

Accessible by Design

A guide for inclusive fitness centres



Version 2



University
of Windsor

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Introduction

Purpose

This guide was created **to support the development, implementation, and ongoing improvement of accessible and inclusive fitness centres.**

Physical activity and exercise offer significant health benefits – such as improved physical function, mental well-being, and social connection – regardless of a person's age, gender, race, or ability.¹ Yet, fitness facilities, such as **gyms, often have barriers that limit access and participation** for diverse populations.^{2,3} For people with a disability, barriers may be physical, social, informational, and policy-related.³ There is a need for **equitable exercise opportunities** that are **accessible, safe, and inclusive for people with a disability**.^{1,4} This guide outlines **common barriers and key facilitators**, and provides **practical strategies and resources** to support the creation of accessible and inclusive opportunities for gym-based exercise among people with a disability.

How was the guide developed?

Two workshops were held to gather ideas on how to make gyms more accessible and inclusive. Most of the content in this guide came from those workshop discussions. **Participants included people with a disability, caregivers, gym users, and professionals working in adapted physical activity, along with coaches, trainers, managers, and general gym staff.** Disabilities among participants included: hearing, mental health, developmental, mobility, and dexterity impairments.

Before the workshops, three research studies were also carried out. Findings from these studies were used to add to and support the ideas shared in the workshops.

Scholarly articles, government websites, and other online sources were also used. You will find a list of references at the end of the guide.

To learn more, you can contact: Fallon Mitchell (mitch11e@uwindsor.ca) or Dr. Paula M. van Wyk (pvanwyk@uwindsor.ca).

All images were AI-generated using Gemini.



Who was this Guide Created for?

The guide is for **anyone interested in fitness, gym-based exercise, disability, or inclusive design**. While the guide focuses on factors that affect accessibility and inclusion in gyms, it can also be helpful for people working in fitness and physical activity, or design – such as individuals in community centres, fitness facilities, sports organizations, or equipment manufacturing. Specific groups who may benefit from using the guide include:



Gym Owners and Managers

As owners and managers usually make key decisions, it is important that they are aware of what helps or gets in the way of making their spaces accessible. Knowing about common barriers, helpful solutions, and available resources can help providers create or adjust programs and facilities to better support a wide range of people.

Trainers, Instructors, and Staff

Staff who regularly interact with gym members should understand the different factors that can affect someone's experience. This helps them provide great service to all kinds of users. Learning about disability, using accessible ways to communicate, and having the right training can help create a welcoming and inclusive space for everyone.

Policymakers

Policymakers play an important role in creating positive change in society. The information in this guide can help shape policies and programs that support accessible and inclusive fitness for people of all abilities. This guide can help policymakers understand real-world challenges that people with a disability may face in gyms.

Gym Users

Users play an important role in making gyms more accessible and inclusive. While this guide can be a resource for all users, the focus is on empowering people with a disability to start conversations and advocate for their needs. Users can read the guide to learn more for themselves or share it with others to help drive change.

How to Use this Guide

This guide has **four main sections**:

- 1.0 Designing Communications and Spaces
- 2.0 Creating an Inclusive Culture
- 3.0 Building Inclusive Programs
- 4.0 Transforming Organizations

Each section includes:

- A short background
- Factors affecting accessibility, suggestions, and/or things to consider
- Links to additional resources
- Quotes from workshop participants that highlight key ideas

Gym owners and managers can use the guide to understand what may affect accessibility in their gym, why it matters, and how to create more inclusive spaces, cultures, programs, and organizations.

Trainers, instructors, and staff can learn how to better support diverse users by improving their verbal and nonverbal communication. Sections 2.0 and 3.0 offer guidance, including tips and resources for interacting and working with people who have a disability.

Policymakers can use the factors, suggestions, and considerations in the guide to help shape policies and programs that support accessible fitness facilities. Section 4.0 may be of particular interest to this group, as it focuses on their role in enabling and supporting inclusive practices.

Gym users can learn why inclusion matters, share factors and suggestions with fitness providers, and see how they can help improve accessibility in gyms.

This guide is not a quick fix or complete solution – it is a starting point for making gyms more accessible. Suggestions are broad so they can be adapted to different contexts, and the linked resources provide deeper insight, existing tools, and checklists with specific criteria. This guide is a living document and should be reviewed and updated regularly to reflect new insights, practices, and user needs.



At a Glance

Exercise is important for everyone, but people with a disability can encounter barriers to exercising in gyms due to inaccessible environments. This guide was created with input from fitness providers and gym users – with and without a disability – to help make gyms more accessible and inclusive.

1.0 Designing Communications and Spaces

How a gym shares information and sets up its space affects who is welcome and can use the facility. Gym owners and managers may want to think about:

- How users learn about and get to the gym.
 - Widely share accessible, clear, and up-to-date promotional materials.
 - Be aware of different transportation options and consider ways to develop or improve accessible transportation options.
 - Provide accessible parking spots and keep nearby bus stops, sidewalks, and parking lots in good shape.
- How users enter and move around the facility.
 - Make sure people with and without a disability can use the same entrances and pathways. They should be obstacle-free and wide enough to allow users with and without a disability to move side by side. This remains true for the space around equipment within the gym.
 - Group equipment in a logical way, mixing adapted and standard equipment.
- How music and lighting can affect user experience.
 - Keep lighting, music, and temperature within a comfortable range for diverse users. Vary music and lighting to satisfy different preferences.
- How users find, access, and process information.
 - Use signs and instructions at various heights, in multiple formats (like print, audio, or video), and with high contrast for visibility.

