantly compared. But when success is defined by quality, every level of participation becomes meaningful and everyone can experience achievement. Participants are not ranked anymore by complexity but recognised for the quality of their participation.

Encouraging creativity and personal expression further strengthens this approach. Even simple versions of an activity can become rich learning experiences when the focus remains on intention, connection, and exploration.

Key Areas for Adaptation: Communication: How you explain and interact

"Can everyone understand, engage, and act through the way we communicate?"

In the context of circus workshops for young people with special needs, communication is not limited to speaking clearly or giving good explanations. It is a fundamental part of activity design. The way facilitators communicate, and the way they choose and structure information, shapes how participants understand tasks, how safe they feel to try, and how independently they can act.

People have different learning styles, sensory profiles, language abilities, and previous experiences. In particular, young people with special needs may face additional obstacles to perception and understanding. However, this does not mean that facilitators should simplify content or lower their expectations. Complex messages and instructions can be made accessible when they are structured carefully and communicated in different ways.

Inclusive communication is about both what we say and how we say it. Facilitators need to decide what information is most important, what can come later, and what may need to be repeated. It also means choosing the most helpful ways to communicate it, whether through words, demonstrations, images, gestures, or the way the space is organised.

Communication also goes both ways. Young people communicate all the time — sometimes with words, but often through gestures, movement, rhythm, hesitation, initiative, or stepping back. These signals tell facilitators a lot about what makes sense, what feels safe, what motivates them, and how the group is functioning. Inclusive facilitation therefore means not only giving clear instructions, but also paying attention and adjusting along the way.

By planning communication on purpose, facilitators help young people turn instructions into action in ways that fit different rhythms, abilities, and preferences. Circus makes this easier because it offers lots of ways to communicate: talking, showing, using gestures, adding images or symbols, organising the space clearly, and using rhythm. When these elements support each other, participation becomes much more accessible.

This section explores how facilitators can plan, organise, and use both the content and the form of communication — while staying attentive to participants' responses — to support understanding, autonomy, and confidence.

Communication as Design, Not Improvisation: Planning for Diverse Ways of Understanding

In inclusive circus workshops with young people with intellectual, sensory, and physical disabilities, communication cannot rely only on spontaneity, intuition, or personal experience. While flexibility remains important, effective communication is first and foremost the result of thoughtful preparation. Just as facilitators plan activities, organise equipment, and structure time, they must also design how information will be shared and understood.

Some participants may need more time to process information, may have difficulty with abstract language, may be sensitive to noise or visual overload, or may experience physical barriers to attention and interaction. When communication is improvised, these needs are easily overlooked. Explanations may become too long, too fast, or inconsistent, creating confusion, frustration, or dependence.

Designing communication in advance helps prevent these difficulties. Before each session, facilitators are encouraged to reflect on key questions:

- What do participants need to know in order to begin?
- What safety information must be clear?
- Which elements require demonstration?
- What visual or spatial supports could help?

Preparation may include creating symbol cards, placing visual markers on the floor, preparing short demonstration sequences, organising materials clearly, or deciding on stable verbal cues and gestures.
For instance, before a juggling session, a facilitator may prepare three baskets with different objects, place a simple visual showing the basic movement near each station, and plan a short demonstration. This allows participants to understand the task without a long verbal explanation. In a balance session, marking the pathway with coloured tape and placing a photo of the final posture nearby can guide practice from the start.

Some participants feel safer when they understand the overall goal of an activity before starting, while others engage best by moving quickly. A good inclusive strategy is to combine both needs: first give a brief overview, then guide the group step by step.
For example, in group acrobatics, you can show a picture of the final human pyramid, so everyone understands where the activity is going. Then you build it progressively, one role and one position at a time, checking comfort and safety at each stage. This approach increases predictability without overwhelming participants with too much information at once.

Importantly, planning communication does not make sessions rigid. On the contrary, it creates a stable structure that allows flexibility. When core messages are clear and supported by the environment, facilitators can adapt calmly to unexpected situations. For example, if a participant becomes overwhelmed, the facilitator can redirect them using familiar visual cues or gestures instead of giving new explanations.

In inclusive settings, communication design is a form of accessibility. It ensures that understanding does not depend on speed, memory, language level, or confidence. Instead, information is distributed across speech, movement, visuals, and space. A participant who forgets an instruction can look at a symbol card, observe a peer, or follow floor markers without asking for help.

Designing communication also means planning ways to check understanding and encourage questions. Facilitators should not assume that silence means comprehension. Instead, they can create moments where participants are invited to show the first step, point to the right place, try a short movement, or repeat an action together. These small checks help identify misunderstandings early, before they turn into frustration or withdrawal.

Facilitators should make sure that questions are always welcome. Some young people hesitate to ask for help because of past experiences, fear of making mistakes, or difficulty expressing themselves. Facilitators can support them by regularly inviting questions, showing patience, and valuing every attempt to seek clarification. Questions may be spoken, gestural, or expressed through hesitation, facial expression, or pauses, and all of these deserve attention.

Verbal Communication: Adapting Speech to Support Understanding and Participation

Verbal language remains an important tool in inclusive circus practice. However, in workshops with young people with special needs, spoken instructions must be used carefully and intentionally. The goal is not to provide as much information as possible, but to offer the right information at the right moment, in a form that can be easily transformed into action.

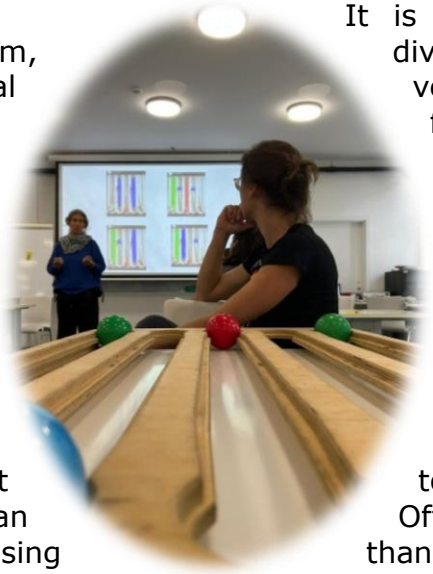
Many participants may experience difficulties with attention, memory, language processing, or auditory sensitivity. Long explanations, complex vocabulary, or rapid speech can quickly become barriers to participation. When verbal communication is well adapted, it helps participants feel oriented, confident, and ready to try.

Effective verbal communication begins with clarity and simplicity. Facilitators are encouraged to use short sentences, concrete words, and clear action verbs. Instructions such as “Throw up and catch” or “Step on the blue line” are easier to understand than abstract or technical descriptions. Whenever possible, language should describe visible and achievable actions.

Structuring speech step by step is equally important. Instead of giving several instructions at once, facilitators should present one element, allow participants to try, and then add the next. For example, in a partner juggling activity, the facilitator may first say, “Stand facing your partner,” then, “Hold one ball,” and only later, “Throw on three.” This progressive approach reduces cognitive load and supports learning through experience.

Pace and rhythm strongly influence understanding. Speaking slowly, leaving short pauses, and repeating key words helps participants process information. Some young people need extra time to translate words into movement. Allowing silence after an instruction gives space for observation and decision-making. Rushing often creates stress and confusion.

Tone of voice also plays an important role. A calm, stable, and encouraging tone supports emotional safety. Speaking loudly, impatiently, or with visible frustration can increase anxiety and reduce willingness to try. In inclusive settings, tone communicates respect and trust as much as content does.



Verbal communication should also avoid becoming overly rigid or prescriptive. Many young people with special needs have experienced repeated correction, evaluation, or failure in educational settings. Instructions that define a single "right way" too quickly can discourage initiative and experimentation. Using more open language helps create space for exploration without creating confusion.

This means describing possibilities rather than obligations, for example: "You can try throwing like this," instead of "You must throw like this," or "See what happens if you slow down," instead of "Don't go so fast." Such phrasing invites participation and creativity while still providing guidance. Instructions become invitations rather than strict directives.

Verbal language is most effective when it is closely connected to action. Facilitators should speak while demonstrating, pointing, or positioning participants, rather than explaining from a distance. For example, saying "Place your foot here" while touching the mat or showing the position helps anchor words in reality.

It is also important to adapt language to group diversity. Some participants may have limited verbal expression, while others may use different first languages or alternative communication systems. Using clear, repetitive phrasing and avoiding unnecessary variation helps create stability. When the same words are used consistently, participants learn to associate them with specific actions.

Encouraging interaction through language can further support understanding. Asking simple, open questions such as "Ready?" or "Shall we try together?" invites engagement without pressure. Offering positive feedback focused on effort rather than performance reinforces motivation and confidence.

Finally, facilitators should remember that verbal communication is only one part of the communication system. It works best when supported by demonstration, visual cues, and spatial organisation. When speech, movement, and environment reinforce each other, understanding becomes more accessible and reliable

Body Language and Demonstration: Using Movement, Posture, and Presence to Support Understanding

In circus education, the body is not only an instrument for practice. It is also a central tool for communication. For many young people with special needs, movement, posture, and visual modelling are more accessible than spoken explanations. Body language and demonstration therefore play a key role in creating understanding and confidence.
Some participants may have difficulties processing verbal information, limited attention spans, or reduced language comprehension. Others may learn best through observation and imitation. In these situations, clear physical demonstration can provide direct access to the task without requiring complex explanations.

Effective demonstration begins with visibility. Facilitators should position themselves where everyone can see clearly, avoid turning away while explaining, and make sure that lighting and distance support observation. When necessary, demonstrations can be repeated from different angles so that all participants can follow.

Movements should be shown slowly and clearly, especially at the beginning of an activity. Slowing down helps participants notice important details such as hand position, body alignment, rhythm, or safety points. For example, when demonstrating a balance exercise, walking the pathway at a calm pace allows participants to observe posture and foot placement more easily.

Demonstration is most useful when it highlights essential elements rather than technical perfection. The goal is not to present an ideal performance, but to show an accessible and realistic version of the task. Facilitators can deliberately simplify movements, exaggerate key actions, or pause at important moments to support understanding.

Gestures can complement both verbal and visual communication. Pointing to equipment, indicating direction with the arm, showing tempo with rhythmic movements, or using agreed hand signals helps guide participants without interrupting the flow of activity. Over time, these gestures become familiar reference points that reduce the need for repeated verbal instruction.

Facilitators should also remain attentive to participants' body language. Changes in posture, avoidance of eye contact, withdrawal, agitation, or rigidity may indicate confusion, fatigue, or discomfort. Reading these signals allows facilitators to adjust the activity, slow down, or offer support before difficulties escalate.

As with verbal communication, demonstration should avoid becoming rigid or prescriptive. Showing only one "correct" way of moving may limit exploration and creativity. Whenever possible, facilitators can demonstrate several variations or invite participants to adapt movements to their own bodies. This reinforces the idea that different ways of performing are valid.

For example, in an acrobatics exercise, a facilitator may demonstrate several base positions with different stances or hand placements, showing that stability can be achieved in more than one way. In juggling, demonstrating throws at different heights and speeds communicates that personal rhythm is acceptable.

Body language also plays an important role in transitions and group management. Standing in a specific place to signal gathering, raising a hand to indicate silence, or sitting down to invite calm reflection are non-verbal cues that support structure without constant verbal control.

Finally, facilitators should adapt demonstrations to participants' physical abilities and needs. When working with young people with limited mobility, demonstrations may need to be adjusted, performed seated, or shown using adapted movements. In some cases, inviting a participant to demonstrate in their own way can be more meaningful than using a single standard model.

Visual Communication: Making Information Visible and Stable

In inclusive circus workshops, visual communication plays a central role in transforming instructions into action. Visual materials act as a bridge between words and movement, helping participants understand, remember, and navigate activities more independently. Their main function is not to "explain better," but to make information visible, stable, and accessible over time.

Unlike spoken instructions, which disappear as soon as they are said, visual supports remain available. They allow participants to return to information whenever needed, without having to ask for repetition. This is particularly important for young people who experience memory difficulties, need extra processing time, or feel uncomfortable interrupting to ask questions.

From a practical point of view, visual supports reduce the need for repeated verbal reminders and constant adult mediation. Once introduced, they continue to support understanding throughout the activity. This creates a calmer learning environment and allows facilitators to focus on observation and support rather than constant explanation.

Visual communication is especially effective in workshops with multiple stations or parallel activities. When participants move through space autonomously, clear visual cues help them understand where to go, what to do, and what choices are available. Station signs, symbols on equipment, or colour-coded areas guide participation without verbal intervention.

Visual supports include a wide range of tools such as symbols, pictures, signs, colour codes, floor markings, and simple diagrams. Gestures and bodily demonstrations also contribute to visual communication by reinforcing meaning through movement. Together, these elements add a visual and spatial layer to verbal language, making information more concrete and less abstract.

In practice, visual supports can communicate many types of content. A visual schedule can show the sequence of the session, helping participants anticipate what comes next. Step-by-step images can clarify the main phases of an activity. Symbols can indicate safety rules or hand positions. Colour coding can distinguish roles or activity levels. Simple signs can mark rest areas or waiting zones.

By making this information visible, facilitators support orientation, confidence, and independence. Participants can check what to do, where to go, or which role to take without relying on memory or asking for help.

To be effective, visual supports should be clear, simple, and consistently used. Too many images or overly detailed visuals can create confusion or overload. When the same symbols, colours, or formats are reused across sessions, participants gradually learn to recognise them and use them independently.

Spatial Communication: Using Space to Support Understanding, Orientation, and Emotional Safety

In inclusive circus workshops, the organisation of space becomes part of the teaching process. A clear and accessible layout reduces the need for repeated explanations, as the environment itself guides attention and participation.

When activity areas are visually recognisable, materials are arranged meaningfully, and signs anticipate what happens in each space, participants receive information simply by entering the room. Verbal instructions then rest on something that is already visible. Words no longer need to explain everything in detail, but instead guide attention toward what the space is already communicating.

This means designing the space in relation to the activities being proposed, using simple and clear signs that can be seen, and treating visual supports as an essential part of the environment rather than as additional tools.

For example, in a workshop organised into stations, each area can be clearly identified visually. A juggling station with balls can be marked with a sign showing balls. An acrobatics station can display a stylised drawing of people supporting each other. A balance station can be identified with an image referring to balance. In this way, the space communicates what happens in each area even before any verbal explanation is given.

Spatial communication is particularly important for young people who are sensitive to noise, crowding, or visual overload, who become disoriented easily, who have mobility limitations, or who need clear boundaries to feel secure. In such cases, unclear or chaotic environments can quickly lead to anxiety, withdrawal, or behavioural difficulties.

A well-organised space helps participants understand:

- where to work,
- where to rest,
- where to wait,
- where to move,
- where to store materials.

When these elements are clearly defined, participants can navigate the session more independently and with greater confidence.

Reducing cognitive and sensory overload is a central function of spatial communication. Too many materials, poorly defined areas, constant movement, or narrow pathways can overwhelm participants and make it difficult to focus. A clean, structured, and well-balanced environment helps regulate attention and energy.

Facilitators should regularly observe how participants move through and use the space. Signs of hesitation, crowding, repeated questions about where to go, or avoidance of certain areas may indicate that spatial communication needs adjustment.

In inclusive circus practice, space becomes a form of silent guidance. It supports understanding without pressure, encourages autonomy without isolation, and offers security without rigidity. When the environment is clear and welcoming, participants are better able to engage, explore, and cooperate.

A thoughtfully designed setting reduces anxiety and confusion. It allows young people to focus their energy on learning, creativity, and shared experience rather than on trying to interpret unclear instructions.

Combining Communication Channels: Distributing Information Across Words, Images, Movement, and Space

In inclusive circus workshops, no single form of communication is sufficient on its own. Some participants rely mainly on verbal explanations, others on visual cues, others on demonstration, and others on spatial organisation. Many use several channels at the same time. For this reason, effective communication is based on combining different modes rather than choosing only one.

Combining communication channels means that important information is shared through several forms at once: spoken language, body movement, visual supports, and environmental cues. Each channel reinforces the others, making understanding more stable and accessible.

For example, when introducing a balancing activity, a facilitator may explain the task verbally, demonstrate the movement, point to floor markers, and show a simple image of the posture. A participant who does not fully understand the spoken instruction can rely on the demonstration or the visual cue. Another participant may use the spatial layout to orient themselves. In this way, everyone has multiple entry points into the activity.

This approach is especially important when working with young people who have intellectual disabilities, sensory sensitivities, or language difficulties. Relying on only one channel places unnecessary demands on memory, attention, or comprehension. Distributing information across several supports reduces cognitive load and increases confidence.

Combining channels also helps stabilise instructions over time. Verbal explanations disappear quickly, but visual cues remain. Demonstrations can be repeated. Spatial markers stay in place. When these elements are coordinated, participants can return to the information whenever needed without depending on constant adult intervention.

Facilitators should also be attentive to how different participants use communication channels. Some may mainly observe before acting. Others may follow floor markings more than verbal cues. Some may imitate peers. Observing these patterns helps facilitators adjust the balance between channels and strengthen weaker supports when needed.

Combining channels does not mean overloading participants with information. The goal is not to multiply signals, but to reinforce essential messages in accessible ways. Too many visual elements, gestures, or verbal instructions can become overwhelming. Effective multimodal communication remains simple, focused, and intentional.

This approach also supports inclusion within heterogeneous groups. When information is distributed across several channels, participants with different abilities can engage in the same activity without separate explanations. Adaptation happens in the design of communication, not through individualised correction.

Roles and Participation

Participation does not mean that everyone does the same thing in the same way. In diverse groups, young people bring different abilities, rhythms, motivations, and ways of expressing themselves. Creating meaningful participation therefore requires more than adapting tasks — it requires choosing roles, structuring the group, and shaping relationships in ways that allow each person to find a place.

This section explores how participation can take many forms within the same activity. It shows how facilitators can use roles, group organisation, and supportive practices to build environments where every young person can contribute meaningfully, develop confidence, and feel recognised.

Multiple Roles: Many Ways to Participate

In inclusive circus workshops, participation is not limited to performing a technique. A circus activity is rarely an individual act; it is a collective construction. Even when one person is at the centre of attention, others contribute through safety, rhythm, organisation, and observation. Recognising this shared dimension allows participation to expand beyond performance.

When everyone is expected to do the same task in the same way, differences in ability, confidence, or energy quickly become visible and may create comparison or frustration. Offering multiple roles within the same activity allows each young person to contribute meaningfully, according to their strengths, needs, and readiness.

Roles support co-creation. They make visible the different functions that allow an activity to exist. Within a single exercise, participation may take several forms, such as:

- Performer, who tries the movement or technique.
- Spotter, who ensures safety and stability.
- Counter or rhythm leader, who supports timing and coordination.
- Equipment manager, who prepares and organises materials.
- Observer, who watches attentively and offers feedback.
- Photographer, who document what is happening
- Demonstrator, who models a variation for others.
- …

In group acrobatics, one participant may form the base, another may climb, a third may spot for safety, and another may observe alignment. In juggling, one may pass the ball, another may count rhythm, and another may manage dropped props. Each role contributes to the shared success of the group.

When these roles are recognised as equally valuable, hierarchy is reduced. Participation is no longer defined only by technical performance. Supporting, organising, and observing become visible contributions rather than secondary tasks. This helps prevent exclusion and allows participants to engage at different levels without feeling less capable.

Role rotation is important. When roles change regularly, participants experience different perspectives within the activity. Someone who begins as an observer may later choose to perform. A confident performer may discover the responsibility of spotting or leading rhythm. Rotation strengthens empathy, cooperation, and shared responsibility.

Choice should be integrated into role allocation. Allowing participants to select a role increases ownership and motivation. At the same time, facilitators can gently encourage exploration of new roles, while always respecting comfort and safety.

Roles are not fixed identities; they are temporary ways of contributing within a collective process. When facilitators present them as complementary rather than hierarchical, the group begins to function as a cooperative system rather than a competitive one.

However, roles alone do not guarantee inclusive participation. The way the group is organised — who works with whom, how groups are formed, and how responsibilities are distributed — strongly influences whether roles truly support inclusion. For this reason, it is important to look more closely at group structure and dynamics.

Group Structure and Dynamics: How group organisation shapes participation

Participation does not happen in isolation. It always takes place within a group. Even the most carefully adapted activity can become exclusionary if group dynamics are not considered. For young people with intellectual, sensory, or physical disabilities, the way the group is structured can either reduce pressure and support belonging, or increase confusion and comparison.

Understanding basic group processes helps facilitators interpret behaviour more accurately and design conditions that support participation.

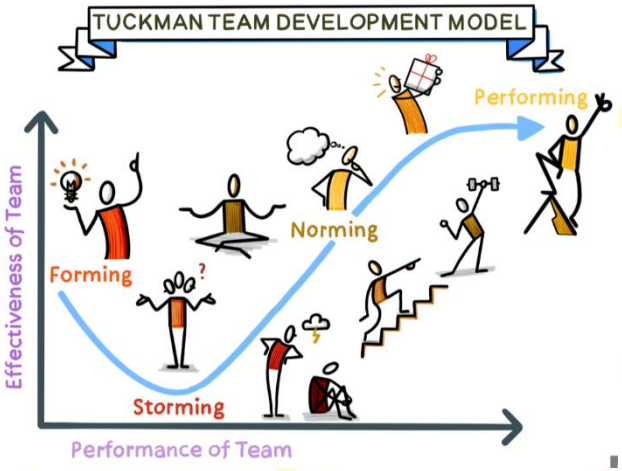
Basic Group Development: Understanding how groups evolve over time

Participation in inclusive circus workshops takes place within a living group process. Groups are not static. They evolve over time, and their atmosphere, energy, and internal dynamics shift as relationships develop. Recognising this helps facilitators interpret behaviour more accurately and respond with appropriate structure and support.

