



UNIVERSAL DESIGN & DISABILITY JUSTICE

"Built-in, not bolted on" is a philosophy rooted in **Universal Design** and **disability justice**. It's about shifting from *adding accommodations for some* to *designing for everyone from the start*.

What "Bolted On" Looks Like (The Old Model)

This is when a space or activity is designed for a "typical" participant, and then accommodations are added later as exceptions for those who need them.

Examples:

- "We'll have chairs, but we can grab a yoga ball from storage if someone asks."
- "The workshop is lecture-style, but we can email you the slides afterward."
- "We usually do loud group discussions, but we can let you sit in the hallway if it's too much."

The problem:

This puts the burden on the participant to **ask**, explain themselves, and be "the exception." It assumes a default and treats everyone else as a modification. It's exhausting and othering.

What "Built-In" Looks Like (Our Model)

This means the program is **designed flexibly from day one**—so that no one has to ask for permission to exist comfortably.

Examples in our program:

Area	Bolted On	Built-In
Lighting	"We can turn off some lights if it's bothering you."	Low, warm lighting is the default. No fluorescent buzz.
Seating	"We have a wobble cushion somewhere."	Variety of seating options are always out: chairs, floor cushions, yoga balls, standing option.
Participation	"You don't have to share if you don't want to."	Sharing is always optional, with multiple ways to participate (verbal, written, art-only). Never singled out.
Sensory	"Let us know if you need headphones."	Headphones, fidgets, and stim objects are visibly available to anyone, no sign-out or explanation needed.
Schedule	"We can let you arrive late if needed."	Flexible arrival/departure is part of the design. No sign-in sheet, no shame.
Communication	"We can write things down if that helps."	Instructions are always given verbally AND visually. Multiple formats from the start.

Why This Matters for Your Group

For **neurodivergent, non-binary young adults**, the "bolted on" model often carries baggage:

- Years of being "too much" or "not enough"
- Having to advocate endlessly for basic needs
- Masking to avoid standing out
- Feeling like an inconvenience

Built-in design says:

You don't have to explain yourself here. We already believed you.

How to Apply This Thinking

Ask yourself at every stage:

"Is there a way to make this accessible to more people without requiring them to ask?"

Some examples for your art program:

Instead of: "We have markers if you need them."

Try: Markers, crayons, coloured pencils, and collage materials already on every table.

Instead of: "You can step out if you get overwhelmed."

Try: A designated quiet corner with low lighting, a visual "do not disturb" option, and no questions asked.

Instead of: "We welcome all genders."

Try: Intake forms with fill-in-the-blank pronouns. Facilitators introduce themselves with name + pronouns. No assumptions.

Instead of: "Let me know if you need instructions repeated."

Try: Instructions on a handout *and* on a slide *and* spoken slowly with visual examples.

A Simple Way to Explain It

If someone asks what you mean by this, you could say:

"Most programs are designed for a 'typical' person, and then accommodations are added later if someone asks. We're flipping that. We're designing our space, schedule, and activities to be flexible and welcoming to everyone from the very beginning—so no one has to feel like a burden just to participate fully."

Let's walk through **key areas of your program** and apply the *built-in, not bolted on* lens. I'll offer concrete shifts in language, design, and practice.

I've organized this into four domains:

1. **Intake & Communication** (before anyone arrives)
2. **Physical & Sensory Environment** (the space itself)
3. **Facilitation & Activities** (how you run things)
4. **Culture & Belonging** (the unspoken atmosphere)

1. Intake & Communication

Registration Form / Interest Survey

Bolted On

"Do you have any accessibility needs? Please list."

Gender: Male / Female / Other

No mention of sensory or communication preferences.

Built-In

Multiple checkboxes for common accommodations + write-in option. *All options are presented as ordinary, not special.*

Gender: _____ (fill-in blank)
Pronouns: _____ (fill-in blank)
Name you use: _____

"Doors open at 4:30. Activities begin at 5:00. Arrive whenever works for you."

"We'll provide instructions in multiple formats. We have fidgets, headphones, and low-sensory spaces available to anyone."

Built-in shift:

Assume *everyone* benefits from clarity, choice, and low pressure. Normalize access from the first click.

Pre-Program Email

Bolted on:

"We are committed to accessibility. Let us know if you need anything."