2.0 Creating an Inclusive Culture

A welcoming and supportive culture helps users feel like they belong and motivates them to use gyms. Owners, managers, staff, and users can help by thinking about:

- How tangible features impact belonging and inclusion.
 - Have staff stationed near the entrance.
 - Provide social and quiet spaces.
 - Use media and displays that reflect diverse body types and abilities.
- How staff welcome, support, and communicate with users.
 - Offer help to all users, build relationships, and ask for feedback.
 - Listen actively and always ask before helping someone.
 - Use direct (face-to-face) and indirect (surveys) methods to communicate and learn about users' needs or preferences.
- How gym etiquette is promoted.

- Users should be mindful of others, clean and return equipment, and practice good hygiene.
- Providers and staff should explain and demonstrate proper gym behaviour and hand out simplified versions of policies.
- How gym culture can become more welcoming and inclusive.
 - Respect all fitness goals, promote gyms for health and connection.
 - Train staff in adapted fitness and put policies in place that discourage judgment and unwelcoming behaviour.

3.0 Building Inclusive Programs

Sticking with gym-based exercise means users need to learn how to exercise, adapt their workouts as their abilities change over time, and avoid injury. Staff play a key role in teaching and adapting workouts to fit individual needs. Owners, managers, and staff should consider:

- How to adapt exercise for all users.
 - Listen to users' needs, preferences, and abilities.
 - Show multiple ways to do exercises at various difficulty levels.
 - Train staff to work with diverse populations.
- How users learn to exercise.
 - Provide resources on using and adjusting equipment.
 - Teach users about types of exercise, progression, and injury prevention.
 - Offer options like orientation sessions or group classes where users can ask questions and get support for their training.

4.0 Transforming Organizations

Gym owners, managers, and policymakers are key to making gyms more accessible and inclusive. They shape the physical space, how people interact, programs, and the rules that guide behaviour. Since inclusion starts at the top and spreads through the organization, owners, managers, and policymakers should consider:

- How accessibility can be made easier and more effective.
 - Identify issues with the current layout and make a list/plan.
 - Design spaces and programs that accommodate different needs.
 - Consider all types of accessibility—physical, sensory, cognitive, and social.
 - Align policies, programs, and actions so they support each other.
 - Plan clear steps to make accessibility easier and more manageable.
- How to encourage and support system-wide change.
 - Treat access to fitness as a right that benefits everyone.
 - Make accessibility and inclusion a core value of the gym.
 - Work with diverse users, community groups, and organizations.
 - Find and create resources that support inclusive practices.



1.0 Designing Communications and Spaces

The way a space is designed and promoted can have a big impact on who can access a fitness facility. **This section offers helpful tips for fitness providers** in designing accessible spaces, planning or informing renovations, and modifying existing buildings to improve access for all types of gym users.

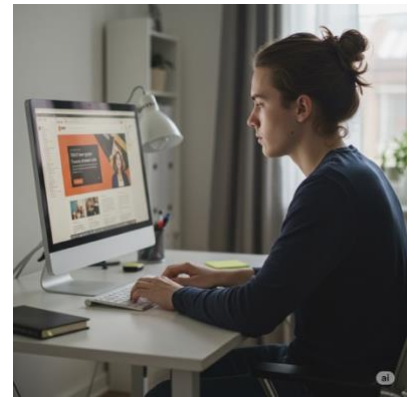
1.1 Getting to the Gym

Many factors can impact a user's experience when trying to find, travel to, and enter a gym. For gyms to be accessible, **it is important to think about a user's entire** journey⁵ – starting from how they find out about inclusive programs, to getting transportation to the gym, and even how they travel through the parking lot to the entrance.

"You can't be an accessible facility if there's no way for your customer base to get there."

Knowing about the Facility

Good communication helps users know about accessible facilities and programs, understand what to expect when they arrive, and feel comfortable and welcome. Accessible websites and promotional materials that are clear, up-to-date, and easy to use provide a foundation for good communication.



Suggestions for Communication

- Make websites easy to use, follow accessibility guidelines (e.g., WCAG 2.0)
- Make key details easy to find (e.g., times, equipment needs)
- Be clear and specific about accessibility features (e.g., wide showers, staff training, adapted equipment, Braille signage)
- Share important updates – like busy times, special events, or temporary changes due to repairs – to help users plan ahead
- Advertise in different places (e.g., social media, community events) and formats (e.g., large print, Braille, audio, video)

Considerations for Providers

- Who is the target population (or who may benefit)?
- Where can potential users find information about the facility in the community?
- What do users need to know about the facility and/or program?
- What is the best way/format to communicate this information?

Arriving at the Facility

Accessible transportation - whether driving, walking, or taking transit - to the facility is essential to ensure diverse users can take advantage of facilities and programs.