Let's look at a bit of theory of group dynamics here:

In general, in the early phase of a workshop cycle, participants are often cautious. They observe the space, test the atmosphere, and try to understand expectations. Some may appear reserved or overly active as they search for their place. At this stage, clear routines, stable communication, and defined roles are especially important. Predictability reduces anxiety and helps build trust.

As familiarity grows, participants may begin to test limits. Differences in personality, rhythm, or confidence become more visible. Small conflicts, competition, resistance, or role negotiation can appear. This phase is normal. It does not mean that the group is failing. It reflects a natural adjustment process as participants explore boundaries and relationships. During this period, facilitators may need to reinforce shared agreements, clarify roles, and maintain consistent structure without becoming rigid.



With time and continuity, many groups move toward greater cooperation. Participants begin to understand one another's strengths and sensitivities. Roles become more fluid, trust increases, and collaboration feels more natural. At this stage, facilitators can gradually introduce more open-ended tasks, shared leadership, and creative autonomy.

Understanding these phases helps prevent misinterpretation. A dominant participant may be seeking visibility rather than challenging authority. A withdrawn participant may still be observing and building internal security. A conflict may signal negotiation of roles rather than disrespect.

In inclusive contexts, patience with group development is essential. Young people with intellectual or sensory disabilities may need more time to build trust and familiarity. Stability in routines, communication, and expectations supports this process.

Basic awareness of group development allows facilitators to design sessions that respond to the group's stage rather than reacting impulsively to individual behaviours. Structure can be stronger when insecurity is high, and flexibility can increase as cohesion grows.

Organising Groups: Designing Group Formats That Support Inclusion and Engagement

The way a group is organised has a direct impact on participation, safety, and emotional comfort. Group structure is not only a practical matter, it is also a pedagogical decision. The size of the group, the way participants are paired, and the stability or rotation of sub-groups all influence how young people engage with the activity and with one another.

Different formats serve different purposes.

Working with the whole group can create a shared sense of belonging and collective energy. It is particularly useful for warm-ups, rhythm games, or moments of collective reflection. However, whole-group formats may increase social pressure for some participants, especially those who feel insecure or overwhelmed by attention.

Working in **pairs** often supports trust, focus, and cooperation. Pair work reduces cognitive and social load and allows more individual attention. It is particularly effective in acrobatics, partner juggling, or mirroring exercises, where mutual responsibility and eye contact strengthen connection.

Trios or small groups introduce negotiation and shared decision-making. They allow roles to circulate more easily and reduce the intensity of one-to-one interaction. Small groups are often beneficial for participants who need a quieter or more contained environment to feel safe.

In inclusive contexts, smaller groups frequently reduce both cognitive and social overload. When fewer people are involved in the interaction, communication becomes clearer and emotional regulation is easier.

The way participants are paired also matters. Mixed-ability pairing can encourage peer learning and cooperation, but it should not create fixed "helper" and "helped" identities. Rotating pairs regularly prevents hierarchy and supports shared responsibility. At the same time, some participants may benefit from more stable partnerships to build trust and predictability. Facilitators can choose between stable and rotating groups depending on the needs of the group and the objectives of the session.

Another important element is whether groups remain stable over time or change frequently. Stable groups increase security and familiarity. Rotating groups increase flexibility and social exploration. Both approaches have value; the key is intentional choice rather than habit.

Station-based organisation is another powerful tool. Dividing the space into clearly defined activity zones allows participants to move autonomously between tasks, work at different rhythms, and choose entry points. This format supports differentiation within the same session while maintaining a shared framework.

Managing Participation Patterns: Understanding that Behaviour is Communication

Within every group, participation does not distribute itself evenly. Some young people take initiative quickly, speak often, and move confidently into new tasks. Others hesitate, observe for a long time, or withdraw when attention increases. These patterns are natural. They are not fixed identities, but dynamic positions within the group that can shift over time.

It is important to read participation patterns without judgement. Behaviour often communicates needs. Agitation may signal sensory overload or frustration. Withdrawal may reflect insecurity, fatigue, or the need for distance. Dominance may express a search for recognition or a desire for control in an unfamiliar environment. When behaviour is interpreted as communication rather than disobedience, responses become more constructive.

Supporting shy or hesitant participants may involve reducing public exposure, offering smaller group formats, or assigning roles that provide structure without high visibility. For example, a participant who avoids performing may feel comfortable acting as a rhythm counter or equipment manager before gradually trying a movement.

Managing dominant participation requires clarity rather than confrontation. Structured turn-taking, rotating roles, and defined time limits can balance interaction without discouraging enthusiasm. Clear group agreements help prevent certain voices from overshadowing others. The goal is not to suppress initiative, but to redistribute space.

Conflicts between participants are part of group life. In inclusive contexts, they often arise from misunderstandings, differences in rhythm, or unclear expectations. Addressing conflicts calmly, reinforcing shared agreements, and clarifying roles can prevent escalation. Punishment rarely improves cooperation; structure and dialogue are more effective.

Managing different rhythms within the same group is also essential. Some participants need more time to understand or complete a task. Others progress quickly and become restless. Offering extension options, parallel tasks, or differentiated challenges allows everyone to remain engaged without creating comparison.

When assistants or co-facilitators are present, clear distribution of adult roles is important. Adults should avoid speaking over participants, over-correcting, or providing constant assistance. Support should remain available but not intrusive. Consistency between facilitators reduces confusion and reinforces stability.

In moments of tension or escalation, de-escalation strategies prioritise regulation rather than control. Lowering voice tone, reducing stimulation, creating physical space, and acknowledging emotion often calm situations more effectively than raising authority. Clear, simple instructions combined with stable body language can help restore balance.

Supporting Participation and Motivation

In inclusive circus workshops, participation does not appear automatically. Motivation develops when young people feel safe, capable, and respected in the activity. For many participants with intellectual, sensory, or physical disabilities, previous experiences in school or sport may have included repeated correction, comparison, or failure. As a result, some may hesitate to try, withdraw quickly when difficulties appear, or wait for constant reassurance.

Supporting participation therefore means creating conditions where trying feels possible and worthwhile. The facilitator's role is not to push young people to perform, but to design an environment where effort, curiosity, and experimentation are welcomed. When the activity feels accessible and meaningful, motivation grows naturally.

One important element is encouragement without pressure. Participants benefit from hearing that their attempts are valued, but encouragement should not become insistence. Inviting someone to try is different from insisting that they must succeed. Simple phrases such as "You can try if you want" or "Let's see what happens" support participation while leaving room for choice.

It is equally important to value effort rather than performance. When feedback focuses only on success or technical precision, participants who struggle may feel discouraged. Instead, recognising effort, persistence, or creativity helps maintain engagement. Saying "You stayed focused" or "You tried several ways" highlights the learning process rather than the result.

Normalising mistakes also plays a key role. Circus practice naturally includes trial and error: balls fall, balances wobble, pyramids collapse and are rebuilt. When facilitators treat mistakes as a normal part of exploration, participants feel less fear of failure. Laughing together, repeating attempts, and celebrating small improvements all contribute to a supportive atmosphere.

Another way to support motivation is by adapting the level of challenge. Activities that are too difficult may create frustration, while tasks that are too easy may lead to boredom. Offering variations within the same activity allows each participant to find an appropriate level of engagement. Some may repeat a simple movement many times, while others may look for more complex variations. When different levels are available, participants can progress at their own rhythm.

Play and creativity are also powerful motivators. Circus activities naturally invite experimentation with rhythm, movement, and imagination. Allowing participants to invent variations, change tempo, or add personal touches transforms practice into exploration rather than repetition. Playfulness reduces pressure and keeps the atmosphere lively.

At the same time, it is important to avoid unnecessary comparison between participants. Inclusive workshops work best when progress is measured against personal experience rather than against others. Highlighting individual discovery rather than ranking performance helps maintain a cooperative environment.

Facilitators can also support motivation by paying attention to energy and fatigue. Some participants may lose concentration quickly or become overwhelmed by long sequences of activity. Alternating active moments with calmer phases, offering short breaks, or changing roles within the activity helps maintain engagement.

Finally, motivation grows when young people feel that their presence matters to the group. Recognising contributions, inviting participants to help organise materials, lead a rhythm, or demonstrate a variation reinforces the sense of belonging and responsibility.

Participation is not forced. It is nurtured through encouragement, patience, and thoughtful activity design. When young people feel that success is possible and that their efforts are recognised, motivation tends to emerge naturally.

Safety and Risk Management

Circus activities always involve a degree of risk. Balancing, jumping, lifting, or working with objects requires coordination, attention, and physical engagement. In inclusive circus practice, the goal is not to remove all risk, but to understand it and manage it in a way that supports learning and participation. Challenge is an essential part of the experience, and removing it completely would also remove many opportunities to learn and grow.

Not all risks are the same. Some risks are useful and necessary: they allow participants to explore, test their abilities, and gain confidence. These can be called *acceptable risks*. Others come from poor organisation, unclear instructions, or lack of preparation. These are *unnecessary risks*, and they should be avoided. A well-facilitated session reduces unnecessary risks while keeping meaningful challenges.

This requires a constant balance between safety, participation, and autonomy. If activities are too controlled, participants may feel restricted or excluded. If they are not structured enough, participants may feel unsafe or overwhelmed. The role of the facilitator is to find the right balance, where participants can try, explore, and take part while knowing that the environment supports them.

Safety in inclusive contexts is not only physical. It also includes emotional safety, clarity, and trust. Participants need to feel secure enough to try, to make mistakes, and to engage at their own rhythm. A well-managed environment allows young people to participate actively while feeling supported and respected.

Circus activities are subject to different regulations depending on the country. Some disciplines, especially those involving height or specific equipment such as trapeze or aerial structures, may require certified installations, trained supervision, or specific safety procedures. In other contexts, these regulations may be less formal or not clearly defined. Regardless of the local framework, facilitators remain responsible for ensuring that the environment, equipment, and activities are safe and appropriate for the group.

In practice, safety relies on several elements working together: a well-prepared space, clear and shared rules, appropriate progression, and attention to participants' signals. Facilitators guide this process, but safety can also be learned and shared within the group.

Safe does not mean risk-free: it means well managed.

Preparing a Safe and Accessible Environment: Setting up space and equipment to prevent risk

A well-prepared environment is one of the most effective ways to prevent accidents and support safe participation. Before the activity even begins, the way space and equipment are organised already communicates what is possible, where to move, and how to act safely. A clear and structured environment reduces confusion, limits unexpected situations, and helps participants focus on the activity.

The first step is to ensure that the working area is appropriate for the activity. The space should be large enough to allow movement without crowding, with sufficient distance between participants. This is especially important in activities involving throwing, balancing, or group movement. Clear pathways should be maintained so that participants can move safely between areas without crossing active zones.

The floor surface plays a key role in safety. Mats can be used for acrobatics or balance activities to reduce the risk of injury. Non-slip surfaces help prevent falls, while uneven or cluttered floors increase risk and should be avoided. Marking the floor with tape can help define personal spaces, movement directions, or activity zones, making the structure of the space more visible.

The organisation of equipment should be simple and intentional. Props should be placed in clearly defined areas and easily accessible, without creating obstacles. Equipment that is not in use should be stored safely to avoid distraction or accidental misuse. When materials are arranged in a meaningful way, participants can understand what to do without needing constant verbal instruction.

It is also important to create clearly identifiable activity zones. For example, juggling, balance, and acrobatics can each have their own space. Visual markers, signs, or the placement of equipment can help participants recognise these zones. This reduces overlap between activities and helps maintain a safe distance between different types of movement.

A safe environment also includes spaces for rest and observation. Some participants may need to step aside, take a break, or observe before joining. Providing a quiet or low-stimulation area allows participants to regulate their energy and return to the activity when they feel ready.

In some contexts, especially when using specific equipment such as aerial apparatus or fixed installations, facilitators must also be aware of local regulations and safety standards. Even when such regulations are not formally required, it is important to apply careful, informed judgement and ensure that all equipment is stable, appropriate, and used under safe conditions.

Preparing the environment is not a one-time action. Throughout the session, facilitators should remain attentive to how the space is used: objects moving out of place, participants gathering too closely, or new risks appearing as activities evolve. Small adjustments during the session can prevent incidents and maintain a safe and supportive environment for everyone.

Clear Safety Rules and Shared Understanding: Making safety visible, simple, and shared

Safety works best when everyone understands what to do and why it matters.

Safety rules should be clear, concrete, and easy to remember. The goal is not to list many rules, but to focus on a few essential ones that guide behaviour and can be applied in different activities.

Rules are more effective when they are connected to action. Instead of abstract instructions, facilitators can use simple and direct language such as "Wait until the space is clear before throwing" or "One person moves, the others watch." These types of instructions are easier to understand and apply, especially for participants who may have difficulties with language or attention.

Demonstration is often more effective than explanation. Showing both safe and unsafe behaviours can help participants understand what is expected. For example, demonstrating how to spot a partner correctly, or how to stand at a safe distance, makes the rule visible and concrete. When possible, participants can also be invited to try the correct behaviour together.

Repetition and consistency are important. Using the same words, gestures, or signals over time helps participants recognise and remember safety rules. For example, a consistent gesture to stop, a specific word to gather attention, or a visual sign placed in the space can become shared reference points for the group.

It is also important to check understanding rather than assume it. Instead of asking "Is it clear?", facilitators can invite participants to show the first step, point to where they should stand, or demonstrate a safe position. These small checks help identify misunderstandings early and reinforce shared understanding.

Whenever possible, safety can be presented as a shared responsibility. Instead of rules being imposed only by the facilitator, participants can be encouraged to watch out for each other, remind each other of safe practices, and take on roles such as observer or spotter. This strengthens both safety and cooperation.

Finally, safety rules should remain visible and present throughout the session. They can be supported by visual signs, repeated at key moments, and adapted when the activity changes. A rule that is only explained once at the beginning is easily forgotten. When safety is regularly brought back into attention, it becomes part of the group's way of working rather than an external constraint.

Safe Physical Interaction: Working with others with awareness, consent, and control

Many circus activities involve working with others: partner exercises, group acrobatics, spotting, or shared balance. These situations can be very rich in terms of cooperation and trust, but they also require particular attention to safety. Safe physical interaction is not only about technique, but also about awareness of others, clear communication, and respect for boundaries.

A first principle is consent. Physical contact should never be assumed. Participants need to know that they can accept, refuse, or adapt contact at any moment. Simple habits such as asking "Can I help?" or "Is this okay?" help create a respectful environment. Facilitators should model this behaviour and make it part of the group culture. Positioning and body awareness are also essential. Participants should understand where to stand, where to place their hands, and how to support or be supported. Demonstrating these elements clearly helps prevent accidents. For example, in a simple acrobatic base position, showing where the feet are placed, how the back is aligned, and where hands can safely support makes the task much more secure.

In activities involving lifting or balance, it is important to introduce basic spotting principles. Spotting does not mean doing the movement for someone, but being ready to support if needed. Participants can learn to stay close, keep their attention on the person performing, and follow the movement with their hands without interfering unless necessary. This helps create a sense of shared responsibility and reduces the risk of falls.

Progression remains key. Physical interaction should start with simple, low-risk situations before moving to more complex ones. For example, before building a group pyramid, participants can explore individual balance, then partner balance, then small group structures. This gradual approach allows participants to build trust in themselves and in others.

Clear rules about distance and movement also help prevent collisions and confusion. Participants should know when to move, when to wait, and how to enter or leave an activity space safely. In group situations, simple rules such as "One person moves at a time" or "Wait until the space is clear" can make a big difference.

Facilitators should also pay attention to non-verbal signals. Discomfort, hesitation, stiffness, or withdrawal can indicate that a participant does not feel safe. These signals should be respected immediately, without requiring verbal explanation. Offering alternatives or pausing the activity helps maintain trust.

Finally, safe physical interaction depends on a supportive group culture. Participants should feel responsible not only for themselves, but also for others. Encouraging communication, attention, and cooperation helps create an environment where safety is shared rather than imposed.

When physical interaction is introduced progressively, clearly explained, and based on consent and awareness, it becomes a powerful tool for building trust, confidence, and connection within the group, while keeping everyone safe.

Responding to Difficult Situations: Staying Calm, Adapting, and Protecting the Group

Even in a well-prepared session, difficult situations can happen. A participant may fall, feel overwhelmed, lose focus, or refuse to continue. What matters most is how the facilitator responds. A calm and clear reaction helps maintain safety and trust for the whole group.

The first step is often to pause the activity if needed. This does not have to be dramatic. A simple stop signal or a quiet regrouping can be enough to bring attention back and assess the situation. Keeping a calm tone helps prevent stress from spreading.

When a participant is involved, the priority is to check their physical and emotional state. Are they hurt? Do they need a break? Are they overwhelmed or confused? Not all situations require the same response. Sometimes a short pause is enough, sometimes the activity needs to be adapted.

It is important to avoid rushing back into the activity. Giving a moment to recover, observe, or step aside helps participants feel safe. A quiet space or a simple alternative role can support this transition without excluding them from the group.

Difficult situations are also moments to adjust the activity. If several participants struggle, it may mean the task is too complex, too fast, or not clear enough. Simplifying the task, reducing the intensity, or returning to a previous step can quickly improve safety and engagement.

Facilitators should also pay attention to the group dynamic. After an incident, some participants may feel distracted, worried, or overexcited. Taking a moment to refocus the group, restate a key rule, or restart with a simple action can help restore a sense of stability.

Finally, it is useful to be prepared for basic situations in advance: knowing where first aid material is, having a clear stop signal, and knowing how to react if someone needs assistance. This preparation allows facilitators to respond calmly and effectively when something unexpected happens.

Reflection, Evaluation, and Adjustment

After defining objectives, preparing the environment, structuring the session, and designing adaptable activities, the next step is to look back and understand what actually happened in practice. Inclusive facilitation does not stop once the activity is delivered. It continues through observation, reflection, and adjustment.

Evaluation in inclusive circus is not about measuring performance or checking whether participants reached a fixed result. It is about understanding how the session supported participation, engagement, and development. Did participants feel safe enough to try? Were they able to take part in their own way? Did the activity match their needs and rhythm?

This process helps connect what was planned with what was experienced. Sometimes an activity works as expected. Sometimes it needs to be simplified, slowed down, or approached differently. Reflection allows facilitators to notice these differences and adapt future sessions accordingly.

In this sense, evaluation is not a final step, but part of an ongoing cycle:

plan → act → observe → adjust.

This section explores how facilitators can observe participants, create simple moments of reflection, involve young people in giving feedback, and use this information to improve their practice over time.

Understanding Progress

Progress is not only about mastering a trick or performing a skill in a neat and conventional way. It is about understanding how each young person is developing through the activity and what that development tells us about how to support them better. Progress includes not only what participants can do technically, but also how they engage, focus, respond, relate to others, manage difficulty, and gradually find their own place within the group.

This broader view is especially important when working with young people with disabilities. Meaningful progress does not always appear as a visible increase in technical skill. A participant may still be dropping the scarf, hesitating before stepping onto a balance line, or needing support to join a group activity, and yet still be making very real progress. They may stay engaged for longer, recover more calmly after a mistake, accept working with a partner, ask for help more easily, or show more confidence in choosing how to participate. These changes matter. In many cases, they are more important than whether a trick is completed perfectly.

Progress is therefore best understood as meaningful change over time in relation to the participant's own starting point. The key question is not, "Who is doing better?" but, "What is changing for this person?" This shifts evaluation away from comparison and toward a more respectful and useful form of observation. It also helps facilitators stay attentive to what supports progress, rather than focusing only on what is missing.

It is also important to remember that progress is rarely linear. A young person may show confidence one day and hesitation the next. They may participate actively in juggling but resist partner acrobatics. They may manage well in a calm environment and struggle when the room becomes noisy, crowded, or unpredictable. This does not mean progress has disappeared. It means progress is shaped by context: energy levels, emotional safety, sensory conditions, relationships, pace, task design, and previous experience. Observing progress therefore requires patience and nuance. Facilitators need to notice not only what a participant can do, but also when, how, and under what conditions it becomes easier or harder.

In inclusive circus, progress can be understood across several connected areas. At a physical level, it may involve body awareness, coordination, balance, timing, posture, strength, or confidence in movement. A participant may become more stable, more oriented in space, or more comfortable using their body in a new way. At a cognitive level, progress may appear in attention, understanding, memory, sequencing, anticipation, or problem-solving. A participant may follow a task more easily, remember a short sequence, or begin finding their own solutions. At an emotional level, progress may show in confidence, persistence, resilience after mistakes, trust, or emotional regulation. A participant may try again more often, tolerate uncertainty more calmly, or stay with difficulty for longer. At a social level, progress may involve interaction, cooperation, turn-taking, awareness of others, or communication in a group. A participant may begin working with a partner, asking before helping, or joining shared tasks more actively. Finally, progress can also be linked to identity and empowerment. A participant may begin taking initiative, making choices, expressing preferences, or seeing themselves as capable and valued within the group.