Built-in:

"Here's what you can expect when you arrive:

- Low, warm lighting throughout
- A variety of seating options (floor, couch, chairs, standing)
- Noise-cancelling headphones and fidgets available on the table—no sign-out needed
- A quiet corner if you need to step away
- No one will be called on to share or speak

This space is designed to be flexible. Come as you are, leave when you need to, participate in whatever way feels right."

Built-in shift:

Describe the accommodations *already in place*. This tells participants: *We already thought of you. You don't have to ask.*

2. Physical & Sensory Environment

Lighting

Bolted On

Fluorescent overhead lights on. Can turn some off if requested.

Built-In

Warm, dimmable lamps or string lights as primary source. Fluorescents off entirely.

Built-in shift:

Default = low, warm, flicker-free. No one has to announce they're sensory-sensitive.

Seating

Bolted On

Chairs in a circle. Can grab a cushion if someone asks.

Built-In

Mix of chairs, floor cushions, yoga balls, low couch. Already set up when people arrive.

Built-in shift:

Variety is visible and normalized. No "special" seating area for those who can't do chairs.

Sound

Bolted On

Built-In

"We can keep it quieter if needed."

Low, consistent background sound (or silence). No sudden loud noises. Headphones visible and accessible to anyone.

Built-in shift:

Sensory safety is the baseline, not a response.

Scent

Bolted On

Built-In

"Please avoid strong perfumes."

Scent-free policy clearly stated in all materials. No air fresheners, scented markers, or cleaning products with fragrance.

Built-in shift:

Policy, not request. Removes the burden of confrontation.

3. Facilitation & Activities

Instruction Style

Bolted On

Verbal instructions only. "I can repeat that or write it down if needed."

"Any questions?"

Built-In

Instructions given verbally + visually (slide, handout, or drawn example). Available for reference throughout.

"I'm going to pause here. You can ask questions aloud, write them down, or just try the first step and see what comes up."

Built-in shift:

Multiple processing modes are the norm. No one has to disclose a learning difference to get information in a way they can use.

Sharing / Show & Tell

Bolted On

"Who wants to share what they made?"

Built-In

"We have time for anyone who'd like to show or talk about their work. You can also pass, share one word, hold up your art without speaking, or write something down for me to read aloud. All ways are welcome."

Built-in shift:

Participation is a menu, not a binary (share or don't share). No spotlight on those who opt out.

Prompts & Creative Direction

Bolted On

"Today we're making collages about our feelings."

Built-In

"Today's prompt is 'a feeling I don't have words for.' You can make a collage, draw, write, or just play with materials and see what happens. The prompt is a suggestion, not an assignment."

Built-in shift:

Art as exploration, not compliance. No wrong way to engage.

Time & Pacing

Bolted On

Strict start/end times. Activities packed tightly.

Built-In

Built-in transition time. Flexibility to stretch, stim, rest. "We'll start in about 10 minutes—settle in however you need."

Built-in shift:

The schedule serves the humans, not the other way around.

4. Culture & Belonging

Facilitator Positioning

Bolted On

Facilitator stands at front, directs group.

Built-In

Facilitator sits among participants, models imperfection, shares their own art (if comfortable).

Built-in shift:

Power is flattened. This is a *with* space, not a *to* space.

Language Norms

Bolted On

"Ladies and gentlemen..." or
"Hey guys."

Built-In

"Folks," "everyone," "y'all," or no collective address. Facilitators model
name + pronouns in introductions.

Built-in shift:

Gender is not assumed. Correction is not placed on participants.

Mistakes & Flexibility

Bolted On

Facilitator apologizes for
oversight, adds accommodation
later.

Built-In

Facilitator names upfront: "We're learning too. If something isn't working
for you, you can tell me directly, write it down, or tell another participant
and they can pass it along. We'll adjust as we go."

Built-in shift:

Feedback is expected and welcomed, not an interruption. No defensiveness.

Visual Cues

Bolted On

Unspoken norms. Reading the room required.

Built-In

Visual cues for quiet spaces, "do not disturb" options, break areas. Clear signage with simple icons.

Built-in shift:

You don't have to guess. The space tells you what's allowed.



🌟 Quick Audit Tool

You can run any element of your program through this checklist:

Question	Bolted On	Built-In
Does this require someone to ask?	✅	❌
Is the default setting flexible?	❌	✅
Does this assume a "normal" way to participate?	✅	❌
Can someone engage without explaining themselves?	❌	✅
Is access visible and ordinary?	❌	✅

🧱 Part 1: Physical Space Setup Checklist

Built-In Access, Not Bolted On

Use this before every session. Check twice, stress once.