Factors affecting Transportation

- Distance and time spent in transit
- Cost
- Availability of accessible transport
- Availability of public transit in towns
- Reliability of public transportation
- Proximity of bus stops to the facility
- Condition of roads, sidewalks, curbs

Suggestions for Users, Providers, Communities, and Policymakers

- Volunteer drop off/pick up programs
- Ride shares, UberWAV
- Transportation subsidies (e.g., through Ontario Disability Support Program)
- Sharing public transit between neighbouring municipalities

Factors affecting Parking

- Proximity between accessible spots and entrance
- Cost
- Width, availability of spots
- Parking lot condition (e.g., snow, ice, visible lines)

Suggestions for Providers

- Providing wide spots
- Additional accessible spots
- Routine snow removal, salting
- Re-painting lines
- Informing users if parking is located far away



Entering the Facility

Entering a facility is typically the first indication of whether someone belongs or is going to be welcomed/wanted in a space. It is common for accessible routes to be separate from main pathways or for ramps and elevators to be out of the way. This can promote exclusionary messages that reinforce stigmatizing perceptions of people with a disability as “other” or different from “normal” users.⁶



Suggestions for Entrances

- Wide, automatic doorways
- Level/flat doorway thresholds
- Fixed rugs or mats at doorways
- Functioning automatic door openers
- Service desks with low counters
- Accessible seating for users and caregivers

Suggestions for Pathways

- Free of obstacles
- Wide enough for users with or without mobility devices to pass through
- Accessible routes are used for emergency plans

Suggestions for Stairs, Ramps, and Elevators

- Easy access and visible elevators
- Elevators, ramps along main pathways
- Tactile strips along stairs
- Round handrails for a comfortable grasp
- If possible, a single level facility

1.2 Using the Gym

Maintaining a wide, obstacle-free route remains essential once users reach the gym. While this **starts with thoughtful design, changes in the environment** – like new equipment, peak-hour traffic, or weights left on the floor and benches moved to different locations – **can impact accessibility**. **Owners, managers, staff, and users share responsibility** for maintaining accessibility.

“In the facilities that do have accessible equipment it would be nice if that was all set up in a location that there’s good flow, good space, but also that it’s not away from everybody else because you still want to be a part of the community and that equipment can still be used by the rest of the community.”

Layout

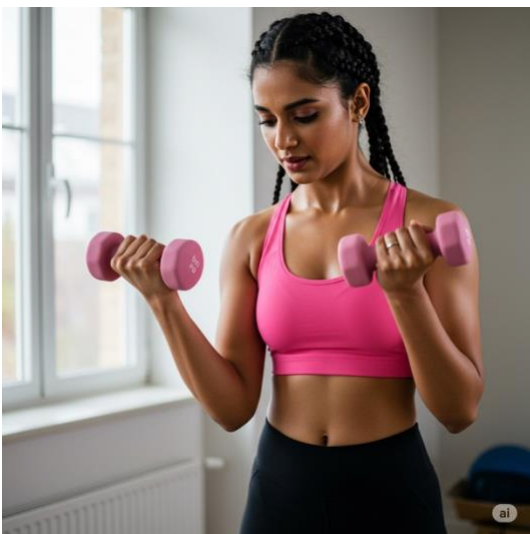
Gyms often prioritize equipment over space to maximize users and profit, neglecting diverse users with mobility devices, exercising with a partner, or doing bodyweight activities (e.g., yoga). Balancing space and equipment depends on factors, like facility size, membership, and equipment needs. While the layout of one gym may differ from the next, it is critical to provide accessible pathways, open space, and logically grouped equipment (e.g., upper/lower body, cardio/strength).

Suggestions for Layout

- To support safe transfers and easy passage, provide enough space between machines for both a mobility device and another user
- Integrate adapted equipment with other machines to foster community
- Placement of equipment in multi-floor gyms
 - Adapted equipment should be most accessible
 - Offering the same equipment on each floor - if possible - lets users choose where they feel most comfortable
- Crowding, privacy, and intimidation can be improved with spacious or dispersed layouts
- If feasible, gyms should be a single level

Accessing Equipment

Access to equipment is central to gym accessibility and inclusion, as many rely on gyms for exercise and recovery resources. Factors like adaptive equipment, assistive devices, upkeep, and user behaviour all impact accessibility. Ensuring accessibility requires collaboration among organizations, staff, and users to work together.



Suggestions for Equipment Accessibility

- Offer adaptive equipment/devices (e.g., resistance bands, cuff weights, removeable seats, chairs)
- Have wide-ranging weight increments (e.g., 1 lb, 3 lb dumbbells)
- Allow users to try, rent, or borrow equipment
- Ask about adapted personal training
- Provide raised mats or massage tables in stretching areas for any user who has trouble getting on and off the floor
- Install grab bars in the stretching area
- Return or store equipment when not in use
- Do not obstruct pathways or equipment (e.g., dumbbell racks)

1.3 Sensory Experiences

Music and Lighting

Music and lighting can impact accessibility, enjoyment, and motivation for diverse users, including people who are sensitive to noise and glare.