These areas are closely connected. A participant who becomes physically more confident may also become socially more active. A participant who feels safer emotionally may take more initiative. A participant who understands a task more clearly may become more willing to persist. Progress does not happen in isolated boxes, but looking at these different areas can help facilitators see more clearly what is developing and what may need further support.

This also means that success in inclusive circus needs to be understood more broadly. Success may mean trying something new, staying engaged, asking for help, cooperating with others, showing creativity, or returning after a difficult moment. If only technical precision counts, many meaningful forms of development disappear from view. A more inclusive understanding of success allows facilitators to recognise progress that is real, motivating, and relevant to the participant's wider development.

In this sense, understanding progress is not about lowering expectations. It is about making expectations more relevant, more humane, and more connected to the real aims of inclusive practice. It helps facilitators see participants more fully, recognise small but important changes, and build sessions that support growth over time.

How to observe progress

Observation in inclusive circus begins long before any formal evaluation moment. It starts when participants arrive, choose props, listen to instructions, enter a task, hesitate, try again, withdraw, reconnect, and move from one activity to another. Observation is not something added at the end of the session. It is part of facilitation itself. It helps practitioners understand what is happening in real time and make more responsive decisions.

Good observation goes beyond asking, "Did they do it?" A more useful question is, "How did they engage with the task?" A participant may complete an exercise with strong support, refuse at first and join later, adapt the task independently, or remain involved through observation. All of these responses give information. They show how the participant understands the activity, what kind of support is useful, and what may need to be adjusted.

It is helpful to look not only at results, but also at process. This includes how the participant approaches the activity, what helps them begin, how long they stay engaged, what happens when they meet difficulty, and how they respond to support, change, or feedback. It can also be useful to notice whether the task becomes easier when it is slowed down, demonstrated visually, made more playful, or done with a partner.

Observation becomes clearer when facilitators pay attention to the main areas of impact. At a physical level, they may notice posture, balance, coordination, timing, rhythm, or ease in movement. At a cognitive level, they may observe attention, understanding, memory, sequencing, or problem-solving. At an emotional level, they may notice hesitation, persistence, frustration, pride, or willingness to try again. At a social level, they may look for turn-taking, cooperation, asking for help, offering help, or responsiveness to others. In terms of identity and empowerment, they may notice initiative, choice-making, self-expression, preference, or signs that the participant sees themselves as capable.

Observation becomes more manageable when facilitators focus on only a few things at a time. In one session, the focus might be participation, persistence, and interaction. In another, it might be body awareness, sequencing, and initiative. Trying to observe everything at once often leads to vague impressions rather than useful understanding. A narrower focus makes it easier to notice changes over time.

Observation also does not need to become heavy or overly technical. Short notes after the session can already be very useful. Facilitators can write down key changes, significant moments, or recurring difficulties. They may also use a simple grid, a few keywords, or visual markers to follow one or two areas over several sessions. What matters is not producing long reports, but keeping a trace of what is changing and what seems to help.

Observation becomes meaningful when it helps answer simple questions. Is the participant more engaged than before? Are they gaining confidence or autonomy? Are interactions developing? Is the current form of the activity supporting participation, or does something need to change? In this way, observation is not about judgement. It is a tool for understanding, adjustment, and more inclusive facilitation.

When observing progress, it is useful to keep returning to the same simple question: what is changing for this person, and what seems to support that change? This helps facilitators stay attentive to development over time without falling into comparison or narrow performance-based evaluation.

Creating moments for reflection

Reflection helps participants and facilitators make sense of what happened during the activity. In inclusive circus, it is not an extra step added only at the end of the session. It is part of the learning process. It helps young people notice what they tried, what they enjoyed, what felt difficult, what supported them, and how they experienced the group. It also helps facilitators understand whether the session was accessible, engaging, and well-paced.

Reflection does not need to be long, abstract, or highly verbal. It should be simple, accessible, and connected to the lived experience of the activity. For some groups, this may mean a short discussion in a circle. For others, it may work better through gesture, drawing, choosing a colour, showing a movement, or pointing to an image or symbol. The aim is not to produce a perfect answer, but to create a moment in which experience can be noticed and expressed.

Reflection can happen at different moments. It may take place briefly at the beginning of the session as a check-in, during the activity through short pauses, or at the end as a way of looking back. A short question before starting can help participants connect with how they feel and what they need that day. A pause during the activity can help them notice what is working or what they want to change. A closing moment can help them recognise effort, enjoyment, or challenge before leaving.

In inclusive practice, timing matters. Reflection should happen when participants are still available enough to engage with it. If everyone is tired, overstimulated, or ready to leave, a very short format may work better than a long group discussion. Sometimes one clear question is enough. Sometimes a gesture, a choice, or a simple visual support may be more appropriate than spoken answers.

It is also important that reflection remains safe and voluntary. Participants should not feel tested, judged, or pushed to say something positive. It should be possible to say that something was difficult, confusing, tiring, or not enjoyable. Honest feedback is useful. It helps facilitators understand the experience more fully and shows participants that their perspective matters.

Creating regular moments for reflection also supports continuity over time. It helps participants become more aware of their own learning and helps facilitators notice patterns across sessions. A participant may begin to recognise what helps them engage, when they need a pause, what kind of support feels useful, or what activities make them feel confident. In this way, reflection is not only about looking back. It also helps shape what comes next.

In inclusive circus, reflection is most useful when it stays simple, regular, and connected to experience. It creates space for participants to be heard, for facilitators to learn, and for the session to become more responsive over time.

INVOLVING PARTICIPANTS IN EVALUATION

In inclusive circus, evaluation should not be something done only *to* participants or *about* participants. As much as possible, it should also involve them. This does not mean asking every young person to give a detailed verbal analysis of their progress. It means creating accessible ways for them to share how they experienced the activity, what mattered to them, what felt difficult, what helped, and what they would like to do again or differently.

When participants are involved in evaluation, they become active contributors to the process rather than passive recipients of adult judgement. This supports self-awareness, agency, and ownership. It also helps facilitators avoid relying only on their own interpretation of what happened. A participant may appear withdrawn but feel satisfied. Another may seem successful from the outside but have felt anxious, confused, or uncomfortable. Including participants' perspectives makes evaluation more respectful and more accurate.

To make this possible, evaluation needs to be accessible. Some young people may be able to answer simple spoken questions. Others may respond better through gesture, drawing, movement, symbols, pictures, objects, colours, or choosing between options. For some, it may be easier to show what they liked than to explain it. For others, a one-to-one conversation may feel safer than sharing in front of the whole group. The aim is not to use one fixed method, but to create different ways for participants to express their experience.

Concrete questions are usually more useful than broad ones. Instead of asking, "Did you make progress?" it may be easier to ask, "Was this easier or harder than last time?" "Would you like to do this again?" "Did you want more help or less help?" "What felt good?" or "What was difficult today?" These questions are easier to access and often lead to more meaningful responses.

Participants can also be involved in defining what success means for them. For one person, success may mean trying once. For another, it may mean staying in the room, joining a partner activity, asking for help, or choosing their own role. When participants help shape what matters, evaluation becomes more relevant and more connected to their real experience.

It is also important to keep participation voluntary. Not every young person will want to respond every time, and not all feedback will come in words. Refusing to answer, stepping back, or showing a preference through action can also give useful information. Inclusive evaluation respects different communication styles and does not force expression.

When participants are involved in evaluation, the atmosphere of the workshop also changes. Feedback becomes part of a shared process rather than something hidden or controlled by adults. This can strengthen trust, support self-expression, and help young people feel that their experience is taken seriously. In this sense, involving participants in evaluation is not only a way of gathering information. It is also part of inclusive practice itself.

Adjusting practice

Observation and reflection are only useful if they lead to adjustment. Inclusive circus facilitation depends on this cycle: notice, understand, adapt, and try again. When a participant is struggling, disengaging, or not progressing in a meaningful way, the first question should not be, "What is wrong with this participant?" but, "What can be adjusted in the activity, the environment, or the facilitation?"

Adjustment can happen at many levels. The task can be simplified or made more complex. The prop can be changed. The pace can slow down. The group size can shift. Instructions can become shorter and clearer, or be shown more through action and demonstration. Waiting time can be reduced. A participant can be offered a different role, more predictable structure, more visual support, another partner, a calmer place in the room, or more choice in how to join. Often, small changes can make participation much more accessible.

Adjusting practice is not only about reducing difficulty. Sometimes a participant needs less pressure, but sometimes they need more challenge. A young person may disengage because the task is too repetitive, too controlled, or too easy. Observation helps facilitators distinguish between overload and under-stimulation. Good adaptation keeps participants close to a learning edge that is demanding enough to be meaningful, but not so difficult that it becomes discouraging.

The most effective adjustments usually preserve the purpose of the activity while changing the route toward it. If the aim is cooperation, different participants may reach that aim through different versions of the task. If the aim is confidence, one participant may need a smaller step while another is ready for more visibility. If the aim is self-expression, participants may need different ways of showing it. Adaptation does not mean abandoning the intention of the activity. It means making that intention reachable in more than one way.

It is also useful to notice what happens after an adjustment is made. A different prop may increase confidence. A slower pace may reduce frustration. A clearer signal may help someone join more easily. Over time, these observations help facilitators build practical knowledge about what supports participation for different young people and in different contexts.

In this sense, adjustment is not a sign that the original activity failed. It is a normal and necessary part of inclusive practice. It shows that facilitation remains responsive to what participants actually need, rather than staying fixed on what was planned. When observation leads to thoughtful adjustment, sessions become more accessible, more meaningful, and more supportive of real participation over time.

Evaluating participants' progress and evaluating your own practice

In inclusive circus, evaluation should always work in two directions. It concerns participants' progress, but it also concerns the quality of the facilitation, the structure of the activities, and the accessibility of the environment. If facilitators only evaluate participants, they risk overlooking their own role in shaping what becomes possible.

Evaluating participants' progress means looking at change over time in relation to each person's own starting point. Are they becoming more confident in movement, more attentive, more persistent, more socially connected, or more able to make choices and take initiative? These questions are best answered through accumulated observation and concrete examples. Progress becomes meaningful when it is linked to something visible, such as returning after a mistake, staying engaged for longer, joining a partner activity, or asking for another turn.

At the same time, facilitators also need to evaluate their own practice. Did the session genuinely allow different ways of participating? Were the instructions accessible? Was the pace suitable? Did the structure support emotional safety and regulation? Did all participants have some degree of choice? Were some young people repeatedly left at the edge of the activity? These questions help shift evaluation away from judging individuals alone and toward examining the quality of the conditions that were created.

This matters because inclusive intentions do not automatically produce inclusive practice. A facilitator may think they are helping while actually giving too much support and reducing autonomy. Another may believe they are offering challenge while creating too much pressure. An activity may seem clear from the facilitator's point of view but still remain confusing, tiring, or inaccessible for some participants. Self-evaluation helps practitioners notice these patterns and improve over time.

A short reflection after each session can already be very useful. What worked well, and for whom? Where did participants struggle, and why? What seemed to increase engagement? What adaptation helped? What might need to change next time? These questions do not require a long report. They require an honest habit of looking back at practice with openness and curiosity.

Co-facilitator discussion can strengthen this process, because another adult may notice things that are difficult to see while leading. Participant feedback also matters here. When several young people consistently ask for more time, more choice, or calmer transitions, that is information not only about their preferences, but also about the practice itself. Evaluation becomes richer when it brings together observation, reflection, participant experience, and professional judgement.

In this sense, evaluation in inclusive circus is not a final judgement. It is a way of understanding development, improving accessibility, and refining facilitation. When observation, reflection, participation, and adjustment are all linked together, evaluation becomes a tool for inclusion rather than control. It helps facilitators see more clearly what supports participation, what needs to change, and how practice can continue to grow over time.

If you want, the next useful step would be to read the whole Reflection, Evaluation, and Adjustment chapter together and check whether there is still repetition between the five rewritten sections.

Inclusive Activity Preparation Template

The principles presented in this chapter become most useful when they are translated into concrete preparation. Inclusive facilitation depends not only on values or intentions, but also on how activities are planned, structured, explained, adapted, and reviewed.

To support this process, an Inclusive Workshop Preparation Template is provided in the annex. It is designed as a practical tool to help facilitators prepare activities in a way that connects learning objectives, access, participation, safety, communication, reflection, and adjustment. Rather than treating adaptation as something added at the last minute, the template encourages facilitators to build inclusion into the activity from the start.

The template can be used before a session to design or adapt an activity, and after a session to reflect on what worked, what created barriers, and what could be adjusted next time. In this way, it reflects the same cycle explored throughout this chapter: plan, act, observe, reflect, and adjust.

Its purpose is not to create rigid lesson plans, but to offer a flexible structure that helps youth workers think more clearly and prepare more responsively. It can be used for simple activities, full workshop sessions, or discipline-specific exercises, and adapted to different groups, contexts, and facilitation styles.

The full template can be found in the annex as a printable resource for facilitators.

Circus Disciplines and Adaptations

Warm-Up and Trust-Building Activities

Warm-up and trust-building activities are a central part of circus practice. They help participants enter the session progressively, settle into the space, and become available for movement, attention, interaction, and play. In inclusive circus, their role goes beyond physical preparation. They also support emotional safety, communication, group awareness, confidence, and readiness to participate.

The activities presented in this section are offered as practical ideas to support the beginning and development of a session. They can be used to welcome a group, create connection, introduce playful interaction, support transitions, or help restore focus and cohesion when energy shifts. Some are especially useful at the start of a workshop, while others may also be used later in the session when the group needs to reconnect, regulate, or regain attention.

The main aim of these activities is not performance. Their purpose is to help participants arrive, feel safe, connect with others, and become ready to take part in the shared experience of the session. When used with care, they create the conditions for participation, cooperation, and engagement, and they help lay the foundations for the work that follows.

Name and Movement Circle

Aim

To help participants learn each other's names while encouraging self-expression, shared attention, and body awareness.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants form a circle, either standing or sitting. One at a time, each participant says their name and make a small movement or gesture. This can be something very simple, such as raising a hand, nodding the head, tapping the shoulders, or making a small rhythm. The rest of the group then repeats the person's name and gesture together. The activity continues around the circle until everyone has had a turn.

Adaptations

The movement can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. Participants may choose very small gestures if needed. The gesture can also be replaced or supported by a look, a sound, or a simple rhythm. If useful, the facilitator can help make the gesture more visible or more audible for the group.

Why it works

This activity is simple, low-pressure, and immediately inclusive. It gives each participant a place in the group and values different ways of expressing oneself. Because the whole group repeats each name and gesture together, it creates mutual recognition, shared attention, and an early sense of belonging.

Passing the Energy

Aim

To build group connection, attention, and playful interaction through shared gesture and imagination.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants stand or sit in a circle. One person begins by sending an imaginary "energy" to the person next to them. This can be done with a gesture, a sound, a facial expression, or a movement of the hands or body. The next person receives it and passes it on in their own way. The energy can stay the same as it travels around the circle, or it can change slightly each time. After one round, the facilitator can invite participants to try different kinds of energy, for example soft, strong, slow, fast, funny, or calm.

Adaptations

The activity can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. The "energy" can be passed with a large gesture, a very small movement, a sound, a look, or a simple change in expression. Participants who do not want to invent their own version can copy the previous one or receive support from the facilitator. The pace can also be slowed down to give more time to respond.

Why it works

This activity is easy to enter and does not require technical skill. It encourages attention to others, turn-taking, creativity, and non-verbal communication. Because each person receives and passes something on, it also reinforces the feeling of being part of a shared group process.

Invisible Similarities

Aim

To strengthen group connection, reveal shared points of experience, and support a sense of belonging.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants stay in a circle, seated or standing. The facilitator offers simple, neutral, and inclusive statements such as: “Who likes music?”, “Who feels curious today?”, or “Who enjoys working with others?” Participants who identify with the statement can respond in an agreed way, for example by raising a hand, making a gesture, giving a sound, or showing a sign. After each prompt, the group takes a moment to notice the similarities that appear. The facilitator can continue with several statements, moving from light and playful themes to ones that support connection and curiosity.

Adaptations

Responses do not need to be verbal. Participants can answer through gesture, sound, a visual card, or another agreed signal. It is helpful to give enough time for each response and to keep the statements clear and accessible. Visual supports or symbols can also be used when needed.

Why it works

This activity helps participants notice connections that are not immediately visible. It shifts attention away from difference as a barrier and toward shared interests, feelings, and experiences. In this way, it supports emotional safety, reduces assumptions, and helps build a stronger sense of group belonging.

Awakening the Body

Aim

To increase body awareness, presence, and gentle attention to sensation.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

The facilitator guides participants through small, slow movements, inviting them to notice breathing, move one body part at a time, and pay attention to sensations. The activity can begin in stillness and gradually introduce simple actions such as rolling the shoulders, moving the head, stretching the arms, shifting weight, or waking up different parts of the body. The focus stays on awareness and presence rather than on doing movements in a precise way.

Adaptations

Movements can be imagined, supported by a facilitator, or performed as micro-movements. Participants may remain seated, standing, or lying down, depending on what is most comfortable and accessible for them. The pace should stay slow enough for everyone to follow in their own way.

Why it works

This activity creates a calm and respectful atmosphere at the start of the session. It helps participants arrive more fully in their bodies, supports regulation and concentration, and values what is possible for each person without pressure or comparison.

Mirror Partners

Aim

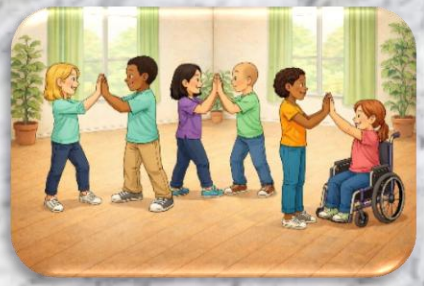
To develop attention, trust, non-verbal communication, and awareness of another person's rhythm and movement.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.



How it works

Participants work in pairs, facing each other. One person begins to make slow and simple movements, while the other follows as if they were a mirror. After a short time, the roles change. The facilitator can then invite pairs to try moving more fluidly, without deciding in advance who is leading and who is following. The focus is not on copying perfectly, but on watching carefully, moving with attention, and staying connected.

Adaptations

The activity can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. Movements can be very small and can involve only the hands, face, head, shoulders, breathing, or upper body if needed. Pairs do not need to move at the same speed, and pauses can be included. For some participants, it may help to begin with one body part only, such as mirroring hand movements, before expanding to the whole body.

Why it works

This activity creates a calm and focused form of interaction. It supports observation, responsiveness, and respect for another person's pace. Because it allows participants to connect without relying on speech or technical skill, it can be especially useful in mixed-ability groups and in sessions that include partner work later on.

Shared Rhythm

Aim

To build group coordination, listening, attention, and a sense of connection through simple shared rhythm.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants stand or sit in a circle. The facilitator begins with a simple rhythm using claps, taps on the body, steps, or vocal sounds. The group repeats it together. Once the rhythm is established, it can be repeated several times, slowly changed, or passed to another participant to lead. The activity can stay very simple or gradually include small variations in tempo, volume, or pattern. The focus is not on accuracy, but on listening, responding, and creating something together.

Adaptations

The rhythm can be made with hands, feet, voice, a prop, a wheelchair movement, or any accessible body action. Participants can join with large or very small movements, and the rhythm can be slowed down, simplified, or supported through demonstration. Some groups may benefit from repeating one steady pattern for longer before introducing change.

Why it works

This activity creates shared focus without requiring verbal communication or technical skill. It supports attention, timing, cooperation, and group awareness, while leaving room for different ways of taking part. Because everyone contributes to the same rhythm, it helps build a strong sense of togetherness at the start of the session.

Pass the Clap

Aim

To build shared attention, rhythm, and group coordination through a simple collective action.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

5–10 minutes.

How it works

Participants stand or sit in a circle. One person begins by turning to the person next to them and making eye contact while clapping once in their direction. The next person immediately passes the clap on to the next participant, and so on around the circle. Once the group understands the pattern, the clap can travel faster, change direction, or be sent across the circle if that feels manageable. The activity stays simple and playful, with the focus on timing, attention, and being ready to respond.

Adaptations

The clap can be replaced by another clear action, such as tapping the knees, making a sound, raising a hand, or using a small movement that is accessible to the group. Participants can pass the signal standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. The pace can remain slow, and the facilitator can support the direction of the clap with gesture or verbal cues if needed.

Why it works

This activity is easy to understand and quick to start. It encourages eye contact, anticipation, listening, and group focus without requiring verbal explanation or technical skill. Because everyone contributes to one shared sequence, it helps create a sense of connection and readiness at the beginning of a session.

Emotion Walk

Aim

To explore movement, expression, and imagination while increasing body awareness and emotional range.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Group size

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants move freely through the space while the facilitator invites them to change the quality of their walk. The prompts can be simple and playful, such as walking as if feeling tired, excited, proud, shy, curious, or calm. The facilitator can offer one emotion or state at a time, giving participants a moment to explore how it changes posture, speed, direction, energy, or facial expression. If appropriate, the activity can later include brief pauses in which participants notice how different emotions change the way they move.