LIGHTING

- Fluorescent overhead lights are **OFF**
- Warm, dimmable lamps or string lights are **ON**
- No flickering bulbs
- Dark corner available for those who need less light
- Natural light options available (blinds adjustable)

Ask: *Can someone enter and immediately feel calmer?*

SEATING

- At least **3 types** of seating are available:
 - Chairs (with and without arms)
 - Floor cushions / yoga mats
 - Low couch or bench
 - Standing option (high table or counter)
- Seating is **already set up** when participants arrive
- No "special needs" section—variety is distributed
- Clear pathways between seats (mobility aid accessible)

Ask: *Can someone choose where to sit without asking permission?*

SENSORY TOOLS

- **Visible and reachable** without asking:
 - Noise-canceling headphones (3+ pairs)
 - Fidget objects (variety: textured, silent, stretchy)
 - Weighted lap pad (optional but lovely)
- No sign-out sheet, no ID required
- Tools are clean and inviting, not hidden in a closet

Ask: *Does this say "yes, you belong here" without words?*

QUIET / REGULATION SPACE

- Designated low-stimulation area
- Not in main flow of traffic
- Seating facing away from activity (optional)
- Visual "do not disturb" option (e.g., small tent card, coloured cup)
- No expectation to explain why you're there

Ask: *Can someone step away without being noticed or questioned?*

SCENT & AIR

- Scent-free policy posted at entrance
- No plug-in air fresheners, candles, or essential oil diffusers
- Fragrance-free cleaning products used
- Windows open or air purifier running if possible

Ask: *Can someone with chemical sensitivity breathe easily here?*



INSTRUCTIONS & VISUAL CUES

- Agenda or schedule posted visibly (words + simple icons)
- Instructions available on paper/handout *and* visually displayed
- Restroom location clearly marked (all-gender signage)
- Quiet area labelled with neutral language ("Regulation Space," not "Time-Out Corner")
- Pronouns optional on name tags or tents, but space for them

Ask: *Can someone navigate this space without speaking to anyone?*



ART MATERIALS

- Materials are **already on tables** or clearly visible
- Variety of tools available without asking:
 - Markers, crayons, coloured pencils
 - Scissors (left- and right-handed)
 - Glue sticks, not just wet glue
 - Collage materials pre-cut (optional, reduces fine motor demand)
- Adaptive tools available (chunky grips, easy-scissors, etc.)
- No "special accommodation" bin—everything is integrated

Ask: *Can someone create without barriers or self-advocacy?*

ENTRANCE & ARRIVAL

- Entrance is well-lit but not harsh
- Someone (facilitator or volunteer) is visibly present to greet, not interrogate
- No sign-in sheet with timestamps
- Clear sightline from door to seating/activity area
- No assumption of lateness—arrival is a spectrum

Ask: *Does the first moment feel like relief or evaluation?*

GENERAL ATMOSPHERE

- Space is tidy but not sterile
- No loud or sudden noises (check door hinges, fans, etc.)
- Temperature comfortable (layers recommended, but space not freezing/overheated)
- Art on walls reflects diversity (gender, race, disability, neurotype)
- Participant work from previous sessions displayed (with consent)

Ask: *Does this space feel alive, not institutional?*

QUICK CHECK: BOLTED ON VS. BUILT-IN

 Bolted On

"We have fidgets if you need them."

"There's a quiet room down the hall."

"Let me know if the lights bother you."

"We have diverse art supplies somewhere."

"We welcome all genders."

 Built-In

Fidgets are already on the table.

The quiet corner is right here.

The lights are already low.

Supplies are out and visible.

Name/pronoun space is on every nametag.

Part 2: Facilitator Guide

Facilitating With Built-In Access

For facilitators working with neurodivergent, non-binary young adults (18–25)

Core Mindset Shifts

From

"I create the structure; participants follow it."

"My role is to teach art."

"Accommodations are for some people."

"Silence means disengagement."

"Participants should explain their needs."

To

"I hold the container; participants shape what fills it."

"My role is to create conditions for expression."

"Flexibility is for everyone."

"Silence might mean processing, resting, or feeling safe."

"The space already reflects their needs."

Opening Circle / Welcome

Instead of:

"Welcome everyone. We'll go around and say our names and why you're here."