“Some people, for example, with autism, the music would be too loud or the lights too bright... and I think we should consider sensory items.”

Suggestions for Providers and Users

- Keep background music low – offer sensory friendly or quiet hours
- Use headphones to enjoy your own music and help keep the space welcoming for everyone
- Play different music genres, including upbeat and easy listening options
 - Consider the type of crowd at different times of the day
- Match music and lighting to activities to motivate users and create immersive experiences (e.g., lower light and soft music for yoga classes, sync music tempo with changing lights in spin classes)
- Consider the needs of people with low vision when making decisions related to lighting
- Add windows for natural light, if possible
- Maintain a comfortable temperature (e.g., use fans, space heaters)



1.4 Access to Information

Before using an elevator, change room, or equipment, users need information to help them navigate or operate within a space. Often, signage is used to acquire this information. **Organizations need to consider the design of signage** – including the location, colours, contrast, format, font type, and size – to ensure all users can access, comprehend, and use information. Additional cues like colour-coded pathways and equipment can further support navigation.

Wayfinding to and within the Gym

“It would be helpful to have a map at the front entrance for somebody to investigate visually where they’re going to be going. And also have Braille incorporated into that for a blind or a low vision person.”

Signs support various activities like finding items and learning exercises, so consider signage inside and outside the gym. Use diverse formats to share directions, equipment instructions, rules (e.g., cleaning reminders), and other key information to ensure accessibility for users with vision loss, colour vision deficiencies, or diverse language and cognitive skills.

Suggestions for Signage

- Eye level, consider different heights
- Multiple locations
- High contrast between font and background
- High contrast between background and surrounding wall/decor
- Big enough to easily read, particularly for overhead signs
- Simple language on signs/machines
- Multiple formats for signs/instructions
 - Braille, images, and/or universal symbols with text
 - Audio descriptions
 - Video demonstrations
 - Different languages

Suggestions for Wayfinding in the Gym

- Colour code objects/locations
 - E.g., brightly coloured elevators
- Colour code pathways to and throughout the gym, indicating walking versus exercise spaces
- Identify adapted equipment
 - E.g., colour coded machines, designated stickers or markings

Potential Organizational Considerations

- Clarity of colour coded systems
- Appealing and functional design
- Cost of painting, flooring
- Cost of adding or replacing signs
- Allowable modifications in building codes, franchise rules, or rental agreements

Want to Learn More?

Links to Additional Resources

Knowing About the Facility

- [UCSF Accessible Publicity Materials](#)
- [Canadian Marketing Association](#)
- [WCAG 2.0](#)
- [The ad accessibility conundrum: community perspectives](#)
- [CNIB: Clear print guidelines](#)

Arriving at the Facility

- [Government of Ontario: How to provide accessible transportation](#)
- [Canadian Transport Agency: Accessible transportation guides](#)
- [OSG: AODA accessible transportation requirements](#)
- [AODA: Accessible parking](#)
- [Accessible parking Canada](#)
- [UberWAV \(Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles\)](#)

Entering the Facility

- [AODA: Accessible entrances](#)
- [Tips for accessible entrances](#)
- [RHF: Universal Design recommendations for entrances and automated doors](#)
- [A Universal Design approach for entrances and pathways](#)
- [A Universal Design approach for stairs, ramps, and elevators](#)

Accessing Equipment

- [Strong Education: Creating inclusive fitness spaces](#)
- [Accessible fitness equipment factsheet](#)
- [Resolution Fitness: Adaptive and wheelchair accessible equipment](#)
- [All Things Adaptive: Adaptive equipment products](#)

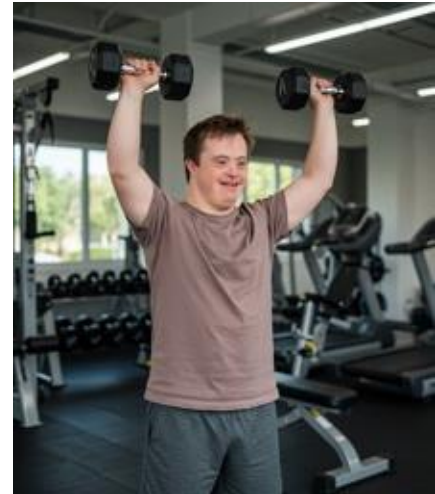
Music and Lighting

- [Lighting design tips for gyms](#)
- [The psychology of gym lighting](#)
- [CNIB: Lighting](#)
- [Hearing Health Foundation: Dangerous noise levels in gyms](#)
- [Life Hearing Solutions: Fitness facilities and hearing loss](#)

Wayfinding to and within the Gym

- [A Universal Design approach: Signage design](#)
- [Braille Literacy Canada: Signage guidelines](#)
- [The Wayfinding Expert: Universal Design examples](#)
- [CNIB: Accessible signage](#)
- [CNIB: Signage](#)
- [CNIB: Tactile maps](#)





2.0 Creating an Inclusive Culture

A sense of belonging and inclusion is key to encouraging people of all backgrounds to take part in gym-based exercise. When users feel welcome, supported, and see others like themselves, they are **more likely to get and stay involved in gym-based exercise**. This section offers tips for fitness providers, staff, and users to help build a gym culture that's welcoming, respectful, and accepting of everyone.