Adaptations

The activity can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. Participants can express the emotion through very small movements, upper-body gestures, facial expression, breathing, or changes in rhythm. The prompts should remain clear and accessible, and participants can always choose to observe first or stay with a smaller version of the movement.

Why it works

This activity supports creativity, body awareness, and expressive movement without requiring technical skill. It helps participants explore different movement qualities in a playful way and can also strengthen imagination, confidence, and awareness of how emotions affect the body.

Group Shape Builder

Aim

To encourage cooperation, creativity, and awareness of others through shared group composition.

Group Size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants stand or sit in a space where they can see each other easily. The facilitator proposes a simple theme, word, or image, such as "tree," "boat," "storm," "bridge," or "circus tent." One participant begins by making a shape with their body. Then, one by one, the others join to build a collective group shape connected to the same idea. The group can hold the final shape for a moment, observe it, and then reset before trying a new theme. The facilitator can also invite participants to create the shape silently, to encourage more attention and non-verbal cooperation.

Adaptations

Shapes can be made standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. Participants can join with a full-body position, a hand gesture, a facial expression, or a smaller contribution if that is more accessible. The themes should remain simple and open enough to allow different interpretations. Some groups may benefit from seeing one example first, while others may enjoy inventing more freely.

Why it works

This activity supports imagination, shared attention, and non-verbal collaboration. It allows each participant to contribute in their own way while becoming part of a larger collective creation. Because the focus is on building together rather than doing it "right," it can be especially useful for mixed-ability groups and for creating an early sense of cooperation.

Blind Trains

Aim

To build trust, listening, group coordination, and awareness of pace and direction.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants form small lines or "trains," with one person at the front and the others behind. Each person places their hands lightly on the shoulders, arms, or back of the person in front, depending on what feels comfortable. The person at the front leads the train slowly through the space, helping the group move together while avoiding obstacles and changing direction carefully. After a while, the facilitator invites the trains to stop and change leader so that different participants can guide the group. In some versions, the people behind can close their eyes if they feel comfortable, while in others everyone keeps their eyes open and focuses on moving together.

Adaptations

The activity can be done with very short trains, with participants standing, seated, or using wheelchairs. Physical contact can be replaced by holding a scarf, rope, or other shared object if that feels more accessible or comfortable. Eyes do not need to be closed for the activity to work. The pace should remain slow, and the route should be simple and safe.

Why it works

This activity strengthens attention to others, shared rhythm, and trust in the group. It helps participants experience leading and following in a playful way, while also encouraging care, responsibility, and awareness of how movement affects others.

Atoms

Aim

To build group awareness, movement in space, responsiveness, and playful cooperation.

Group size

8–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants move freely around the space. The facilitator calls out a number, for example "two," "three," or "five," and participants quickly form groups of that size. Once the groups are made, they can simply stand together, make a shared shape, or complete a very small task such as raising hands together or sitting down. After a few seconds, everyone begins moving again until the next number is called. The game continues with different group sizes and can stay fast and playful or slower and more structured, depending on the group.

Adaptations

The pace can be slowed down to give more time to join a group. Participants can show their group through proximity, gesture, or a shared object rather than close physical contact. If moving quickly in the space is not accessible, the activity can be adapted so that participants stay in place and form groups by signalling or connecting visually. The facilitator can also reduce the range of numbers and repeat familiar patterns.

Why it works

This activity encourages participants to notice others, react together, and form new connections in a playful way. It supports spatial awareness, flexibility, and social interaction, while keeping the atmosphere light and active. Because the groupings change often, it can also help break fixed pairings and encourage wider contact within the group.

Rhythm Walk

Aim

To develop body awareness, rhythm, coordination, and group attention through movement in space.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants move freely through the space while the facilitator proposes a simple rhythm, either by clapping, counting, stepping, or making a repeated sound. The group is invited to walk in that rhythm, noticing how it affects speed, energy, and coordination. The facilitator can then change the rhythm, for example making it slower, faster, heavier, lighter, or more playful, and participants adjust their walking accordingly. Short pauses can also be added so the group listens, stops, and starts again together.

Adaptations

The activity can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. The rhythm can be followed through walking, rolling, stepping in place, hand tapping, or upper-body movement. The pace can remain simple and steady, and participants can stay with one rhythm for longer if frequent changes are too demanding. Visual or verbal cues can support transitions when needed.

Why it works

This activity helps participants connect movement with rhythm in a simple and accessible way. It supports listening, coordination, and shared timing, while also helping the group become more aware of space and of each other. Because it stays open and adaptable, it can work well with mixed-ability groups and at different energy levels.

Freeze and Listen

Aim

To develop attention, impulse control, body awareness, and responsiveness to shared signals.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

5–10 minutes.

How it works

Participants move freely through the space while the facilitator gives a simple signal, such as a clap, a word, or a sound. When they hear the signal, everyone freezes and becomes still for a moment. When the facilitator gives the next signal, participants begin moving again. Once the group understands the game, the facilitator can vary the quality of movement between freezes, for example walking slowly, moving lightly, or taking larger or smaller steps. The activity can stay simple or become more playful depending on the group.

Adaptations

The activity can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. “Freezing” can mean stopping completely, pausing one part of the body, or becoming still in the way that is most accessible for the participant. Signals can be auditory, visual, or gestural, depending on what the group responds to best. The pace can remain slow, with enough time for everyone to notice and respond.

Why it works

This activity is easy to understand and helps build shared focus very quickly. It supports listening, timing, self-control, and awareness of the group. Because it alternates movement and stillness, it can also help participants regulate energy and reconnect attention during a session.

Slow Motion Walk

Aim

To support body awareness, balance, control, and attention to movement through a slower pace.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

5–10 minutes.

How it works

Participants move through the space as slowly as possible, paying attention to each step, shift of weight, and change of direction. The facilitator can invite them to notice how the body moves when the pace becomes much slower than usual. The walk can stay silent and focused, or the facilitator can occasionally suggest small changes, such as stopping, turning, lifting the arms, or changing level. The main focus is on control, presence, and awareness rather than on reaching a destination.

Adaptations

The activity can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. Slow movement can be explored through walking, rolling, shifting weight, hand movement, or upper-body motion. Participants can work with very small actions if that feels more accessible. The facilitator can also reduce the size of the space or the number of changes to keep the activity clear and manageable.

Why it works

This activity helps participants slow down and notice movement in a different way. It supports concentration, regulation, balance, and physical awareness, while also creating a calm and focused atmosphere. Because it reduces speed and pressure, it can be especially useful for helping the group settle and reconnect.

Object Balance Challenge

Aim

To develop concentration, balance, coordination, and body awareness through a simple and playful task.

Group size

6–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Each participant receives a light object to balance, such as a beanbag, scarf, soft ball, or small plate, depending on what is available and appropriate for the group. The facilitator invites participants to place the object on a part of the body, for example the head, hand, shoulder, arm, knee, or foot, and then explore how to stay balanced while standing still or moving slowly through the space. The activity can begin very simply and then include small variations, such as walking, turning, stopping, changing level, or balancing the object on a different body part.

Adaptations

The challenge can be done standing, seated, or in a wheelchair. The object can be placed on the hand, lap, shoulder, head, footrest, or another accessible body surface. Participants can stay still instead of moving, or balance the object with support from a wall, chair, or partner if needed. Lighter, softer, or larger objects may also make the activity easier and more comfortable.

Why it works

This activity supports focus and body awareness in a simple and accessible way. It encourages participants to adjust posture, notice movement carefully, and respond to small changes in balance. Because the task can be adapted easily and does not require technical circus skill, it works well in mixed-ability groups and can be both calming and playful.

Building a Tower

Aim

To encourage cooperation, concentration, problem-solving, and shared planning through a simple group construction task.

Group size

4–20 participants.

Duration

10–15 minutes.

How it works

Participants work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to build a tower using available materials such as cups, blocks, boxes, juggling balls in cups, soft objects, or other safe equipment. The facilitator can invite them to make the tallest tower possible, the most stable tower, or a tower with a particular shape. The activity can begin freely or with a simple challenge, and groups can pause to look at what is working, adjust their strategy, and continue building.

Adaptations

The task can be done seated, standing, or from a wheelchair. Materials can be made larger, lighter, softer, or easier to grip depending on the group. Participants can contribute in different ways, such as stacking, passing objects, suggesting ideas, checking stability, or helping organise the materials. The goal can also be simplified, for example building only three levels or working together on one shared structure.

Why it works

This activity supports collaboration and communication without relying heavily on verbal skill or physical speed. It gives participants a shared goal while allowing different roles and ways of contributing. Because it combines planning, action, and adjustment, it can also strengthen patience, flexibility, and a sense of achievement within the group.

Partner and Group Acrobatics

Objectives and Benefits

Group acrobatics, sometimes called acrobalance, is a circus discipline based on cooperation between two or more people. Participants use their bodies to create balances, counterbalances, supports, and simple pyramids. Some positions are static, while others involve movement, transitions, or shared weight. Unlike individual circus techniques, group acrobatics depends on collaboration, communication, trust, attention, and shared responsibility.

In an inclusive youth work context, its value goes far beyond learning a figure. Its main objectives include developing body awareness, cooperation, communication, confidence, and respect for boundaries. Because participants work in direct relation to one another, they learn not only how to control their own body, but also how to adjust, support, wait, and respond to others.

One important objective is the development of physical awareness and control. Participants learn how to place their hands, feet, knees, hips, and weight in a stable and safe way. Even simple positions require attention to posture, balance, alignment, and controlled movement. Group acrobatics also develops sensitivity to weight, timing, and contact. Participants learn to notice whether a partner is ready, how much pressure to give, and when to move together.

Group acrobatics is also especially valuable for social learning. A balance only works if participants cooperate. They must listen, agree on roles, and act together. This makes the discipline a concrete way to explore teamwork and shared responsibility. Participants quickly understand that each person's role matters to the stability of the whole group.

Trust is another central objective. Participants often need to rely on one another physically, whether by leaning back, supporting weight, or holding still while someone else adjusts. This trust must be built progressively and cannot be forced. For this reason, group acrobatics is also an important space for learning about boundaries, consent, and respectful physical contact. Participants practice asking, checking, refusing, and respecting comfort levels, which is particularly important in inclusive groups.

The discipline can also strengthen confidence and participation in mixed-ability groups. One participant may be a base, another a flyer, another a spotter, and another may help organise or guide. This flexibility allows different strengths to be recognised and valued.

Finally, group acrobatics encourages communication and collective problem-solving. Building a figure together often means adapting, testing, and finding solutions as a group. Its value lies not in creating the highest pyramid, but in the process of cooperating, building trust, respecting limits, and discovering that different people can create something together.

Intro to Acrobalance Session

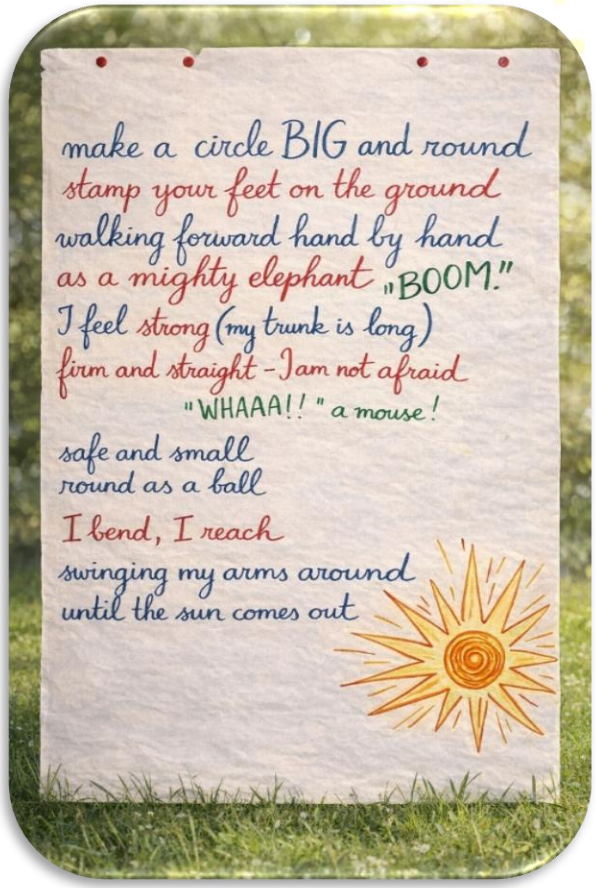
Warm-up and Group Preparation

Always begin with a warm-up. In group acrobatics, this is important not only to prepare the body, but also to prepare the group to listen, move together, and work safely with others.

The warm-up can be organised in different ways: a movement game across the space, a circle in which each participant shows one warm-up movement, or a guided sequence led by the facilitator. Include simple actions such as walking, stopping, stretching, bending, shaking, reaching, and activating different body parts. Depending on the age and needs of the group, songs, rhymes, and repetitive movement patterns can be especially useful, as they create structure, attention, and enjoyment.

The warm-up should stay open and adaptable so that all participants can join in at their own level. The goal is to help everyone become active, focused, and ready to cooperate.

Here is an example of a warm-up rhyme that you can use:



BEFORE STARTING WITH ACROBALANCE : ESTABLISH SAFETY RULES

Before beginning any acrobalance activity, take time to prepare both the group and the space. Acrobalance is a physical discipline that involves weight-sharing, balance, and close cooperation between participants. Like any physical activity, it carries some risk if it is not properly supervised. For this reason, safety should never be treated as an extra point at the end of the session. It must be introduced clearly from the start.

First, make sure that the practice space is suitable. The area should be large enough for the size of the group, with enough room between pairs or small groups so that participants do not interfere with one another. Mats should always be placed on the floor, and the environment should feel calm, organised, and well supervised. It is also important to keep the group size manageable and, where needed, ensure that enough accompanying adults or support persons are present.

Before starting, ask all participants to remove jewellery, watches, and any other objects that could cause discomfort or injury. Long hair should be tied back. Clothing should allow movement and should not be too loose or slippery. These small preparations help reduce risk and make the activity more comfortable for everyone.

Just as importantly, make sure that all participants understand the safety rules before they begin. In inclusive groups, these rules may need to be explained more than once, shown visually, demonstrated physically, or repeated during the session. Safety rules should be simple, clear, and consistent. If, during the workshop, participants are not able to follow them safely, it is better to stop the activity and return to a simpler exercise or a more supported format.

As a facilitator, your role is not only to teach shapes or balances, but to create a safe and supportive structure in which participants can explore them with confidence. A well-led acrobalance session should feel calm, clear, and controlled. When safety rules are introduced early and repeated consistently, participants can relax more, trust the process, and engage more fully in the activity.

Basic safety rules for acrobalance

Adapt the activity to the group

Figures and exercises should always match the age, abilities, confidence, and needs of the participants. Do not rush toward more complex balances. Each figure should be approached through simpler exercises that prepare for the next level. Do not move on until the group is stable, comfortable, and ready.

Always use a spotter

Whenever participants are trying a balance, there should always be a spotter nearby, ready to support or catch in case of a loss of balance. This is essential. The spotter does not always need to be the facilitator, but whoever takes this role must stay fully focused. No joking, distracting others, or looking away. If a participant cannot take the role seriously, choose someone else or stop the activity.

Establish clear communication

Participants need simple and shared verbal signals. If the base says “down,” everyone must come down immediately. Everyone should know that listening and responding quickly is part of keeping each other safe.

Say clearly if balance is being lost

If a participant feels they are falling or losing control, they should warn the others immediately in a loud and clear voice, by saying, “I’m falling.” This helps the group and the spotter react quickly and safely.

Check that body contact is comfortable

When stepping, leaning, or placing weight on another person, participants should always check whether the position is comfortable and adjust if needed. The goal is to work with stable and safe contact, not painful contact. It is useful to explain that effort and muscle work may feel demanding, but sharp pain should never be ignored.

Never put weight on the spine

Participants should never stand on another person’s spine or place pressure on the back. Weight should only be placed in safe and appropriate areas, such as the pelvis, upper legs, shoulders depending on the figure being taught.

Come down in reverse order

At the end of a figure, participants should come down slowly and in the reverse order from the one used to build it. The top person comes down first, then the middle level if there is one, and finally the base. This should always be done with control, never by jumping or collapsing out of the shape.

ACROBALANCE EXERCISES

Feeling Each Other's Weight

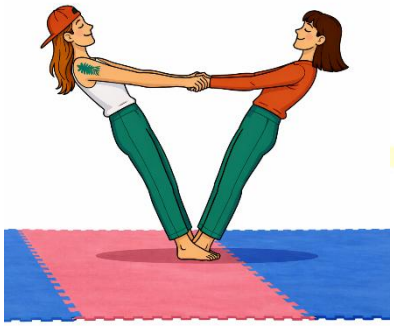
This exercise introduces participants to one of the key foundations of group acrobatics: sensing, giving, and receiving weight. In pairs, participants explore shared weight and support through simple seated positions.

First, sitting back-to-back, they gently push into one another and notice pressure, balance, and stability.

Then, in the same position, one person gradually relaxes more of their weight into the other, while their partner supports them.

They then switch roles.

A further variation can be done in a simple V-shape position, as shown in the image. Participants stand facing one another with their feet close together and hold each other's wrists. From there, they gradually straighten their arms and lean back at the same time until their bodies form a clear V shape. The position should be built slowly, with both partners staying attentive to balance, tension, and mutual support.



To make the transition easier and safer, partners can agree on a simple signal before starting. For example, the person whose hands are lower can give a small tap with the finger on the other person's wrist to indicate when to begin leaning. This helps both participants move together and reinforces the importance of communication, timing, and shared attention.

This exercise helps participants experience trust, body awareness, physical communication, and the difference between supporting and being supported. It can be followed by a short reflection on what felt easier, what required trust, and how the different roles were experienced.

Next level: Countering a Partner's Weight

In this variation, one person stands in a chosen position while their partner gently places their hands on the body and gradually applies light pressure. The standing participant responds by adjusting their posture and countering the weight to stay stable. Partners then switch roles and can try the exercise again in different positions.

This exercise develops balance, body awareness, postural control, and physical communication. It is also a good moment to talk about consent, expressing discomfort, and taking care of a partner. The aim is not strength, but safe and attentive cooperation.

Different roles in acrobalance

In acrobalance, three main roles are commonly used: the base, the flyer, and the spotter**.**

The base is the person on the ground who provides support and stability.
The flyer is the person who is supported above or on top of the base.
The spotter is the person who helps keep the movement safe by staying close, attentive, and ready to assist if balance is lost. The role of the spotter is extremely important and should always be taken seriously. A spotter should stand in a stable position, with one foot slightly in front of the other, hands ready, eyes focused on the flyer, and full attention on the movement at all times.

Preparing to be a base : table position

One of the main goals of a first acrobalance session is to teach participants, whenever physically possible, how to build a strong and stable table position, which is one of the most common foundations for beginner pyramids and balances.

In this position, the participant is on the floor on hands and knees, with the hands placed directly under the shoulders and the knees under the hips. The arms remain straight, the back is flat and strong, and the head stays in line with the spine, with the gaze slightly downward. The body should feel active and stable, with enough engagement to prevent the back from collapsing or rounding.

The table position creates a wide and low base of support, which makes it especially useful for beginners, youth groups, and inclusive practice. It allows a partner or flyer to place hands, knees, or part of their weight on the base in a secure and gradual way. It can be used for simple static balances as well as for learning how to enter and leave pyramids safely.

FACILITATORS GUIDE

Begin by showing the group what a correct table position looks like. Then show one or two incorrect versions: hands forwards, arched or raised back…

Invite participants to notice what needs to be corrected. This helps them understand the position actively rather than only copying it.

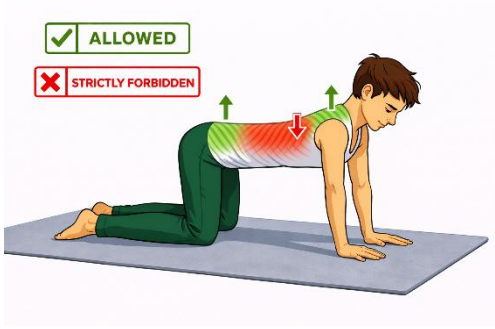
Next, ask all participants to try the position themselves while the facilitator moves around the space, giving individual corrections and helping each person find more stability.

Then, participants can work in pairs. One person takes the table position while the other places one hand on the shoulder and the other on the hip, and gradually applies light pressure. The participant in the table position can then slightly change the placement of the hands or knees and notice how stability changes. This helps them explore how body alignment affects strength and balance.

In another pair exercise, one participant takes the base position while the other gently lies across the base and relaxes part of their weight. This allows both partners to explore support, trust, and the feeling of carrying weight in a controlled and gradual way.

IMPORTANT!

Positioning of the flyer on the base: The flyer should NEVER stand on the spine of the base. We only stand on top of the hips of the base and between the shoulder blades. We stand on the base slowly, checking if the base is feeling alright and go down from the base slowly, we never jump.



PYRAMIDS

Once participants understand the basic rules, are properly warmed up, and can hold a stable base position, the group can begin exploring simple acrobalance positions and pyramids. At this stage, safety remains essential. Every time there is a possibility of falling, there should be enough spotters in place to protect the flyer and support the movement.

Below are seven positions/pyramids that can be explored with the group. They are presented in a progression from easier to more challenging. As always, the pace of progression should depend on the confidence, physical abilities, coordination, and needs of the participants. The aim is not to move quickly to harder figures, but to build stability, trust, and success step by step.