Try:

"Welcome. Take a moment to settle in however you need. We'll start in a few minutes.

When we do introductions, you can share your name, how you're feeling today, or just pass. There's no wrong way to arrive here."

Introducing a Creative Prompt

Instead of:

"Today we're making zines about identity. Here's how you do it."

Try:

"Here's a prompt you can use or ignore: *Something I wish I'd been told sooner.*

You can make a zine, a single page, a drawing, a poem, or just play with materials.

The goal isn't to finish something impressive. The goal is to spend time with yourself and maybe some paper."

Offering Choice

Instead of:

"Would you rather draw or write?"

Try:

"You've got options here—drawing, writing, collage, or just sitting with your thoughts. All of them are valid. You can also switch halfway through."

Navigating Sharing Time

Instead of:

"Who wants to share first?"

Try:

"We have about 15 minutes for anyone who'd like to share what they made or talk about their process. You can:

- Hold up your work without speaking
- Read something you wrote
- Say a few words
- Pass completely
- Write something down for me to read aloud

No explanations needed. No pressure."

Responding to "I'm not good at art."

Instead of:

"Everyone is an artist!"

Try:

"This space isn't about skill. It's about expression. If you made a mark on paper, you did it right.

Also, you never have to show anyone what you make. Some people keep their art in their pocket all session. That's okay too."

When Someone Steps Away

Instead of:

"Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

Try:

Acknowledge with a glance or nod, then return focus to the group.

No follow-up unless they initiate. Trust that they know what they need.

Closing Circle

Instead of:

"What did you make today?"

Try:

"We'll close with one word or a sound—whatever's with you right now. You can pass, make a gesture, or just breathe into the circle. I'll start."

Facilitating with Neurodivergent Affirmation

Processing Styles

- **Verbal processors:** May think out loud. Allow space for this without requiring it of others.
- **Visual processors:** Instructions on paper/slide essential, not optional.
- **Non-linear processors:** May start in the middle, work on multiple things at once, or stare at paper for 30 minutes. All of it is creative process.

Masking & Safety

- Never praise someone for seeming "more comfortable" or "less anxious."
- Never say "You seem really relaxed today!"—this implies their usual state is a problem.
- Instead, offer neutral presence. Safety is felt, not performed.

Stimming

- Stimming is welcome and normal.
 - Facilitator can model: tap a rhythm, fiddle with clay, rock gently.
 - Never ask someone to stop unless it's causing harm (and then offer alternative, not suppression).
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Facilitating With Gender Affirmation

Language Norms

- Always introduce yourself with name + pronouns. ("I'm Sam, they/them.")
- Never say "preferred pronouns." Just "pronouns."
- Use "they/them" until told otherwise. If you make a mistake: brief correction, move on. No over-apology.

Group Address

- Avoid "ladies," "guys," "boys and girls."
- Use: folks, everyone, y'all, friends, humans, artists, the group.

Forms & Name Tags

- Name tags/ tents with space for:
 - Name you use
 - Pronouns (optional)
- Facilitator wears one visibly.

If Someone Corrects You

"Thank you. I'll get it right going forward."

Then do.

In-the-Moment Facilitation Tools

The Pause

Count to 7 silently after asking a question. Neurodivergent processing time often requires longer pauses. Don't fill the silence.

The Menu

Never offer a binary choice. Always offer a spectrum:

"You can share, pass, write it down, or just hold your art up."

The Invitation, Not Demand

"If you'd like feedback on your piece, you can leave it on the feedback table or ask me directly. You never have to."

The Soft Start

Not everyone transitions at the same speed. Announce a 10-minute settling window. Music optional. Chat optional. Silence optional.



After-Session Reflection

Ask yourself:

- Who spoke the most? Who spoke the least? Was that, okay?
- Did I accidentally centre one way of being?
- Did anyone have to ask for something that should have been already there?
- What will I build in next time?

 Quick Reference: Facilitator "Don't" List

Don't

Try Instead

"Does anyone have any questions?"

"I'll leave the instructions up. You can ask anytime, or just try things out."

"Let's go around the circle."

"We'll do a brief check-in. You can share or pass."

"That's so creative!"

"Thanks for sharing that with us." (Neutral, warm, low-pressure)

"You seem quiet today."

Say nothing. Let quiet be okay.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to..."

"Thanks for your patience. Let's adjust."