2.1 Features that Reflect Inclusion

Gyms that are designed for, welcome, and support diverse bodies help build socially inclusive cultures. Features like accessible design, inclusive practices, and diverse promotional materials can **help all users feel seen, valued, and like they belong**.

“Having the front desk being right there and having staff there to help welcome is very important. You want that friendly environment and that welcoming feeling. You really want to ensure the longevity of them using the facilities, especially if they're signing up.”

Physical Signs of Social Inclusion

The physical features of a gym reflect its values and who it aims to include. Things like brochures, posters, digital displays, and the layout of the space can influence how safe, welcome, and included users feel.

Tangible Factors with Social Meaning

- Upkeep of equipment, doors, and elevators
- Timely maintenance and repairs
- Well-maintained sidewalks and parking lots
- Media promoting accessibility
- Signs encouraging acceptance of all users
- Front desks with staff at the entrance
- Social areas, such as coffee bars
- Arrangement and integration of equipment
- Quiet spaces, bookable rooms for privacy or users with social anxiety

Diverse Bodies

Gyms that show diverse bodies – sizes, abilities, and fitness levels – in their pictures, media, and membership help users feel like they belong. This signals that the gym is open to, values, and supports all people. Having diverse staff also improves communication, programming, and cultural understanding, making the space more inclusive and comfortable for everyone.

Suggestions for Diversity/Representation

- Recognize and support multi-cultural holidays
- Use promotional materials that feature diverse bodies and exercise types
- Use member engagement features, like whiteboards with holidays or activities
- Intentionally recruit diverse staff
- Ensure staff are ready to assist all users, including people with a disability
- Create an environment that visibly includes and supports users with a disability

2.2 Quality Service and Communication

Quality customer service that **focuses on building strong relationships with users is key** to creating a welcoming and respectful gym environment. **Clear, open, and accessible communication** can facilitate relationship building. When members feel valued, respected, and supported, **gyms become more inclusive for everyone.**

“I think for a lot of people gyms are a scary place. So having that welcoming or that feeling of being seen, it really increases the chance of you going back, so increasing the retention. And the amount of people that are going to want to go to the gym.”

Welcoming and Respectful Staff

Building relationships is key to creating a welcoming and respectful gym. When staff treat every member with respect, offer support, and make users feel valued, gyms become more inclusive and accessible for all. Every staff member should be trained to offer a warm welcome and treat each person with dignity, kindness, and professionalism – regardless of ability, background, or identity.



Suggestions for Inclusive Communities

- Greet and offer assistance to all users as they enter
- Staff should have a friendly, positive, and helpful attitude
- Staff should circulate and check in with users, offering help as needed
- Treat everyone with respect, listen openly, and avoid being condescending or pushy
 - Be patient and allow extra time for communication when needed
 - Use person-first language, unless otherwise preferred by the individual
- Host social events for members (e.g., summer BBQ)
- Focus on building relationships by getting to know users—use names and ask questions to connect

Supporting All

Inclusive gyms rely on open communication between users, staff, and providers. Users should feel empowered to share their needs and concerns, while staff and providers must actively seek feedback, listen, and follow through with meaningful improvements.

Suggestions for Supportive Gyms

- Always ask before offering help to others
- Display signs encouraging users to request help or adaptations
- Involve people with a disability and members in operational or program decisions
- Providers should ask for input/feedback from users
- Staff/providers should listen to user feedback to identify areas for improvement
- Staff should pay attention to users during workouts, offering help and enforcing rules when necessary
- Users should share concerns, experiences, and suggestions
- Users should ask for assistance when needed

Communicating with Users

Providing both direct (asking staff in person) and indirect (notification systems) ways to contact staff allows users to choose the method they are most comfortable with. This supports independence while ensuring everyone can access help when needed.

Suggestions for Communication Systems

- Add cards to machines or give users cards to display a red side if they do not want help or a green side if they do
- Link user profiles/intake forms – including communication and accessibility needs – to memberships
- Install call stations with buttons for users to notify staff when they need assistance

2.3 Behavioural Expectations for Members

Showing respect for others and the gym – like cleaning equipment, putting weights back, and being aware of those around you – **helps create a more comfortable and accessible experience**. While user behaviour can shape gym culture, **it is not always easy to manage**. That is why **clear, respectful strategies for enforcing rules** and expectations **are essential**.

"If I'm in a facility and I feel socially awkward or I don't feel connected to the space or the people, I just don't really want to be there. We kind of talk about that non-judgmental environment too. If you're being judgmental, that's not creating community."

Enforcing Behavioural Policies/Peacekeeping

Enforcing behavioural policies in gyms can be challenging, but it is key to creating a respectful and welcoming space for everyone. Staff should enforce rules calmly and respectfully, teach users how to behave in the gym, and provide a clear, easy-to-read code of conduct. Regular reminders and clear expectations help ensure that all users respect each other, the staff, and the space.