THE SAIL

THE SURFER

The **base** begins in a stable **table position**.

The **flyer** then steps carefully onto the base, placing **one foot on the pelvis** and **the other foot between the shoulder blades**.

A **spotter** must stay present at all times, standing close and holding the flyer at the **hips** to support balance and safety.

To come out of the pyramid, the flyer should **step down carefully, never jump!**

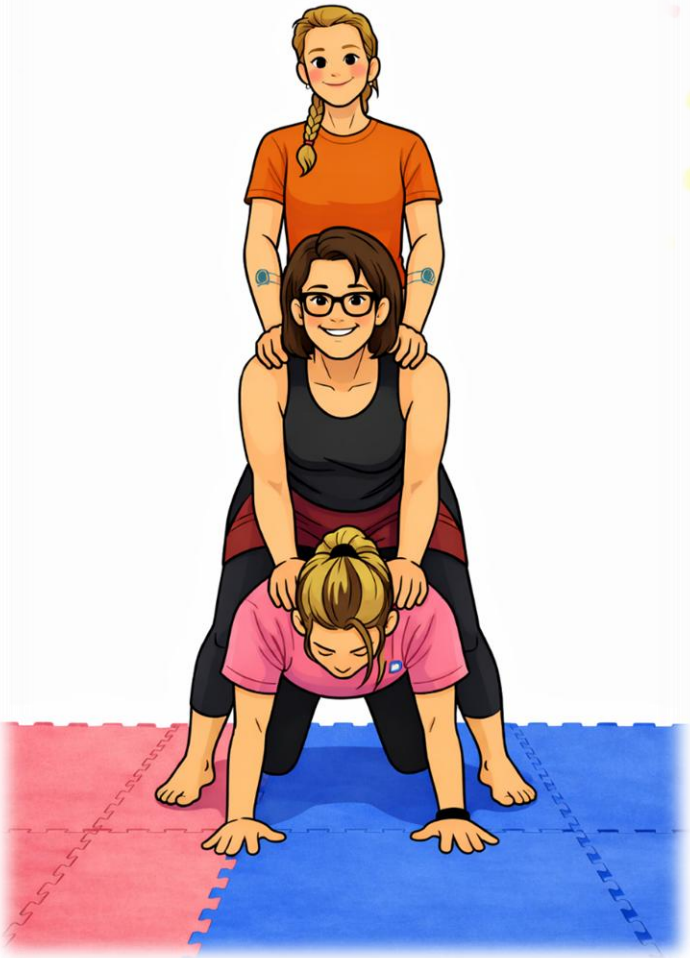
SIMPLE THREE-PERSON PYRAMID

One participant begins in a stable **table position**.

The second participant steps over the base and places their **hands on the base's shoulders**.

The third participant then climbs up, placing their feet on the **pelvis of the base** and holding the **shoulders of the middle participant** for support.

To come out of the pyramid, participants come down **slowly and in the reverse order** of the assembly.



THE FLAG

One participant begins in a stable **table position**.

The second participant leans onto the base for support.

The **flyer** then steps carefully onto the **knees of the middle participant**.

Both participants gradually **lean back** and work together to find a shared **balance point** between them.

If the position becomes stable, the **base** can carefully move away, allowing the pair to remain balanced on their own.

To come out of the position, both participants return upright together and the flyer steps down slowly, **without jumping**.

THE FLOWER

Two participants begin in a **stable seated** position on the floor, face to face, with some space between them.

Two participants position themselves **on the knees** of the first two people, creating a strong, grounded base with their bodies.

The flyer **stands up** between them, placing one foot on each base's thigh

The bases place their hands on the standing participant's legs, above the knees to provide stability.

Everyone maintains steady body tension and communicates to keep the position stable.

To come out of the position, the standing participant carefully steps down one foot at a time, while the bases continue to support until everyone is safely back on the floor.

THE TUNNEL

One participant begins in a stable **kneeling position**.

The second participant **stands** on the base's legs.

The base places both hands firmly on the flyer's legs, **above their knees**, to provide support and stability.

Once the flyer is steady, they raise their arms and **connect hands** with the flyer of the next pair.

All pairs gradually **find balance** together, while the bases remain grounded and attentive throughout the position.

To come out of the position, the flyers **release hands** and **step down slowly**, while the bases continue supporting them until both participants are safely back on the floor.

THE ROOF

Two participants begin in a stable **table position**, facing each other and leaving space for 2 people between them.

The **middle participants** each place their hand onto the bases' shoulders on each side and lean their weight carefully to create two strong support points.

Two **flyers** then climb up on the base. They place their hand on the shoulders of the middle participant and both foot on the **pelvis** of the bases.

Another **flyer** then climbs up on top, place one foot on the **pelvis** of each middle participants and slowly stand up.

All participants work together to find balance and **spotters** remain close, ready to assist at any moment.

To come out of the position, the top flyer **steps down carefully**, followed by the middle participants, while the bases remain stable until everyone is safely back on the ground.

Cool Down and Reflection

At the end of the acrobatics workshop, it is important to create a calm and gentle transition out of the activity. After working with balance, support, contact, and concentration, participants need a moment to slow down, release tension, and let their bodies settle. The cool down can include a few gentle stretches for the back, shoulders, legs, wrists, and neck, together with slower breathing or simple calming movements.

This is also a valuable moment to reflect together on the experience. Facilitators can invite participants to share how they felt during the activities: What felt easy or difficult? What was surprising? When did they feel safe, stable, or unsure? What helped them trust themselves or others? The discussion does not need to be long or formal. What matters is giving participants space to notice what they experienced and to leave the session feeling heard.

Ending in this way helps bring a sense of completion to the workshop. It reminds participants that acrobatics is not only about making positions, but also about trust, cooperation, effort, communication, and shared learning.

As a final playful moment, you can introduce a simple closing game such as the "Human Conveyor Belt." Participants lie side by side, close together on the floor. One person lies on top of the group, and the others gently start rolling on one side all together to transport the person from one end to the other. The movement should stay slow, coordinated, and careful, with clear communication. This activity brings a sense of group connection, trust, and shared rhythm, while ending the session in a light and enjoyable way.

Adapting Acrobalance for Different Needs

Acrobalance can be adapted in many ways so that participants with different needs can take part safely and meaningfully. This requires facilitators to be creative, flexible, and attentive. In inclusive practice, creativity is not an extra: it is essential. The aim is not to simplify the activity, but to find different ways for participants to experience balance, support, trust, cooperation, and shared movement. Sometimes this means changing the position, the level, the role, the way instructions are given, or the pace of the activity. With thoughtful adaptation, acrobalance can become accessible to a wide range of bodies, abilities, and ways of participating.

For physical disabilities or mobility impairments

When adapting acrobalance for participants with physical disabilities or mobility impairments, the starting point is to move away from a single idea of what a "correct" position looks like. Acrobalance does not have to be vertical or based on standing. It can happen close to the ground, seated, or with the support of equipment.

One of the first adaptations is to rethink the roles. A base does not need to be on hands and knees. It can be seated, supported, or use a chair or wheelchair with brakes secured. In the same way, a flyer does not always need to stand. Weight sharing can happen through leaning, pushing, or connecting different parts of the body.

It can also be helpful to focus on horizontal structures and low-level positions. Working on the floor reduces the risk of falling and allows participants to explore contact, balance, and cooperation in a safer way. Simple actions such as leaning into a partner, sharing weight through the arms, or creating shapes together can already offer a rich acrobalance experience.

Roles can remain flexible. Participants can take part as supporters, stabilisers, spotters, or coordinators, not only as base or flyer. Mats, blocks, or chairs can also help adjust height, reduce effort, and create intermediate steps between positions.

The aim is not to reproduce a fixed form, but to create a shared experience of support, trust, and cooperation that works for each participant.

For limb difference or reduced strength

When working with participants with limb difference or reduced strength, it is helpful to move away from the idea that all bodies need to move or support weight in the same way. Acrobalance can adapt to different body structures by exploring alternative contact points, positions, and roles.

One important adaptation is to rethink how weight is shared. Instead of relying on strength alone, the focus can shift to alignment, positioning, and communication. Small adjustments in placement can make a big difference in stability and comfort.

It is also useful to explore different ways of making contact. Participants might use forearms, shoulders, back, or other parts of the body instead of hands, depending on what is available and comfortable. The aim is to find connections that feel secure and allow both partners to stay engaged without strain.

Reducing load and working progressively is key. This can mean starting with light pressure, partial weight sharing, or supported positions, and only increasing intensity when appropriate. In many cases, acrobalance can remain meaningful without full weight transfer.

In this way, the activity becomes less about strength and more about cooperation, adaptation, and shared problem-solving.

For hearing impairment

When working with participants with hearing impairment, the main focus is on how information is shared and how communication happens within the group. Acrobalance already relies strongly on visual cues and physical connection, which can make it very accessible when communication is adapted thoughtfully.

Clear visual demonstration becomes essential. Showing the movement is often more effective than explaining it. It can help to repeat demonstrations, break them into steps, and make sure everyone has a clear view before starting.

Facilitators can also use simple gestures or visual signals to indicate key moments such as starting, stopping, or changing roles. Agreeing on these signals with the group helps create a shared understanding and reduces confusion during the activity.

Positioning in space matters. Participants should be able to see each other easily, especially their partners and the facilitator. Communication through touch and movement can also be encouraged, as partners naturally develop ways of signalling readiness, pressure, or adjustment through physical contact.

With these adaptations, participants can fully take part through visual attention, physical awareness, and shared movement.

For intellectual disabilities

When working with participants with intellectual disabilities, it is important to create a structure that is clear, predictable, and easy to follow. Acrobalance can remain rich and engaging, as long as the way it is introduced and guided supports understanding.

Instructions should be simple, concrete, and given step by step. It is often more effective to show rather than explain, and to repeat demonstrations when needed. Breaking down a position into small actions helps participants understand what to do and feel more confident.

Repetition and routine can also be very helpful. Using similar structures across the session creates a sense of familiarity and safety. It is often useful to focus on one element at a time: first exploring the position of the hands, then adding weight, then adding a partner.

Clear and positive feedback helps participants recognise what they are doing well and stay engaged. Some may also need more time to observe, try, and repeat. Acrobalance can then become a space where participants learn through doing, repeating, and experiencing at their own rhythm.

For visual impairment

When working with participants with visual impairment, the focus shifts to how the activity is experienced through touch, space, and clear guidance. Acrobalance can be very accessible, as it naturally involves physical contact and shared movement.

Clear verbal guidance is essential. Instructions should describe not only what to do, but also where the body is in space and how to position it. Using precise and consistent language helps participants build a clear understanding of the movement.

Touch can be a powerful support. Participants can be invited to explore positions physically, for example by feeling a posture on a partner or with guided assistance from the facilitator. This helps translate the movement into a concrete experience.

It is also important to create a structured and predictable space. Keeping the room organised, with clear boundaries and stable positions, allows participants to move with more confidence. Working slowly and maintaining contact with a partner during transitions can provide additional orientation and reassurance.

This makes acrobalance an activity grounded in touch, connection, and spatial awareness.

For autism spectrum

When working with participants on the autism spectrum, it is important to create a setting that feels predictable, clear, and manageable. Acrobalance involves contact, coordination, and group interaction, which can be very positive, but may also require careful introduction.

Structure is key. Having a clear sequence of the session, with visible or explained steps, helps participants understand what is coming next. Keeping routines consistent can reduce uncertainty and support engagement.

It can also be helpful to allow time for observation before participation. Some participants may prefer to watch first, understand the activity, and then join when they feel ready. This should be seen as a valid way of taking part.

Attention to the sensory environment is also important. Noise, light, and the number of people moving at the same time can affect concentration and comfort. Physical contact should always be approached with care, with choice, consent, and respect for boundaries.

With these adaptations, acrobalance can become a space where participants feel safe, respected, and able to engage at their own pace.

For psychosocial or mental health challenges

When working with participants experiencing psychosocial or mental health challenges, the priority is to create a space that feels safe, supportive, and non-judgmental. Acrobalance can be a powerful activity for building trust and connection, but it should always be introduced progressively and without pressure.

It is important to offer choice and flexibility in participation. Participants should feel free to engage at their own level, take breaks, or choose different roles such as observer, spotter, or supporter. Participation should never feel forced.

Building trust takes time. Starting with simple, low-risk activities such as gentle contact, mirroring, or small weight-sharing exercises can help participants feel more comfortable before moving to more demanding positions.

The emotional side of the activity should also be acknowledged. Working with balance and physical contact can bring up feelings such as uncertainty, fear, or vulnerability. Facilitators can support this by encouraging open communication and normalising these experiences.

The focus should remain on cooperation, mutual support, and shared experience rather than performance or achievement. In this way, acrobalance becomes not only a physical activity, but also a space for connection, trust-building, and emotional safety.

Adapted Juggling

Objectives and Benefits

Adapted juggling offers a wide range of benefits that go far beyond learning a technical skill. In an inclusive youth work context, its main objective is not to master complex patterns, but to create a space where participants can explore movement, coordination, rhythm, and success at their own pace.

One important objective is the development of coordination and motor skills. Through throwing, catching, rolling, or passing objects, participants work on hand-eye coordination, timing, and control. Using adapted equipment such as scarves, larger balls, or slower-moving objects allows participants to engage with these skills in an accessible and progressive way.

Adapted juggling also supports attention and concentration. Following the movement of an object, anticipating its trajectory, and reacting at the right moment helps participants develop focus. The repetitive and rhythmic nature of juggling can make this process engaging and easier to sustain over time.

Another key objective is to build confidence and a sense of achievement. Juggling can be broken down into small, achievable steps, where each success—catching once, repeating a movement, controlling an object—has value. This makes it particularly suitable for participants who may need more time or different approaches to experience success.

The discipline also encourages exploration and creativity. There is no single "correct" way to juggle. Participants can invent their own ways of moving objects, combining actions, or working with different parts of the body. This flexibility allows each person to find their own entry point into the activity.

Adapted juggling can also support emotional regulation. The rhythm and repetition of movement can have a calming effect, helping participants manage stress, frustration, or agitation. At the same time, it provides a safe space to experience challenge, make mistakes, and try again.

From a social perspective, juggling can be practiced individually, in pairs, or in groups. Passing objects, synchronising movements, or creating small group sequences helps develop communication, cooperation, and shared attention. It allows participants to connect with others without relying only on verbal interaction.

Finally, adapted juggling promotes inclusion and participation. Because it can be easily modified in terms of speed, difficulty, equipment, and expectations, it allows participants with different abilities to take part together. Each person can engage at their own level while still being part of the group experience.

For facilitators, the main objective is not to teach juggling as a performance skill, but to use it as a tool for learning, expression, and connection.

Adapted Juggling Exercises

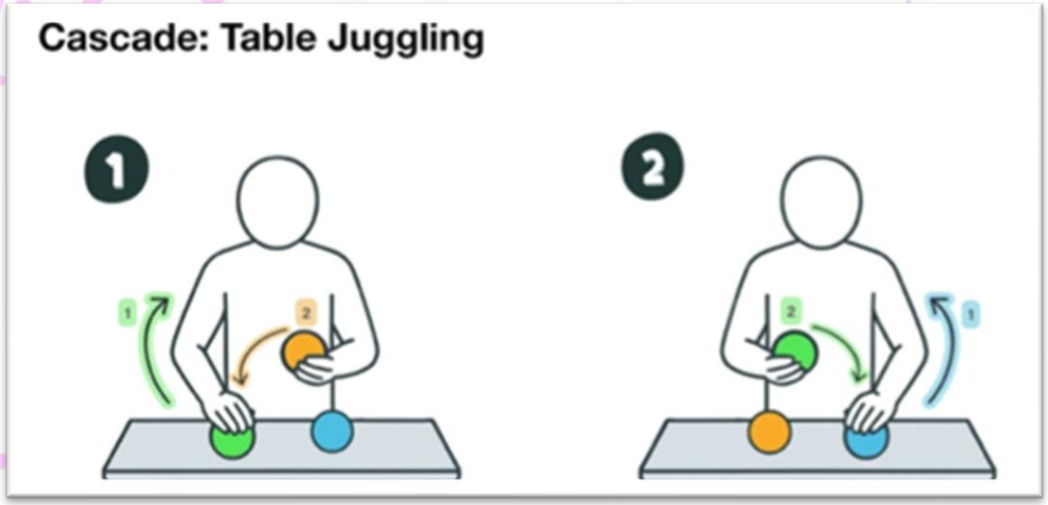


Image credit: Craig Quat (Quat Props)

Participants stand or sit in front of a table with three objects (e.g. balls or beanbags) placed in front of them.

Alternatively, they pick up one ball from the table with one hand and replace it with another ball with the other hand.

Focus on keeping the motion **smooth and regular**, with both hands working in turn, rather than focusing on speed.

This exercise helps develop **coordination, timing, and rhythm**, while reducing difficulty compared to air juggling.

You can also do this exercise using 2 rings on the floor :

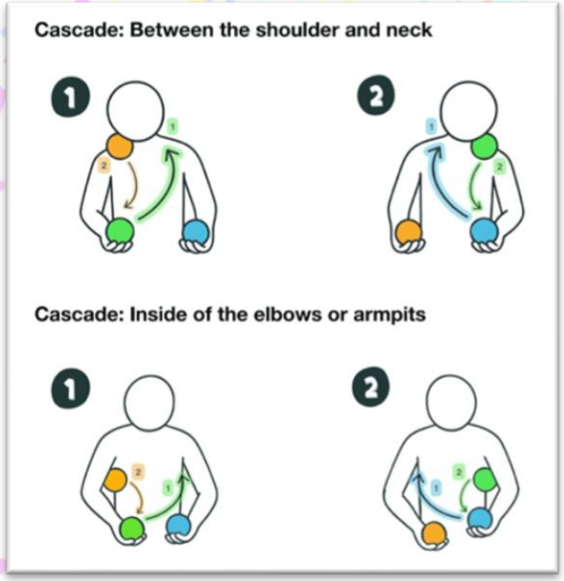


Image credit: Craig Quat (Quat Props)

Participants work with three objects (e.g. balls or beanbags).

Alternatively, they place one ball on one side of their neck with the opposite hand and block it by leaning their head.

Then, they place another ball on the other side of their neck and block it too. They catch the falling first ball.

And so on.

Focus on keeping the motion **smooth and regular**, with both hands working in turn, rather than focusing on speed.

This exercise helps develop **coordination, timing, and rhythm**, while reducing difficulty compared to air juggling.

Participants work **in pairs with three balls** shared between them.

Alternatively, **send one ball to the empty hand** of the partner. The ball can be placed, rolled, or tossed.

One person always **passes straight across**, while the other always **passes crosswise**.

The focus is on timing, attention, and keeping the exchange smooth rather than fast.

This exercise develops coordination, tracking, reaction, and partner awareness, while introducing the basic logic of passing patterns in a clear and adaptable way.

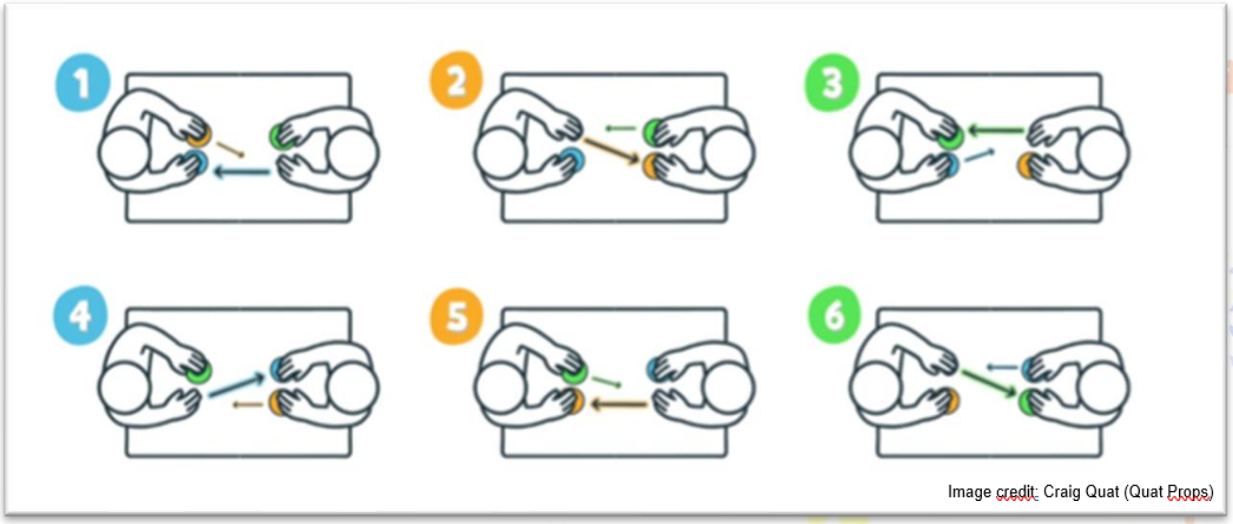
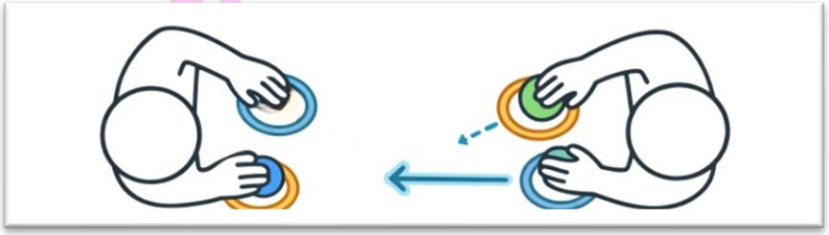


Image credit: Craig Quat (Quat Props)

This exercise can also be done **sitting on the floor**, using four **rings** placed between the two participants. Each person has two rings in front of them, representing the positions of their hands. The rings help to visualise where each ball should go and make the empty space easier to identify.