Suggestions for Peacekeeping

- Develop and enforce a clear code of conduct for staff and users
- Teach staff to enforce rules respectfully and fairly
- Have new members review rules, attend an orientation, and show them key expectations (e.g., cleaning equipment)
- Offer simple, easy-to-read versions of policies
- Post signs with key rules and reminders throughout the gym

Respecting the Space and Each Other

Gym rules help create a safe, accessible, and inclusive space for everyone. When users do not follow rules, it can be frustrating and seen as inconsiderate or disrespectful. Users need to be mindful of how their behaviour affects others to create a positive, accessible environment for all.



Suggestions for Respecting the Gym and Users

- Users need to clean equipment after use
 - Ensure cleaning supplies are easily accessible
 - Spray bottles may not be easy for all people to squeeze or pick up – consider wipes or offer help with cleaning
- Staff should clean daily/routinely
- If feeling unwell, wear a mask or stay home
- Do not interrupt people while they are working out
 - Ask before offering assistance
- Leave space for other users to move around you
- Be mindful of where people are when you are moving around them

2.4 Culture Shifts

Gyms are often linked to exclusive cultures shaped by narrow ideas about gender, “ideal” bodies, and acceptable training goals. This can make **gyms feel intimidating**, especially for beginners or people with different body types or fitness goals. **Shifting the focus from appearance and performance to health, function, and social connection** can help make gyms more inclusive and welcoming for everyone.

Concerns about Culture

Many people feel uncomfortable in gyms, especially when they are new. Common reasons include feeling judged, out of place, or insecure about their bodies. Confusing equipment, unwelcoming behaviour, and unrealistic fitness standards can also discourage people from using gyms.

Factors affecting Poor Cultures

- Gender stereotypes (e.g., men should lift heavy)
- Pressure to meet appearance or fitness “ideals”
- Stigma toward users who do not fit ideals (e.g., people with a disability, larger bodies, low muscle tone)
- Steep learning curves (e.g., unfamiliar equipment or terminology)
- Aggressive or disrespectful behaviour (e.g., excessive grunting, dropping weights, disagreements)
- Worries about intimidation, insecurity, and judgement

Redefining Fitness in Gyms

Gyms can be more welcoming by focusing on community, respect, and movement for health instead of on appearance or performance. Everyone has their own reasons for going to the gym and it is important to create a non-judgemental culture. Create rules and practices to encourage kindness and respect among staff and users.

Suggestions for Inclusive Cultures

- Accept people of all skill levels and abilities
- Create policies that promote respect, acceptance, and discourage judgment
- Highlight the gym as a place for mental and physical health, and social connection – not just intense exercise and performance
- Celebrate the joy of movement and support all goals, from strength to mobility
- Normalize adaptations for gym-based exercise
- Listen to clients to balance intensity and motivation with their individual needs
- Hire or train staff in functional and adapted fitness
- Build community and belonging through inclusive media, programs, and initiatives

Offer options like adaptive workouts, support for different abilities, and practical fitness for everyday life. Some people like to work out alone, while others enjoy being social – gyms should make space for both.

Want to Learn More?

Links to Additional Resources

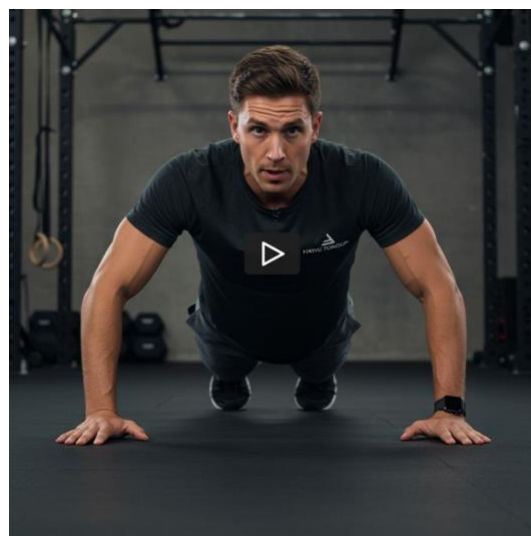
Communicating with Users

- [A Universal Design approach: Face-to-face communication](#)
- [A Universal Design approach: Spoken and signed communication](#)
- [A Universal Design approach: Communication for deaf and hard of hearing persons](#)

Enforcing Behavioural Policies/Peacekeeping

- [How to create a code of conduct](#)
- [A Universal Design Approach: Dealing with difficult situations](#)
- [Gym etiquette 101](#)
- [Planet Fitness: A beginner's guide to gym etiquette](#)





3.0 Building Inclusive Programs

Gyms are a valuable resource for exercise, but **to support diverse users, they must offer programs and training tailored to different needs.** Building exercise knowledge and providing inclusive programs **helps users start and stick with gym-based exercise.** This section offers tips to help staff and providers deliver inclusive exercise.

3.1 Providing Inclusive Exercise

Embracing Diversity

Many trainers lack the training or experience needed to work with diverse populations, making it hard for users to find safe, accessible support. Hiring staff from diverse backgrounds and with certifications in adapted training helps gyms better serve all users. **Diverse, well-trained staff lead to more inclusive programming and promote shared learning** among team members.