Instead of passing directly hand to hand, participants can **place or roll the balls into the rings**, always aiming for the ring that is empty. This version slows down the action, supports understanding of the pattern, and makes the exercise more accessible for beginners or participants who need clearer visual structure.

Participants work **in pairs facing each other**, sharing **three balls**.

At the beginning, one person holds one ball, the other two.

To start, the person holding two balls send one to their partner's empty hand. Then the second person also send one ball to their partner's empty hand, and so on.

The ball can be **placed or tossed**.

One person always passes **straight across**, while the other always passes **crosswise**.

The focus is on rhythm, anticipation, and cooperation rather than speed. This exercise develops coordination, bilateral movement, and partner awareness, while introducing the foundations of passing patterns in a clear and engaging way.

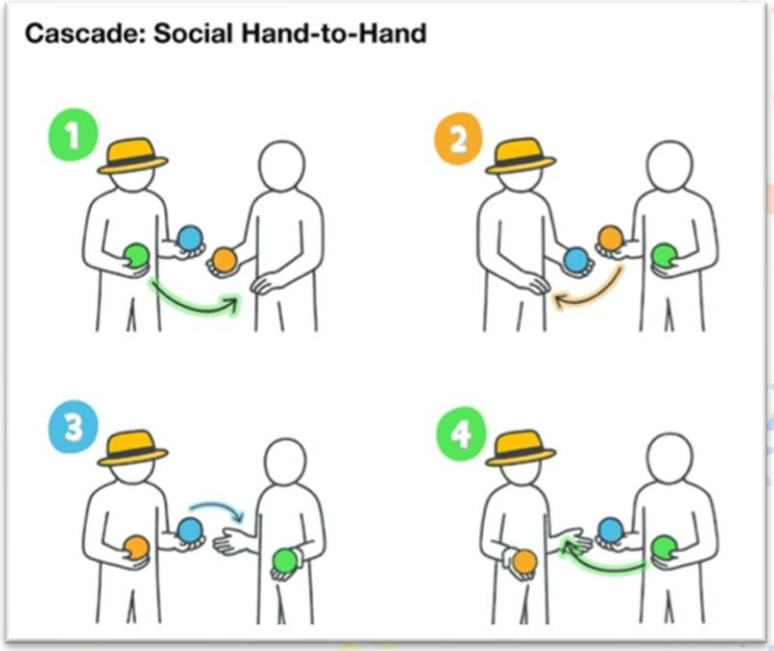


Image credit: Craig Quat (Quat Props)

Shadow Juggling:

Catch and place the balls for them so they can focus on the rhythm

Image credit: Craig Quat (Quat Props)

Participants work in **pairs**, **standing one behind the other**.

The person in front focuses on the juggling movement, while the person behind supports by catching and placing the balls into their partner's hands.

The front participant tosses the first ball across in the air and the back participant catches it.

The back participant then places one ball in the empty hand of the front participant.

And so on.

The focus is on feeling the rhythm and timing of the pattern, without the pressure of catching. This allows participants to build coordination, confidence, and understanding of the movement sequence in a supported way. It also encourages cooperation and trust between partners.

Two-Person Juggling:

Standing side by side each person juggles one half of the pattern.

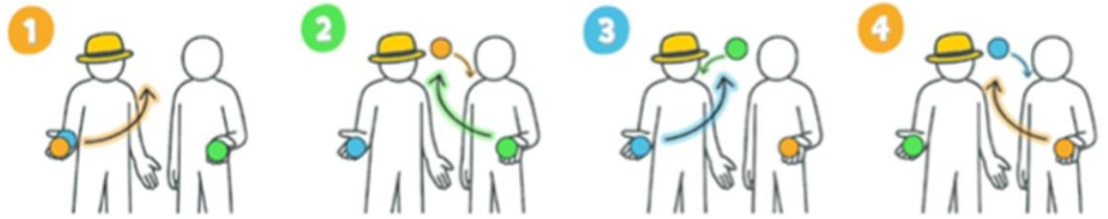


Image credit: Craig Quat (Quat Props)

Participants stand **side by side**. One holds **two balls in one hand**, the other **one ball**.

The person with two ball start by tossing the first ball across.

When the first ball is about to fall back down, the second participant **toss** his ball across and **catch** the first one that is coming.

Timing and coordination are essential.

The focus is on synchronisation, rhythm, and cooperation rather than individual performance. This exercise helps develop awareness of shared patterns, improves passing accuracy, and allows participants to experience juggling with reduced individual complexity.

Adapting juggling for Different Needs

Juggling can be adapted in many ways so that participants with different needs can take part safely and meaningfully. This requires facilitators to be attentive, flexible, and ready to adjust both the activity and the way it is introduced. The aim is not to simplify juggling into something less valuable, but to find different ways for participants to explore rhythm, coordination, attention, and shared movement.

Adaptation can involve changing the number of objects, the height of the throws, the position of the body, the use of space, or the roles within the activity. It can also mean shifting from throwing to placing or rolling, or from individual practice to partner or group work. With thoughtful adaptation, juggling becomes accessible to a wide range of bodies, abilities, and ways of learning.

For physical disabilities or mobility impairments

Juggling does not need to happen standing or in the air. It can be done seated, on the floor, or with the support of a chair or wheelchair. Ground-based approaches, such as placing or rolling objects between hands or into hoops, can make the activity more stable and accessible.

The height and amplitude of the movement can be reduced, focusing on small and controlled actions rather than large throws. Using surfaces such as tables or the floor can also support the movement and reduce physical demand.

Partner work can be especially helpful. One participant can take a more active role in moving the objects, while the other supports the rhythm or receives and returns objects in a way that suits their capacity. The aim is to keep the logic of the pattern while adapting how it is physically performed.

For limb difference or reduced strength

Juggling can be adapted by exploring different ways of holding, releasing, and receiving objects. Participants do not need to use both hands equally or follow a fixed technique. They can work with one hand, use the body, or involve surfaces to support the movement.

Lightweight and slow-moving objects such as scarves or soft balls can reduce effort and give more time to react. The focus can shift from continuous juggling to sequences of actions, such as placing, catching, and resetting.

Patterns can also be simplified or shared with a partner, allowing participants to engage in the rhythm without needing to manage all elements alone. This makes the activity less dependent on strength and more based on timing and coordination.

For hearing impairment

Juggling relies strongly on visual rhythm and movement, which makes it naturally accessible when communication is adapted. Demonstration is key. Showing the pattern clearly, and repeating it if needed, helps participants understand without relying on verbal explanation.

Visual cues can be used to support timing, such as gestures to indicate when to start or stop. Working in pairs or small groups also allows participants to follow each other's movements and build a shared rhythm.

Positioning is important. Participants should be able to clearly see the facilitator and their partners. With these adaptations, juggling becomes a visually structured and accessible activity.

For visual impairment

Juggling can be adapted to rely more on touch, rhythm, and spatial awareness. Verbal instructions should clearly describe where the hands are, how the movement happens, and where the object is going.

Participants can explore movements physically, for example by feeling the position of the hands or practicing guided motions with a partner or facilitator. Sound can also support orientation, using objects that make noise or verbal cues during the activity.

Working with shorter distances, slower rhythms, and consistent patterns helps create a stable and understandable structure. Partner exercises are particularly useful, as they provide continuous feedback through interaction.

For intellectual disabilities

Clarity and structure are essential. Instructions should be simple, concrete, and given step by step. It is often more effective to show the movement than to explain it, and to repeat demonstrations when needed.

Breaking down juggling into smaller actions helps participants understand the sequence. For example, starting with one ball, then two, or working with placing before throwing. Using tools such as hoops on the ground can help visualise where objects should go.

Repetition and routine support learning. Keeping a consistent rhythm and structure allows participants to build confidence and recognise the pattern over time. The focus should remain on success, participation, and enjoyment rather than technical precision.

For autism spectrum

Predictability and structure are important. A clear sequence of the activity, with repeated patterns and consistent rhythm, helps participants understand and feel comfortable.

It can be helpful to start with individual exploration before moving to partner work. Some participants may prefer to observe first and join when they feel ready. This should be respected as a valid way of engaging.

The sensory environment should be considered. Using soft objects, reducing noise, and limiting the number of simultaneous actions can support concentration. Clear rules, stable patterns, and optional participation in contact-based exercises help create a safe and manageable experience.

For psychosocial or mental health challenges

Juggling activities should be introduced in a way that feels safe and without pressure. Starting with simple, low-risk exercises allows participants to build confidence gradually.

Participants should have choice in how they take part. They may engage actively, work with a partner, or take on a supporting role. The focus should be on participation and experience rather than performance.

Rhythmic and repetitive movements can support focus and regulation. At the same time, facilitators should remain attentive to signs of frustration or overload, and allow space for breaks or adjustments.

In this context, juggling becomes not only a coordination activity, but also a way to build confidence, concentration, and a sense of shared rhythm with others.

These are only a few exercises suggestion. For more, go get QuatProps books “Juggling For Everyone” and “Comprehensive Juggle Board Manual” at quatprops.net

Balancing activities

Objectives and Benefits

Balance activities are not only about staying upright or controlling movement. They are a way to support physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development through playful and meaningful practice. In inclusive circus, balance becomes a medium for growth: participants learn to organise their bodies in space, manage uncertainty, build confidence, and engage with others in a focused and cooperative way.

One important objective of balance work is the development of proprioception and body awareness. Through activities such as *Jungle Fanfare* or *Rope Laying*, participants learn to better sense where their body is in space, how weight is distributed, and how posture can be adjusted. These exercises help strengthen awareness of alignment, centre of gravity, and controlled movement.

Balance activities also support cognitive integration. For many participants, especially those who benefit from concrete or imaginative approaches, using animals, stories, or images can make movement easier to understand. Invitations such as walking like a giraffe or standing like a penguin help connect abstract instructions to a clear physical action. In this way, imagery becomes a bridge between thinking and doing.

Another key benefit is emotional regulation. Balance often involves challenge, hesitation, and the possibility of losing control. Exercises such as the *Octopus* or the *Frog* can help participants move through the cycle of fear, attempt, adjustment, and success. This supports patience, resilience, and the ability to stay engaged even when something feels difficult or unfamiliar.

Balance work can also strengthen social skills and trust. Many activities involve spotting or support from another person. This creates opportunities for non-verbal communication, shared attention, and cooperation. Participants learn not only to balance themselves, but also to rely on others and to offer support in return.

Finally, balance activities contribute to both fine motor and gross motor development. Tasks that combine stability with another action, such as standing on one leg while picking up or placing an object, encourage coordination, concentration, and multitasking. This helps participants develop more precise control while staying connected to the whole body and the surrounding space.

Basic safety rules for balancing activities

Physical spotting

For activities such as the **Rola Bola** or the **Globe**, spotters should stay close enough to prevent falls without taking over the movement. Support should be given at the **shoulders** or **hips**, never by pulling the arms. This helps participants find their own centre of balance while staying safe.

Emotional spotting

Facilitators should also pay attention to signs of **anxiety**, **hesitation**, or disengagement. In balance activities, waiting time can sometimes increase stress. If a participant becomes uneasy during a pause, it can help to keep them engaged through encouragement, presence, or a small task.

Clear boundaries

Participants should know exactly when an exercise **starts** and **ends**. Using a simple and consistent signal, such as a **countdown** like *3–2–1–stop*, helps the whole group finish safely and together.

Equipment check

Before starting, make sure the **floor is clear** of any unnecessary objects, especially around balancing equipment. Participants need enough safe space to get on and off the equipment without obstacles.

Flooring and environment

Always consider the type of **flooring** and whether it matches the activity. On a **hard floor**, for example, strong stamping actions such as walking like an elephant may not be appropriate. Exercises should be adapted to the space and surface to reduce impact and discomfort.

Activities / Exercises (Jungle thematics)

Jungle Fanfare

Participants move around the space while imitating different animals, each one inviting a different way of using the body. As giraffes, they stretch their hands high and walk on tiptoes. As elephants, they move with heavy steps on their heels. As monkeys, they swing their arms and walk on the outside of their feet. As penguins, they keep their arms by their sides and walk on the inside of their feet.

Once participants are familiar with each animal, the facilitator can introduce a mixed sequence, combining two steps of each animal one after the other. This creates an extra coordination challenge and encourages quick adjustment between different movement patterns.

This warm-up develops **body awareness**, **postural control**, and **coordination** in a playful way. It also prepares participants for balance work by exploring different weight shifts, foot positions, and ways of moving through space.

Crossing the Jungle

Participants move through a small obstacle course made of **rings** and **yoga blocks**, imagined as trees and ruins in the jungle. The aim is to cross from one side to the other without touching the "ground." To do this, participants step, reach, and transfer their weight carefully from one object to the next.

The activity can be varied in different ways. For example, participants may place their **feet in the rings** and their **hands on the blocks**, or they may be asked to always keep **one hand and one foot** in contact with an object while moving. These variations encourage planning, precision, and problem-solving.

This exercise develops **balance**, **spatial awareness**, and **concentration**. It invites participants to explore stability and movement strategies while staying engaged in a playful challenge.

Rola Bola and Plank Preparations

This sequence prepares participants for balance work on unstable surfaces through a series of progressive exercises. It begins on the floor and gradually introduces weight shifts, centre finding, and controlled movement.

The first exercise focuses on **one-leg balance**. Participants stand between two rings and follow a slow **1–2–3 count**: first lifting one foot, then touching the knee, and finally stepping into the other ring. This helps develop control, rhythm, and awareness of weight transfer from one side of the body to the other.

In the next variation, participants remain on one leg while picking up a ball imagined as an apple. They pick it up, pass it from one hand to the other, and place it in a different ring. This adds an extra layer of challenge and develops coordination, stability, and attention.

The sequence then moves to **The Octopus**, where participants hold a plank position with the board balanced on a yoga block. From there, they slowly lift their feet to explore where the centre of balance is. This exercise helps them feel how small adjustments influence the whole body.

In **The Surfer**, participants balance on the plank and bend down to pick up objects while staying stable. The difficulty can be increased by adding a **second yoga block**, creating a less stable base and requiring more precision.

Together, these exercises develop **core stability**, **weight transfer**, **focus**, and **confidence**. They offer a gradual way to approach unstable equipment without rushing into more advanced balancing tasks.

Globe

This sequence introduces participants to balance activities using a **large ball**, allowing them to explore instability, support, and body control in a gradual way. The exercises can begin with simple contact and progress toward more demanding positions, depending on the confidence and ability of the group.

In the **globe basics**, participants first explore the ball by lying on their belly and trying to stay balanced without touching the ground. They can then move to sitting on the ball and gradually reduce their contact with the floor, exploring how to stay stable while letting go. For participants who are ready for a greater challenge, the progression can continue into the **frog position**, where they squat on top of the ball. This advanced variation requires strong concentration, control, and confidence.

The **group globe** introduces cooperation and shared balance. Participants can work together to block or stabilise the ball with their hands or feet, for example while lying on their backs, so that one person can carefully stand or balance on it. They can also use the ball collectively in activities such as shared push-ups, coordinating pressure and movement around the unstable surface.

These activities develop **balance**, **core strength**, **body awareness**, and **trust**. They help participants experience instability in both individual and group forms, while building confidence through progressive challenge and support.

Extra Balance Games

These games offer a playful way to continue balance practice while adding interaction and challenge. They can be used as an extension of the main session, a lighter closing activity, or a motivating variation for participants who are ready for something more dynamic.

In **Rock Paper Scissors on the Rola Bola**, participants play the familiar game while balancing on the board. This combines a physical task with quick decision-making and encourages participants to stay stable while interacting with a partner.

In **Rice Bag Tag**, participants move through the space with small bags balanced on their heads. If a bag falls, the participant freezes until another person helps place it back on their head. This adds a cooperative element, as participants must pay attention both to their own movement and to the needs of others.

These games develop **posture**, **attention**, and **coordination**, while also encouraging **peer support**, **reactivity**, and playful engagement.

If you want, I can also edit the **Objectives and Benefits** and **Safety Guidelines** in the same tighter style so the whole Balance chapter matches perfectly.

Adapting balance for Different Needs

Adapting Balance for Different Needs

Balance activities can be adapted in many ways so that participants with different needs can take part safely and meaningfully. This requires facilitators to be attentive, flexible, and ready to adjust both the task and the environment. The aim is not to simplify the activity, but to find different ways for participants to explore stability, weight shift, coordination, confidence, and movement in space.

Sometimes this means changing the position, the level of support, the speed, the surface, or the role within the activity. It can also mean moving from standing to sitting, from dynamic movement to smaller controlled actions, or from individual challenge to shared balance. With thoughtful adaptation, balance can become accessible to a wide range of bodies, abilities, and ways of participating.

For physical disabilities or mobility impairments

Balance does not have to happen standing or on unstable equipment. It can be explored seated, supported, or close to the ground. Participants can work on shifting weight, maintaining posture while reaching, or coordinating movement while sitting on a chair, wheelchair, or large ball with support.

It is helpful to focus on the principle of balance rather than on one fixed form. A participant may not stand on one leg, but they can still explore stability, controlled transfer of weight, and the relationship between movement and support. Rings, blocks, chairs, and other equipment can help create gradual challenges that fit the participant's possibilities.

Partner support can also be useful. A participant may balance with physical assistance, use a hand for support, or share a task with someone else. The aim is to make the experience of control, adjustment, and success accessible in a safe way.

For limb difference or reduced strength

When working with participants with limb difference or reduced strength, it is important to move away from the idea that balance must rely on symmetrical positions or strong muscular effort. Balance can be explored through different contact points and body organisations.

Activities can be adapted by reducing the load, shortening the duration, or allowing support from equipment or another person. The focus can shift toward alignment, timing, and efficient weight distribution rather than force. Small and supported movements can already offer a meaningful balance experience.

In this way, balance becomes less about reproducing a standard position and more about finding effective and comfortable ways of staying organised in space.

For hearing impairment

When working with participants with hearing impairment, the main focus is on how information is shared. Balance activities are often highly visual, which can make them very accessible when communication is adapted clearly.

Demonstration is essential. Showing the movement, repeating it, and breaking it into visible steps is often more effective than long verbal explanations. Facilitators can also use simple visual signals for starting, stopping, or changing exercises.

Positioning in space matters as well. Participants should be able to see the facilitator and, when relevant, the other participants. In partner or group activities, balance can also support strong non-verbal communication through observation, timing, and shared attention.

For intellectual disabilities

When working with participants with intellectual disabilities, it is important to create a structure that is clear, predictable, and easy to follow. Balance activities can remain rich and engaging, as long as the way they are introduced supports understanding.

Instructions should be simple, concrete, and given step by step. It is often more effective to show rather than explain. Breaking the activity into smaller parts can help participants understand what to do and feel more confident. Visual markers such as rings, lines, or blocks can also support understanding.

Repetition is especially helpful. Repeating the same movement in a stable format helps participants build confidence and recognise the pattern. The aim is not technical precision, but successful engagement and growing control.

For visual impairment

When working with participants with visual impairment, the focus shifts to touch, clear verbal guidance, and consistent spatial organisation. Instructions should describe not only what to do, but also where the body is in space and how the weight should shift.

Touch can be a valuable support. Participants may explore equipment with their hands before using it, feel a body position with guidance, or work with a partner to understand the direction and shape of a movement. Clear boundaries, predictable layouts, and consistent equipment placement help participants move with more confidence.

This makes balance an activity grounded in sensation, orientation, and body awareness.

For autism spectrum

When working with participants on the autism spectrum, it is important to create a setting that feels predictable, clear, and manageable. A clear sequence, repeated structure, and visible progression can reduce uncertainty and support participation.

Some participants may need time to observe before trying an activity themselves. It can also help to introduce one element at a time, rather than combining too many demands at once.

Attention to the sensory environment is also important. Unstable equipment, waiting turns, noise, or physical proximity can affect comfort and concentration. Giving clear boundaries, offering choice, and allowing different levels of participation can make balance activities feel safer and more accessible.

For psychosocial or mental health challenges

When working with participants experiencing psychosocial or mental health challenges, the priority is to create a space that feels safe, gradual, and non-judgmental. Balance can bring up hesitation, fear of failure, or frustration, so it is important to introduce challenge without pressure.

Participants should feel free to engage at their own level. Some may prefer simple floor-based exercises, supported positions, or observing first before trying. Others may need breaks, encouragement, or the option to repeat a familiar task.

When supported well, balance activities can help participants build confidence, patience, focus, and trust in their own capacity to try, adjust, and continue.

Using the DiversAbility Circus card Game

The DiversAbility Circus card Game is a pedagogical tool designed to support inclusive circus practice. Rather than focusing on a single discipline, it brings together different circus activities into a structured, game-based format that encourages participation, cooperation, and exploration.