Suggestions for Inclusive Exercise

- Listen to clients' needs, abilities, and goals
- Personalize workouts with different intensity levels and adaptations
- Train instructors to work with older adults, people with a disability, and users with chronic conditions
- Hire staff from diverse backgrounds
- Teach staff to communicate effectively with all users and provide accessible customer service
- Provide and encourage ongoing training to employees through internal programs and external resources

3.2 Supporting Exercise Adherence

Improving Exercise-Related Knowledge

For users to stick with gym-based exercise, they need to **build confidence and knowledge.** It is easy for providers, staff, and experienced users to forget how overwhelming gyms can be at first. **Clear instructions on equipment and staff can make a big difference** in closing knowledge gaps.

Suggestions for Exercise Knowledge

- Have staff walk users through the layout and point out accessible features
- Provide resources (videos, manuals) so users can learn how to adjust and use equipment
 - Consider adapted equipment and people with diverse abilities
- Educate users on exercise types, progressions, and injury prevention
- Host inclusive fitness days with adapted classes, guest speakers with a disability, and/or booths about disability and exercise
- Offer training in various formats and price ranges or short-term punch passes
- Host (free) orientation sessions or rookie hours
- Use goal setting to support learning and progress

Want to Learn More?

Links to Additional Resources

Training Resources

- [Strong Education: Adaptive training courses](#)
- [Adaptive and Inclusive Trainer \(AIT\) certification course](#)
- [CSEP learning modules](#)
- [Disability and exercise training resources](#)

Tips and Recommendations

- [Guide to gym accessibility](#)
- [Trainer Academy: Communication skills](#)
- [Special Olympics: Creating an inclusive gym](#)





4.0 Transforming Organizations

Gym owners, managers, and policymakers play a key role in making gyms accessible. They **are responsible for removing barriers and creating inclusive spaces** – from the layout and equipment to the rules and policies. **To create real change**, it is important to **think carefully about how accessibility is approached, put into practice, and improved over time**. This section offers practical tips to help guide that process.

4.1 Implementing Accessibility

Accessibility can seem complex and demanding in terms of time, money, and effort. **With thoughtful planning, it becomes more manageable** and can simplify access for diverse users.⁴ By viewing **accessibility as an ongoing process**, strategies can be tailored to fit each gym's unique layout, users, staff, and programs. Consider small adjustments that can have a large impact.

“We have tried to be accessible, but I'm just thinking that there's probably an easier way to make access to the spaces that we have. There's things on different levels. There's an elevator, but that elevator's kind of out of the way.”

Approaching Accessibility

Accessible design often focuses on meeting building codes and legal requirements.³ True accessibility goes beyond compliance.³ Inclusive approaches, like universal design, aim to create spaces that everyone can use – without relying on separate accommodations. This helps include more users, reduces stigma, and makes it easier to support diverse users from the start.

Suggestions for Providers

- Aim for a simple, inclusive design instead of multiple separate accommodations
 - E.g., create one main entrance that is accessible to all
 - E.g., place stairs and elevators together for equal access
 - E.g., provide wide parking spots for anyone who needs extra space, like people with a disability or pregnant persons
- Think about all aspects of accessibility (e.g., physical, social, informational, program, organizational factors)
- Consider all areas of the gym – e.g., equipment, signage, layout, staff training
- Align accessibility policies with actual plans and available supports

Accessibility as a Process

Creating an accessible gym can feel overwhelming for providers, especially if they believe there is only one chance to get it right. Instead of viewing accessibility as an outcome, it should be seen as an ongoing process. Taking a step-by-step approach – with planning, implementation, and regular evaluation – makes accessibility more manageable and effective.⁴

Suggestions for Providers

- Create a clear, thoughtful plan to build or improve gym accessibility
- Make a list of accessibility features or improvements, then prioritize based on importance, cost, time, and other constraints
- Make sure changes meet the needs of diverse users (e.g., people with Down Syndrome, amputations, or vision loss)
- Regularly assess gym accessibility and look for ways to improve
 - Observe and collaborate with users of all abilities
 - Gather feedback through surveys, forums, and conversations
 - Use tools like the AIMFREE or toolkits from disability organizations
 - Know accessibility standards like the AODA
 - Consult expert organizations (e.g., ACSM, CSEP, CNIB) for guidance

Contextualized Implementation

Every gym is different, as such accessibility strategies should be tailored to fit the layout, users, staff, and programs of each facility. Factors like the facility's age, location, governing bodies, evolving laws and best practices, and the needs and preferences of users all play a role in shaping the most effective approach.



Factors affecting Practice

- New builds have more flexibility to improve accessibility than existing gyms
- Each gym is unique in layout, users, staff, programs, and resources
- Many tools use U.S. standards; Canadian gyms have different regulations
- Guidelines and resources are often general and must be adapted to each gym
- Guidelines and resources need to be regularly reviewed and updated
- What is accessible for one group may not work for another
 - E.g., smooth floors help wheelchair users but may pose a fall risk for others
- Not all people with the same disability or assistive device need the same support
- User preferences vary, including privacy needs and music choices

4.2 Advancing Accessibility

Creating accessible gyms that are inclusive of people with a disability **requires widespread change. Users, providers, communities, and policymakers need to work together** to advance accessible practices.