The game is based on a system of task cards and activity stations, where participants engage with different circus disciplines such as juggling, balance, and acrobalance. Through these tasks, participants practice skills step by step and can later combine them into a shared moment or sequence. The structure helps create a clear and engaging framework, while remaining flexible and adaptable to different groups.

One of the main strengths of the game is that it supports mixed-ability groups. Activities can be selected, adapted, or simplified depending on the participants, and multiple levels of difficulty can exist at the same time. Participants can engage in different ways, whether by performing, supporting others, observing, or taking on alternative roles.

The game also encourages cooperation over competition. Participants work together towards a shared goal, which helps build group cohesion, communication, and a sense of collective achievement. The use of optional elements, such as constraint-based cards, can further support reflection, empathy, and awareness of different experiences, when used carefully and respectfully.

Facilitators can use the game in different ways: as a full session structure, as a framework for several sessions, or as a source of inspiration for specific activities. It can be particularly useful when working with groups that benefit from clear structure, variety, and playful engagement.

At the same time, the game is only one possible tool within inclusive circus practice. Activities can always be used independently of the game, and facilitators are encouraged to adapt, combine, or simplify its elements according to their context.

Games and creative expression

Objectives and Benefits

Games and creative expression are an important part of circus pedagogy. Circus today is not only about technique or mastering specific skills. It is also about play, creativity, teamwork, and growing more comfortable with oneself and with others. Through games inspired by clowning, theatre, and improvisation, participants can explore movement, emotion, and interaction in a more open and playful way. These activities help create a space where participants can try, imagine, perform, and enjoy being seen by others without the pressure of needing to be perfect.

One of the main objectives of this work is to develop spontaneity, creativity, and emotional expression. Clowning and improvisation games invite participants to respond in the moment, to play with ideas, and to express themselves through gesture, movement, facial expression, and interaction. They encourage curiosity, imagination, and the freedom to explore different ways of being.

These activities also help participants become more present and more comfortable with uncertainty. In impro and clowning, it is not always possible to prepare in advance or control what will happen next. Participants learn to react, adapt, and stay engaged with what is happening around them. This supports flexibility, attention, and confidence in responding authentically.

Another important benefit is the development of self-confidence and self-expression. Games of performance, humour, and imagination allow participants to show parts of themselves in a playful and supported way. They can experiment with being visible, taking initiative, and performing in front of others. This can help reduce self-judgment and fear of making mistakes, while building a stronger sense of ease and confidence.

Games and creative expression also support emotional well-being. By creating space for laughter, play, surprise, and emotion, they help participants release tension and experience joy. They also encourage participants to accept mistakes as part of the process, which can reduce fear of failure and support resilience.

At the social level, these activities strengthen communication, listening, empathy, and group cohesion. Many games depend on observing others, reacting to partners, sharing attention, and building something together. They help participants connect through presence and interaction, often without relying only on words.

For young people and mixed-ability groups, these activities are especially valuable because they help create an inclusive atmosphere where individuality is welcomed and differences become a source of creativity rather than limitation. In this way, games and creative expression support not only artistic exploration, but also confidence, connection, and participation.

Safety Guidelines

Games and creative expression activities are generally low-risk, but they still require attention to both **physical safety** and **emotional safety**. Because these exercises involve imagination, interaction, and sometimes performance, it is important to create a space where participants feel secure, respected, and free to express themselves.

PHYSICAL SAFETY

Ensure the space is clear of obstacles and allows for safe movement in all directions. Participants should be aware of others around them, especially during walking or movement-based games.

Encourage control rather than speed. Even in playful or competitive games, movements should remain safe and adapted to the space and the group. Physical contact should always be **optional**, clearly introduced, and respectful.

Facilitators should remain attentive to fatigue, balance, or coordination difficulties, and adapt the intensity or duration of activities when needed.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Creative and expressive activities can make participants feel visible and sometimes vulnerable. It is important to establish a climate where **mistakes are accepted**, **no one is judged**, and participation is never forced.

Participants should always have the option to **observe**, **adapt**, or **step out** of an activity. Encouragement should focus on participation and effort rather than performance or "being funny" or "being good."

Humour and play should never target or exclude anyone. Facilitators should be attentive to group dynamics and intervene if necessary to maintain a respectful atmosphere.

GROUP AWARENESS AND FACILITATION

Facilitators should continuously observe the group's energy, engagement, and comfort level. Some participants may need more time, support, or reassurance, while others may seek more challenge.

Balancing energy is important: alternating between active and calmer moments can help maintain attention and avoid overload.

Facilitators should also model the behaviour they expect: openness, respect, playfulness, and acceptance. This helps create a safe environment where participants feel confident to explore and express themselves.

Activities / Exercises

Name and Bust a Move

Participants stand in a circle. One by one, each person says their name and shows a movement. The rest of the group repeats both the name and the movement together.

This activity helps participants learn each other's names while starting to move, observe, and express themselves in front of the group. It also creates a playful atmosphere from the beginning. It can be helpful to invite participants not to prepare their move too far in advance, but to respond in the moment when it is their turn. At the same time, they should stay focused on copying the movement of the previous participant as closely as the y can.

Walking Speeds 1–10

Participants move freely around the space. The facilitator calls out numbers from 1 to 10 in random order. Each number corresponds to a walking speed: **1** means completely still, **5** is a normal walking pace, and **10** is the fastest safe speed possible in the space.

This exercise develops awareness of tempo, responsiveness, and control of movement. It can also support concentration and spatial awareness. Participants should be encouraged not to walk in a circle, but to change direction, notice empty spaces, and spread themselves throughout the room.

Walking and Stopping

The group walks through the space at a normal pace. At first, participants stop whenever the facilitator stops. After repeating this a few times, the group is invited to decide together, without words, when to stop.

This exercise strengthens group awareness, non-verbal communication, and shared attention. Participants begin by following an external signal, then move toward collective decision-making and listening through the body. It can be interesting to observe how the group starts to sense timing together.

Marionette

Participants work in pairs. One person is the marionette, a puppet moved by invisible strings. The other is the puppeteer, guiding the puppet's movement by "pulling" these imaginary strings. After a few minutes, the roles change.

This activity encourages imagination, body awareness, and attention to movement quality. The puppeteer explores how

different parts of the body can be activated, while the marionette practices responsiveness, release, and physical expression. It also builds trust between partners.

Mirroring

Participants stay in pairs, facing each other. One person begins by leading simple movements while the other mirrors them as precisely as possible. After a few minutes, the roles switch. Later, the pair can continue without a clear leader, trying to move together as if both are guiding at the same time.

This exercise develops observation, coordination, concentration, and connection with a partner. It invites participants to pay close attention to detail and to stay present with another person's rhythm and intention.

The Slowest Race in the World

The group stands in a line at the start of a race. A finish line is clearly defined. The rule is simple: this is the slowest race in the world, and the last person to cross the finish line is the winner. Participants may playfully sabotage each other, as long as this stays safe and respectful and everyone is still able to reach the finish line.

This game invites participants to play with tension, slowness, control, and strategy. It often creates laughter and strong engagement while also requiring focus and awareness of others. Clear boundaries are important so that the activity remains safe and enjoyable for everyone.

Passing the Ball and Gift Giving

These are group mime exercises, done standing in a circle.

In **Passing the Ball**, the facilitator begins by miming holding an imaginary ball and passing it to another person. That person catches it and passes it on to someone else. Participants are encouraged to show clearly how heavy, light, big, or fast the ball is, and to catch it with the same energy with which it was thrown.

In **Gift Giving**, one participant mimes giving an object to the person next to them. The receiving person says, "Aww, thank you for this…" and decides what the object is. They briefly show how they use it, then put it away and mime giving a new object to the next person. The game continues around the circle.

The next level is to invite the receiving person to respond with a specific emotion to the gift. Before doing this, it can be useful to discuss different emotions with the group.

These exercises develop imagination, mime skills, shared attention, and creative interaction. They also encourage participants to accept and build on each other's ideas. The point is not to guess correctly, but to create a shared reality together.

Adapting Games and Creative Expression for Different Needs

Physical Disabilities / Reduced Mobility

All activities can be done seated, standing, or lying down, depending on individual needs. Movement does not need to involve the whole body; it can focus on the upper body, head, facial expression, breath, or eye direction.

"Walking" activities can be adapted to rolling, gesturing, or shifting weight. Speed, range of motion, and duration should be adjusted individually. Assistive devices such as wheelchairs, walkers, or crutches are fully integrated into the activity and treated as part of the participant's movement possibilities.

Visual Impairments

Participants can work with a partner for verbal or physical orientation (always with consent). The space should be organised with clear boundaries and a consistent layout to support orientation.

Activities such as mirroring can shift from visual imitation to focusing on rhythm, timing, or movement quality. Clear verbal descriptions and tactile exploration of space or positions can support participation.

Hearing Impairments

Instructions should be supported with visual cues, gestures, and demonstration. Group signals such as start, stop, or changes in speed can be communicated visually.

Pair and group exercises can emphasise eye contact, body signals, and shared attention. Verbal responses can be replaced with movement, gesture, or facial expression.

Intellectual Disabilities / Learning Difficulties

Activities should be introduced in a clear, simple, and structured way. Instructions are short, concrete, and demonstrated rather than explained abstractly.

Exercises can be broken down into small steps, with each step being a success in itself. Repetition helps build understanding and confidence. Participants may choose to copy existing ideas rather than create new ones, and extra time should be given for processing and responding.

Neurodivergent Participants (e.g. autism, ADHD)

A predictable structure and clear sequence can support engagement, especially at the beginning of the session. Participants may prefer small, repetitive, or low-intensity movements, and this should be fully accepted.

The sensory environment (noise, speed, proximity, visual input) should be adjusted when needed. Participants can observe first and join when ready. Different levels of participation, including non-verbal involvement, are valid and encouraged.

Speech or Communication Disabilities

Verbal expression is optional in all activities. Communication can happen through movement, gesture, mime, or facial expression.

Names, emotions, or ideas can be expressed physically rather than verbally. One-word responses, alternative communication methods, or assisted communication are welcomed. Facilitators should model openness and acceptance of multiple ways of communicating.

Creating a performance

In the context of circus activities with young people with disabilities, creating a performance is an option that should be considered only if it serves a meaningful purpose. A performance is not a necessary outcome of inclusive circus practice, and it should never become an obligation or a measure of success. The value of circus does not depend on showing results to others.

In some contexts, however, creating a performance can offer a positive and meaningful experience. It can give participants an opportunity to share something they have created, to experience being seen in a supportive environment, and to strengthen a sense of group achievement. When approached carefully, a performance can support confidence**,** expression, and belonging.

The key question is not "Should there be a performance?" but rather "Why are we creating one, and for whom?" A performance should be proposed only when it matches the needs, wishes, and comfort of the participants, and when the process remains respectful, flexible, and inclusive.

Possible purposes of creating a performance

A performance may be useful when it helps give meaning to the work done in the sessions. It can offer a way to bring together movements, ideas, or skills that participants have explored over time and turn them into a shared experience.

It can also support self-confidence and self-expression, especially when participants enjoy showing something to others and feel proud of what they have created. For some groups, a performance can strengthen group cohesion by creating a shared goal and encouraging cooperation.

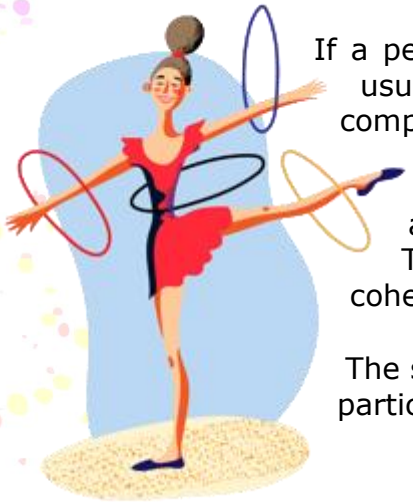
In other situations, however, a performance may not be appropriate. If it creates stress, pressure, or unnecessary exposure, it may go against the aims of inclusive practice. In such cases, a simple form of sharing within the group may be more appropriate than a more structured or public presentation.

What performance can mean in this context

In an inclusive circus setting, performance does not need to mean a formal show in front of an audience. It can be a very simple act of sharing. This might be a short sequence shown to another small group, a presentation for peers or support staff, or a moment where participants show each other what they have created.

A performance can include movement, stillness, sound, objects, interaction, or simple repeated actions. It does not need to be technical or polished. The focus is on presence**,** participation, and shared meaning, not on perfection.

How to create a performance in an inclusive way



If a performance is chosen, it should grow out of activities that participants already know and enjoy. It is usually better to build from familiar exercises, games, or movement ideas than to introduce something completely new for the sake of the presentation.

A performance can be created as a simple sequence with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It can also be built from short group scenes, repeated actions, or combinations of movement and objects. Themes such as emotions, everyday actions, circus images, or imaginary situations can help give coherence to the piece.

The structure should remain flexible. It can be short, simple, and adapted at any time. What matters is that participants understand what they are doing and feel comfortable doing it.

A GRADUAL PROGRESSION OF SHARING AND PERFORMANCE

When creating a performance, it is important to follow a gradual progression that supports confidence and emotional safety. Participants should first experience sharing in a familiar and supportive environment before being invited to present to a wider audience.

A useful progression is to begin with small-group sharing**,** where participants show what they know or what they have created within a limited and trusted setting. This can happen in pairs, in small groups, or in front of the rest of the group they already know. At this stage, the focus is on becoming comfortable being seen, experimenting, and gaining confidence without pressure.

Only when participants feel ready and secure in this context should the experience be extended to outsiders, such as another group, staff members, families, or a broader audience. This step should always remain optional and adapted to the comfort level of the participants.

This gradual progression helps reduce anxiety, build trust, and make performance a positive experience. It allows participants to develop confidence step by step, so that being seen by others becomes supportive and empowering rather than stressful.

ROLES AND PARTICIPATION

Not all participants need to take the same role in a performance. Inclusion means offering different ways to take part and recognising that visibility can be experienced differently from one person to another.
Some participants may want to perform directly, while others may prefer to support the process in another way. Roles can include performing, observing, helping with props, shaping the space, supporting transitions, creating sounds or rhythm, or assisting another participant.
All of these roles are meaningful. A participant does not need to be at the centre of attention to be part of the performance.

Adapting performance to participants' needs

Participation in a performance should always be **voluntary**. No participant should feel forced to perform, speak, or be visible in a way that feels uncomfortable. The level of exposure should be adjustable. A participant may prefer to be part of a group moment, remain seated, stay in one place, or contribute only to one part of the sequence.

The performance should also be adapted to the group's energy, communication styles, and support needs. It may need to be shorter, slower, more structured, or less public. In some cases, it may be more appropriate to present only to familiar people or to keep the sharing entirely within the group.

The aim is not to fit participants into the expectations of performance, but to adapt the performance so that it remains safe, accessible, and meaningful.

Creating a safe and supportive process

Because performance can involve visibility and vulnerability, the process must be grounded in trust**,** respect, and choice. Facilitators should regularly check whether the performance still makes sense for the group and whether participants remain comfortable with it.

Feedback should be encouraging and focused on participation, effort, presence, and expression rather than quality or comparison. What matters most is that participants feel acknowledged for their contribution and experience the process as positive.

When handled with care, a performance can become a valuable moment of sharing, recognition, and collective achievement. But it remains only one possible path within inclusive circus practice, not a goal in itself.

Resources and Tools

Research and Publications

When discussing the developmental and therapeutic value of circus activities, it is important to be clear about the observations, experiences, and research on which these claims are based. The idea that circus practice can support physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development should not rely only on intuition or positive anecdotal experience. It is also supported by a growing body of scientific research. Over the past two decades, numerous publications have explored the effects of circus practice through empirical observation and measurement.

As part of this field of inquiry, the Hungarian Juggling Association has compiled a collection of 30 international studies examining the impact of circus techniques on areas such as the nervous system, motor and cognitive development, and social skills. In addition, circus arts are also studied from other perspectives, including aesthetics, history, philosophy, and sociology. For readers wishing to explore these broader approaches, the online collection of the Circus Arts Research Platform offers a useful point of entry.

The research compilation used for this manual focused primarily on English-language sources. It is therefore likely that valuable studies and publications also exist in other languages. The abstracts of the thirty selected studies were brought together in an English-language publication titled *Collection of Scientific Research and Evidence*, which provides an accessible overview of the main assumptions, methods, and findings of this body of work.

Taken together, international research and the experience of practitioners working in circus pedagogy suggest that well-facilitated circus activities can have a positive impact on physical development, emotional well-being, cognitive functioning, and social participation. These findings strengthen the case for circus as a meaningful educational and inclusive practice when it is thoughtfully adapted and responsibly facilitated.

Further Reading

The following resources may be useful for readers who wish to deepen their understanding of inclusive circus, social circus, movement-based learning, psychomotor practice, and disability-related pedagogy. The list combines publications directly connected to circus pedagogy with broader references on movement, learning, psychomotor development, and inclusion.

Some recommended starting points include:

Circus for Development: Social and Inclusive Circus Practices – an overview of social and inclusive circus practices.

Social Circus: Building Communities – case studies of social circus in Europe and beyond.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living* – a key reference on mindfulness and body awareness.

Thich Nhat Hanh – writings on compassion, presence, and awareness.

Learning Through Movement: A Guide for Educators – resources on movement-based learning and body awareness.

Body-Mind Centering® – approaches to education and body expression.

In addition to these general references, the draft also includes a substantial bibliography of books and publications in Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, and German related to psychomotricity, special education, disability, movement education, and adapted physical activity. These references can be especially valuable for readers working in Central European contexts or wishing to explore related traditions outside the English-language literature.

Useful Websites

The following websites provide practical resources, publications, networks, and policy frameworks relevant to inclusive circus and disability-related work:

AltroCirco – Italian network and project supporting the development of social circus in Italy.

FEDEC – European Federation of Professional Circus Schools.

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education – resources and policy material on inclusive education.

Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity – European guidelines and frameworks related to inclusion and diversity.

European Network on Independent Living (ENIL) – European network promoting independent living for people with disabilities.

Annexes

The annexes included in this manual provide practical tools to support facilitators in planning, implementing, and reflecting on inclusive circus activities.

The **Participant Development Map** offers a framework to observe and understand participants' progress across physical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

The **Activity Template** supports the design and structuring of sessions, helping facilitators clearly define objectives, steps, adaptations, and key points of attention.

The **Disability Profiles** provide guidance on different needs and possible adaptations, supporting facilitators in creating accessible and inclusive activities for diverse groups.

Participant Development Map

This tool helps facilitators identify strengths, support needs, and learning priorities across key development areas, and link them to adapted circus activities and facilitation strategies.

Learning Area		Current Abilities & Capacities	Learning & Participation Objectives	Circus Activity & Facilitation Plan
Physical	Movement			
	Sensory perception			
Cognitive	Learning			
	Problem-solving			
	Attention			
Emotional	Emotional regulation			
Social	Communication			
	Independence			
	Social relationships			
Creativity/ strengths	Creativity / Strengths			

Inclusive Activity Template

Activity Title: _____

Learning Objective / Core Principle: _____

Duration: _____

Equipment and Props
What materials are needed? Are there alternative or adapted props available?

_____

_____

Entry Levels and Progression
What is the simplest way to enter the activity?
What are 2–3 different entry points?
How can the activity become more challenging without changing its core aim?

_____

_____

_____

Adaptations for Different Needs
Motor: Can it be done seated, with reduced range of movement, or with adapted support?
Sensory: Is there a visual, tactile, or auditory version?
Cognitive: Are instructions short, clear, and supported by demonstration or visual cues?
Emotional / social: Are there ways to reduce pressure, increase safety, or allow gradual participation?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Roles and Choices
What different roles can participants take?
How will you offer choice of role, prop, pace, or level of challenge?

Communication and Instructions
How will you explain the task?
What words, gestures, demonstrations, or visual supports will you use?
What start and stop signals will you use?

Creativity and Personalisation
How can participants add their own idea, rhythm, variation, or style?
Is there space for improvisation, group invention, or personal interpretation?

Safety and Consent
What are the key safety points?
How will you check readiness before partner or group work?
What exit options are available if someone wants to stop or step back?

Closing and Reflection
How will you close the activity?
What simple question, gesture, or feedback tool will help participants reflect on the experience?

Facilitator Notes After the Session
What worked well?
What barriers appeared?
What adaptations helped?
What would you change next time?

AUTISM / AUTISM SPECTRUM

1. COMMUNICATION

Challenge
They may find it harder to express themselves verbally or to understand the intentions and hidden messages of others
Strength
Often understands well through concrete examples, routines, and visual information.
Facilitation Hint
Demonstrate first, use short sentences, and support explanations with gestures, images, or simple keywords.

2. ATTENTION AND FOCUS

Challenge
May have difficulty switching tasks or adapting quickly to changes.
Strength
Can show deep concentration on activities that feel meaningful or interesting.
Facilitation Hint
Announce transitions in advance and connect activities to participants' interests when possible.

3. SENSORY PROCESSING

Challenge
May be sensitive to noise, light, touch, or crowded spaces.
Strength
Often develops strong awareness of sensory details and movement quality.
Facilitation Hint
Reduce unnecessary noise, offer quiet breaks, and allow participants to choose comfortable positions.

4. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Challenge
May find group dynamics, eye contact, or spontaneous interaction difficult.
Strength
Often brings honesty, loyalty, and focused engagement to relationships.
Facilitation Hint
Avoid forcing interaction. Use small-group activities and clear social roles.

5. EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Challenge
May feel overwhelmed by uncertainty, pressure, or unexpected changes.
Strength
Can develop strong self-regulation when supported by structure and trust.
Facilitation Hint
Keep routines stable, validate emotions, and offer calming strategies when needed.

6. LEARNING STYLE

Challenge
May struggle with learning through verbal explanation alone.
Strength
Often learns effectively through repetition, physical experience, and visual patterns.
Facilitation Hint
Use "show–try–repeat" sequences and allow time for embodied exploration.

Reflective Reminder

Autistic participants are not "less capable" — they often need different conditions to thrive.
Inclusive facilitation focuses on adapting environments, not correcting individuals.

DOWN SYNDROME

1. COMMUNICATION

Challenge
Speech may develop later, and words may sometimes be harder to articulate clearly.
Strength
Often communicates strongly through facial expression, body language, imitation, and warm social presence.
Facilitation Hint
Use short and clear sentences, demonstrate physically, give extra time to respond, and accept different ways of communicating.

2. LEARNING STYLE

Challenge
New skills may take more time to acquire, especially when instructions are abstract or too complex.
Strength
Often learns well through repetition, routine, practical experience, and step-by-step support.
Facilitation Hint
Break activities into small achievable steps, repeat key actions, and build learning through doing rather than long explanations.

3. MOVEMENT AND COORDINATION

Challenge
Coordination, balance, and muscle tone may require extra support and practice.
Strength
Many enjoy movement-based activities and can make strong progress when practice is consistent and encouraging.
Facilitation Hint
Offer stable starting positions, simplify movement pathways when needed, and celebrate progress in control, rhythm, and confidence.

4. ATTENTION AND MEMORY

Challenge
It may be harder to stay focused for a long time or to follow too many instructions at once.
Strength
Often remembers visual information and familiar routines very well.
Facilitation Hint
Keep instructions brief, use visual cues or repeated demonstrations, and maintain a predictable session structure.

5. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Challenge
They may need support in reading social situations, managing boundaries, or not simply following others.
Strength
Often enjoys being with others, participates with openness, and contributes warmth and connection to the group.
Facilitation Hint
Use partner or small-group activities, give clear roles, and support positive peer interaction without overprotecting or speaking in their place.

6. EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Challenge
Disappointment, frustration, or change can sometimes be hard to manage.
Strength
Often shows affection, enthusiasm, and genuine joy in shared success.
Facilitation Hint
Create a calm and predictable atmosphere, acknowledge emotions clearly, and help participants return to success through simple, manageable tasks.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with Down syndrome are not defined by delay. They often learn and participate best when time, repetition, clarity, and encouragement are built into the activity. Inclusive facilitation is not about lowering expectations, but about creating the conditions in which progress, confidence, and participation can grow.

CEREBRAL PALSY

1. MOVEMENT AND MUSCLE TONE

Challenge
Muscles may be too stiff or too loose, which can make movements harder to control.
Strength
With regular practice and support, participants can make meaningful progress in movement and coordination.
Facilitation Hint
Offer stable starting positions, slow the pace when needed, and focus on control, comfort, and success rather than speed or precision.

2. MOBILITY AND POSTURE

Challenge
Walking may be unsteady, posture may need support, or mobility aids may be part of everyday movement.
Strength
With perseverance, adapted environments, and assistive devices, independent movement is often possible.
Facilitation Hint
Keep pathways clear, adapt the space, and allow different ways of moving between activities without making one way seem “better” than another.

3. FINE MOTOR SKILLS

Challenge
Handling small objects, gripping props, or doing precise actions may be difficult.
Strength
With patience, repetition, and adapted tools, these skills can be developed.
Facilitation Hint
Use larger, lighter, or slower props, allow extra time, and accept different ways of catching, holding, or manipulating equipment.

4. COMMUNICATION

Challenge
Speech may be slower or less clear for some participants.
Strength
Participants may communicate very effectively through gestures, facial expression, or assistive communication tools.
Facilitation Hint
Do not rush responses. Use demonstration, simple questions, and alternative ways to communicate and participate.

5. ATTENTION AND LEARNING

Challenge
Some participants may tire quickly, need more time to learn, or find it hard to concentrate for long periods.
Strength
Many have typical intellectual abilities, learn well, and can stay deeply engaged in activities that matter to them.
Facilitation Hint
Keep instructions short, build in breaks, repeat key actions, and let learning happen through practice rather than long verbal explanation.

6. SOCIAL INTERACTION AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Challenge
Physical barriers and repeated difficulties can sometimes lead to frustration or make peer interaction harder.
Strength
Participants are often resilient, open, and able to build strong bonds with others.
Facilitation Hint
Reduce environmental barriers, create cooperative partner roles, and make sure each participant is recognised for their contribution, not compared by speed or physical ease.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with cerebral palsy are not defined only by motor difficulty. Their participation depends greatly on how space, equipment, communication, and pacing are designed. Inclusive facilitation means reducing unnecessary barriers and creating real possibilities for movement, expression, confidence, and belonging.

ADHD

1. Attention and Focus

Challenge
Maintaining concentration on tasks that feel repetitive or uninteresting can be difficult.
Strength
When engaged and motivated, participants may focus very deeply and show strong involvement in an activity.
Facilitation Hint
Keep instructions short, make activities active and meaningful, and vary rhythm to help sustain attention without overload.

2. Activity Level and Movement

Challenge
Sitting still for long periods may be hard, and participants may fidget, move often, or seek constant stimulation.
Strength
High energy can become a real asset in movement-based, playful, and dynamic circus activities.
Facilitation Hint
Build movement into the session, allow active participation from the start, and avoid expecting stillness for too long.

3. Impulsivity and Self-Regulation

Challenge
Participants may act quickly without always thinking through consequences or waiting for their turn.
Strength
They can also be spontaneous, courageous, and very open to trying new experiences.
Facilitation Hint
Use clear boundaries, short turns, and concrete rules, while giving space for initiative and experimentation.

4. Task Completion and Organization

Challenge
Starting many things and finishing fewer of them, or keeping track of steps and materials, can be difficult.
Strength
With structure and clarity, participants can often work quickly and move efficiently through tasks.
Facilitation Hint
Break activities into small steps, give one instruction at a time, and make the sequence of the activity visible and predictable.

5. Emotional Regulation

Challenge
Emotional reactions may be sudden and intense, and frustration can rise quickly.
Strength
Participants are often passionate, enthusiastic, and bring strong energy into the group.
Facilitation Hint
Keep the atmosphere calm and supportive, notice rising frustration early, and help participants return to regulation through movement, pause, or a simpler task.

6. Social Interaction and Learning Style

Challenge
Interrupting, talking a lot, waiting, or adapting to more traditional teaching situations may be difficult.
Strength
Participants are often sociable, quick to connect, and respond especially well to active, playful, and creative learning approaches.
Facilitation Hint
Use interactive teaching, short partner tasks, and practical learning through doing rather than long verbal explanations.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with ADHD do not need less stimulation altogether — they often need the right kind of stimulation, structure, and pacing. In circus activities, their energy, spontaneity, creativity, and engagement can become real strengths when the session is designed with movement, clarity, flexibility, and rhythm in mind.

VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

1. VISION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Challenge
Visual information may be partially or fully inaccessible, depending on whether the participant has low vision or no sight.
Strength
Other senses, especially hearing, touch, and spatial awareness, are often strongly developed.
Facilitation Hint
Do not rely only on visual demonstration. Use clear verbal guidance, tactile exploration when appropriate, and consistent spatial references.

2. MOBILITY AND ORIENTATION

Challenge
Navigating unfamiliar spaces independently can be more difficult.
Strength
With auditory cues, clear orientation points, and mobility tools, participants can move through space effectively.
Facilitation Hint
Keep the room layout predictable, avoid unnecessary obstacles, and explain clearly where people, props, and activity zones are located.

3. LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONS

Challenge
Instructions that depend on printed material or visual imitation may not be accessible.
Strength
Participants can learn very successfully through spoken explanation, touch, repetition, and adapted tools.
Facilitation Hint
Use short verbal instructions, break tasks into steps, and allow participants to explore props and movements through hands-on experience.

4. SENSORY PROCESSING

Challenge
The absence of visual information can make some activities slower or more demanding at first.
Strength
Hearing, touch, and body awareness often become highly refined and can be powerful resources in circus activities.
Facilitation Hint
Work with sound, rhythm, texture, and body feedback, and give enough time for participants to build familiarity with movement and equipment.

5. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Challenge
Recognising people visually or reading visual social cues may be difficult.
Strength
Participants may become very attentive to voice, tone, behaviour, and other non-visual signals.
Facilitation Hint
Say names aloud, encourage people to identify themselves when speaking, and create group habits that make interaction more explicit and welcoming.

6. PARTICIPATION, CREATIVITY AND CONFIDENCE

Challenge
Many activities are wrongly assumed to be inaccessible, which can affect confidence and expectations.
Strength
Participants are often highly adaptable, determined, and creative, and can thrive in adapted sports and artistic activities.
Facilitation Hint
Focus on possibility rather than limitation, adapt the task instead of excluding the participant, and recognise independence, strategy, and creativity as real forms of skill.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with visual impairments do not need to be protected from participation. They need access, orientation, clear communication, and time to explore. Inclusive facilitation means designing activities so that sight is not the only pathway into movement, learning, play, and connection.

HEARING IMPAIRMENT

1. HEARING AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Challenge
Sounds may be heard faintly, unclearly, or not at all.
Strength
Visual attention and observation skills are often highly developed.
Facilitation Hint
Do not rely only on spoken instructions. Use visual cues, clear gestures, demonstration, and agreed signals for starting, stopping, or changing activities.

2. SPEECH AND COMMUNICATION

Challenge
Understanding speech, especially in noisy spaces, can be difficult, and some participants may communicate differently.
Strength
Many participants communicate very effectively through sign language, body language, facial expression, and visual attention.
Facilitation Hint
Face the group when speaking, avoid talking while turning away, and support communication with signs, gestures, and visible demonstration.

3. LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING INSTRUCTIONS

Challenge
Oral language-based learning may be harder to access, especially when too much information is given only verbally.
Strength
Visual learning methods, written support, and practical demonstration can work very well.
Facilitation Hint
Keep explanations short, show rather than only tell, and use step-by-step visual teaching whenever possible.

4. RHYTHM, MUSIC AND SOUND-BASED ACTIVITIES

Challenge
Activities based mainly on hearing music, rhythm, or audio cues may be less accessible.
Strength
Some participants connect strongly to rhythm through vibration, movement, and visual timing.
Facilitation Hint
Use visible rhythm cues, shared movement patterns, floor vibration when possible, and partner or group timing instead of relying only on sound.

5. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Challenge
Group conversations and fast-moving interactions can be harder to follow.
Strength
Participants are often highly observant and skilled in alternative ways of connecting with others.
Facilitation Hint
Create turn-taking structures, make sure only one person speaks at a time when needed, and encourage group habits that make communication clearer and more inclusive.

6. INDEPENDENCE AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Challenge
Missing important auditory information can create frustration, confusion, or exclusion.
Strength
With accessible tools and clear visual information, participants can act with strong independence and confidence.
Facilitation Hint
Make key information visible, check understanding without putting pressure on the participant, and reduce frustration by creating a space where communication differences are normal and respected.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with hearing impairments do not need less participation. They need communication that is visible, accessible, and shared by the group. Inclusive facilitation means designing activities so that hearing is not the only path to understanding, timing, expression, and connection.

PHYSICAL DISABILITY

1. MOVEMENT AND MOBILITY

Challenge
Walking, running, climbing, or using certain parts of the body may be difficult.
Strength
Many participants develop effective ways of moving with the help of assistive devices, adapted techniques, or their own strategies.
Facilitation Hint
Adapt the task, not the expectation of participation. Offer different ways to move, reach, travel, or take part in the activity.

2. INDEPENDENCE AND DAILY ACTION

Challenge
Some everyday actions may take longer or require support.
Strength
Participants often develop strong independence, problem-solving skills, and creative ways of doing things.
Facilitation Hint
Allow enough time, avoid rushing, and do not assume help is needed before asking. Support autonomy wherever possible.

3. FATIGUE AND PHYSICAL EFFORT

Challenge
Movement may require more energy, and fatigue can appear more quickly.
Strength
Many participants show strong perseverance and determination.
Facilitation Hint
Build in pauses, adjust intensity, and focus on sustainable participation rather than pushing for constant effort.

4. ACCESS TO SPACE AND EQUIPMENT

Challenge
Stairs, narrow spaces, unsuitable surfaces, or inaccessible equipment can create unnecessary barriers.
Strength
With accessible tools and environments, participants can move and participate much more freely.
Facilitation Hint
Check the space in advance, clear pathways, adapt equipment placement, and make sure the environment supports participation from the start.

5. SOCIAL INTERACTION

Challenge
Others may underestimate the participant's abilities because of visible mobility differences.
Strength
Participants are often open, friendly, and able to build meaningful relationships.
Facilitation Hint
Avoid overprotection, speak directly to the participant, and create group dynamics based on respect rather than pity or assumptions.

6. PARTICIPATION, CREATIVITY AND CONFIDENCE

Challenge
Some activities may need to be approached differently, and inaccessible environments can lead to frustration or exclusion.
Strength
Participants are often highly resourceful, resilient, and creative in finding ways to take part.
Facilitation Hint
Value different methods of doing the activity, recognise adaptation as skill, and make room for participants to suggest their own ways of engaging.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with physical disabilities do not need to be placed on the side of the activity. They need access, time, thoughtful adaptation, and genuine recognition of their capacities. Inclusive facilitation means removing avoidable barriers and creating real possibilities for movement, creativity, confidence, and belonging.

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

1. LEARNING STYLE

Challenge
New skills may take more time to learn, and repeated practice is often needed.
Strength
With patience, consistency, and practical methods, participants can learn a great deal.
Facilitation Hint
Break activities into small steps, repeat key actions often, and build learning through doing rather than long explanations.

2. PROBLEM-SOLVING AND UNDERSTANDING

Challenge
Complex, abstract, or multi-step tasks may be harder to understand.
Strength
Participants often do very well in practical, hands-on, and visual situations.
Facilitation Hint
Keep tasks concrete, show each step clearly, and use visual or physical examples whenever possible.

3. COMMUNICATION

Challenge
Expressing ideas verbally may be harder, and language may be simpler.
Strength
Participants are often honest, direct, and expressive in clear emotional ways.
Facilitation Hint
Use simple language, short sentences, and clear demonstration, and give enough time for responses without rushing.

4. ATTENTION AND MEMORY

Challenge
Attention may be shorter, and long verbal information can be difficult to remember.
Strength
When interested, participants may be enthusiastic, engaged, and willing to repeat tasks in order to learn.
Facilitation Hint
Keep instructions brief, repeat important information, and use predictable routines to support memory and focus.

5. INDEPENDENCE AND PARTICIPATION

Challenge
Daily tasks and more complex sequences may require support.
Strength
With practice, encouragement, and adapted expectations, independence can gradually grow.
Facilitation Hint
Offer support without taking over, give participants real responsibilities, and create achievable roles within the activity.

6. SOCIAL INTERACTION AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Challenge
Participants may be easily influenced, may find social rules difficult to read, and may react strongly to frustration or disappointment.
Strength
They are often warm, sincere, friendly, and enjoy being part of a group.
Facilitation Hint
Create a respectful group atmosphere, make expectations explicit, and support emotional regulation through calm structure, encouragement, and clear boundaries.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with intellectual disabilities should not be defined only by what is difficult for them. They often show honesty, enthusiasm, warmth, persistence, and joy in participation. Inclusive facilitation means creating clear, concrete, supportive conditions in which learning, confidence, autonomy, and meaningful group participation can grow.

SPEECH DISORDER

1. SPEECH AND ARTICULATION

Challenge
Certain sounds may be distorted, missing, or pronounced differently.
Strength
With practice and support, speech can develop and improve significantly.
Facilitation Hint
Do not rush or correct constantly. Give time to speak, listen patiently, and accept different ways of expressing words.

2. FLUENCY AND SPEECH RATE

Challenge
Speech may be too fast, too slow, interrupted, or halting.
Strength
With confidence and the right support, smoother and more comfortable speech can develop.
Facilitation Hint
Create a calm atmosphere, avoid pressure to speak quickly, and do not finish sentences for the participant unless they ask for help.

3. LANGUAGE USE AND EXPRESSION

Challenge
Vocabulary may be more limited, and sentences may be shorter or harder to formulate.
Strength
Participants may be highly expressive through gestures, facial expression, and body language.
Facilitation Hint
Use communication that welcomes words, gestures, signs, and demonstration. Let participants show as well as say.

4. UNDERSTANDING INSTRUCTIONS

Challenge
Complex or long sentences may be harder to understand.
Strength
Simple, familiar, and concrete communication is often understood well.
Facilitation Hint
Keep instructions short, concrete, and step by step. Show the activity physically instead of relying only on explanation.

5. PEER COMMUNICATION AND GROUP PARTICIPATION

Challenge
Participants may speak less, withdraw, or feel hesitant in group situations.
Strength
In a safe and accepting environment, they often become more open and engaged.
Facilitation Hint
Use pairs or small groups first, reduce pressure to speak in front of everyone, and build trust before expecting verbal participation.

6. EMOTIONS, CONFIDENCE AND PERFORMANCE

Challenge
Putting feelings into words can be difficult, and speaking in front of others may create anxiety.
Strength
Participants can communicate emotions richly through nonverbal expression and often gain confidence gradually in supportive groups.
Facilitation Hint
Value nonverbal expression, celebrate small moments of confidence, and make performance possible through movement, rhythm, role-play, or shared action — not only speech.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with speech disorders should not be reduced to the way they speak. Their ideas, emotions, humour, and presence can be very rich, even when verbal expression is difficult. Inclusive facilitation means creating space for communication in different forms and making sure participation does not depend only on fluent speech.

DYSPRAXIA / DEVELOPMENTAL COORDINATION DISORDER (DCD)

1. MOVEMENT PLANNING & COORDINATION

Challenge
Planning, organising, and carrying out coordinated movements may be difficult.
Strength
With repetition, practice, and step-by-step support, participants can make meaningful progress in movement skills.
Facilitation Hint
Break actions into small parts, teach them one step at a time, and give enough time for the movement to be repeated and integrated.

2. BALANCE & GROSS MOTOR SKILLS

Challenge
Running, jumping, catching, kicking, climbing stairs, or joining fast physical games may be harder.
Strength
Participants may do better when activities are predictable, slowed down, and practised in a supportive way rather than under pressure.
Facilitation Hint
Offer stable starting positions, reduce speed, simplify the motor demand when needed, and focus on success in participation rather than polished performance.

3. FINE MOTOR SKILLS & HANDLING PROPS

Challenge
Writing, drawing, using scissors, fastening clothes, tying shoelaces, or handling small objects can be difficult.
Strength
Adapted tools and props can make participation much more accessible.
Facilitation Hint
Use larger, lighter, slower, or easier-to-grip props, and accept different ways of holding, catching, or manipulating equipment.

4. LEARNING NEW SKILLS

Challenge
New motor skills may take longer to learn, especially when instructions are given too quickly or all at once.
Strength
Learning often improves when the task is concrete, repeated, and practised through doing.
Facilitation Hint
Keep instructions short, demonstrate clearly, repeat key actions, and return to the same movement several times across the session.

5. ATTENTION, ORGANISATION & FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

Challenge
Some participants may find it hard to concentrate for long, follow several instructions in sequence, or organise themselves within a task.
Strength
Clear structure and close guidance can help participants stay engaged and understand what comes next.
Facilitation Hint
Give one instruction at a time, make the sequence visible and predictable, and guide the participant through the task without overloading them with information.

6. CONFIDENCE, FRUSTRATION & SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Challenge
Repeated difficulties with coordination can lead to frustration, low self-esteem, or reluctance to join physical activities.
Strength
In a supportive and non-comparative environment, participants can build confidence, persistence, and enjoyment in movement.
Facilitation Hint
Avoid comparison, celebrate small progress, create cooperative tasks, and make sure the participant has real opportunities to succeed in front of others and with others.

Reflective Reminder

Young people with dyspraxia should not be seen as lazy, careless, or incapable. They may need more time, more repetition, and clearer structure to learn and coordinate movement. Inclusive facilitation means reducing

unnecessary motor and organisational barriers, while creating real opportunities for confidence, skill development, and joyful participation in circus activities.

Project Partners

The *DiversAbility Circus* project is implemented by a partnership of five organisations from across Europe, bringing together expertise in youth work, inclusive education, and circus pedagogy. Each partner contributes specific experience and perspectives to the development of inclusive circus practices for young people with disabilities.

Association La Villa (France)

Association La Villa

Društvo CIK (Slovenia)

Cirkus La Bulle
Društvo CIK

LuneNuove (Italy)

LUNE nuove

Hungarian Juggling Association (Hungary)

Magyar Zsonglőr Egyesület
Hungarian Juggling Association

Trapiti (Slovakia)

trapiti

Get in touch with us:

diversabilitycircus.org

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