Encouraging Change

Encouraging providers to prioritize accessibility involves highlighting its benefits as a human right and a smart business move. Accessible gyms include people with a disability, benefit all users, and can boost membership and profits. For lasting impact, accessibility should be embedded in policies, practices, and the space itself. Building partnerships can also strengthen and support change.⁴

“It’s that commitment to EDI that will drive everything from your facility design to the equipment you purchase to time and energy spent on training your staff, appropriately.”

Suggestions for Users, Providers, Communities, and Policymakers

- Highlight importance of exercise and accessibility for people with a disability
- Show how accessibility can grow membership and boost profits
- Educate about the AODA and the risks of not being accessible
- Explain how accessibility supports gym owners' goals and strategic plans
- Remember that accessibility benefits everyone
- Collaborate with gyms, community groups, universities, healthcare providers, researchers, governments, and people with a disability to improve accessibility
- Lead by example – make accessibility a core value, starting with leadership and shared with staff and users

Supporting Implementation

To successfully implement accessibility, providers need support and resources from policymakers. Partnerships, grant programs, and fundraising initiatives can offer the financial and practical help needed to create more accessible gyms.

Suggestions for Providers and Policymakers

- Work with equipment companies to showcase adaptive tools at the gym
- Establish an advisory board with diverse people and professionals to support decision-making and help with grant applications
- Partner with organizations (like not-for-profits) to help fund accessibility efforts
- Develop, find, and use resources, such as:
 - Funding programs for people with a disability, grants for accessibility
 - Provincial disability organizations (e.g., Spinal Cord Injury Ontario, Disability Alliance BC)
- Use sponsorships, fundraisers to lower costs

Want to Learn More?

Links to Additional Resources

Implementing Accessibility

- [How to develop an accessibility transition plan](#)
- [Portland Community College: Accessibility transition plan](#)
- [Universal Design: Process, principles, and applications](#)
- [Lakeshore Foundation: Inclusive fitness centres](#)
- [Program evaluation toolkit](#)
- [Accessibility Instruments Measuring Fitness and Recreation Environments \(AIMFREE\)](#)
- [Accessibility checklists](#)
- [Accessibility checker](#)

Advancing Accessibility

- [Enabling Accessibility Fund](#)
- [Age-friendly and accessibility grants](#)
- [Ontario Trillium Foundation grants](#)
- [Canada-Ontario Job Grant](#)
- [Inclusive Spaces Program Grant](#)
- [Jumpstart Community Development Grants](#)
- [Passport program](#)



Conclusion

This guide is for gym owners, managers, staff, users, and policymakers to help make gyms more accessible and inclusive. It covers physical design, communication, social inclusion, adaptive exercise, and system-wide change. In addition to using this guide, **it is important to collaborate with people who have a disability.** Their lived experience is valuable and can help owners and managers adapt suggestions to their gym, inform new ideas, and plan for accessibility. Involving people with a disability **ensures plans for spaces, programs, and policies are relevant and effectively meet their needs.**

Next Steps for this Guide

The suggestions within this guide are just a start. In the same way that accessibility should be viewed as a continuous process, this guide should evolve over time. It should be evaluated, improved, and updated as needed. Next steps may include:

- User testing to improve accessibility, clarity, relevance, and completeness
- Implementation research evaluating feasibility and adoption within gyms
- Producing the guide in different formats (e.g., audio, video, Braille)
- Adapting the guide to different facilities (e.g., sports clubs, private vs public gyms), countries, or populations (e.g., chronic conditions, older adults)
- Creating training modules to help gym owners, managers, and staff
- Summarizing the guide into a checklist

Additional Resources

The links in this section include additional information about accessibility standards, universal design, inclusive exercise, communication, and organizations or tools that may be useful for learning about or improving the inclusion of diverse people.

Videos

- [Tedx Talks: Inclusive fitness opportunities](#)
- [Tedx Talks: The need for universal design](#)
- [10 unspoken gym rules](#)
- [Building Bridges: Interacting with adults who have developmental disabilities](#)
- [Special Olympics: Inclusive gyms](#)

Organizations & Tools

- [2024 #BeActive Day Campaign](#)
- [Canadian Disability Participation Project \(CDPP\)](#)
- [Canadian National Institute for the Blind \(CNIB\)](#)
- [National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability](#)
- [The Steadward Centre](#)
- [UNICEF: Accessibility toolkit](#)

Reading

- [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#)
- [Canadian Standards Association: Accessible design for the built environment](#)
- [Fitness venues and accessibility](#)
- [Facility Accessibility Design Standard](#)
- [Inclusive Physical Space Framework](#)
- [Lakeshore Foundation: Serving clients with disabilities](#)
- [CNIB: Clearing our path version 2.0](#)
- [Summary of Accessible Canada Act](#)

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Fallon Mitchell is a PhD candidate in Kinesiology at the University of Windsor. As a youth athlete and avid exerciser, physical activity and sport have been a part of Ms. Mitchell's life for many years. This project was inspired by her desire to enable diverse populations to experience the joys and benefits of physical activity, particularly in gyms. She works with diverse groups, including older adults and individuals with a disability, to advance equitable exercise opportunities.

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