

Making your arts venue user-friendly for families with children and young people with disabilities

Produced by Imagineate

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The Family Friendly initiative

Imagineate has received funding from the Scottish Arts Council to run the Family Friendly Initiative over two years. The aim of the initiative is to improve children and families' access to and participation in arts activities by encouraging and supporting Scottish art venues to become more child and family friendly.

Making your arts venue user-friendly for families with children and young people with disabilities

All children and young people of all abilities have the right to take part in a wide range of leisure and recreational activities. These activities are not just about having fun, but also about gaining new skills and experience that can enhance their well being. The arts, in all forms, are beneficial for children and young people and can help them to express themselves more freely, developing and increasing their confidence and self-esteem. It is paramount that everyone feels comfortable and welcome in your venue.

It is equally important for disabled children and young people, parents and carers to feel that they too can share the same experience and joys of 'live' performance and workshops in a safe and comfortable environment. But for many disabled children and young people, and their families, there are many obstacles preventing them from enjoying artistic and cultural facilities, performances and events - both practically and socially. This should not be the case - they have rights enshrined in law.



What the Law says

Article 31 of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1981) states that "*children have the right to 'participate freely in cultural life and the arts' and that parties shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity*".

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) gives all disabled people important rights of access to everyday lives, rights that others take for granted. For further information on the Disability Discrimination Act check out www.disability.gov.uk.

Since October 1999 service providers have had to consider making reasonable adjustments to the way they deliver services so that disabled people can use them. From October 2004 venues must have done their best to 'remove physical features' which stop disabled people from accessing their venues. This includes improving facilities like lighting and signage, as well as bigger things like having lifts and ramps installed.

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Taking a holistic approach

Venues need to understand that for many families with disabled children and young people, the day does not begin when they arrive at your venue. Every aspect of making their visit an enjoyable one should be covered - from booking tickets, disabled parking facilities and physical access of your venue, to seating arrangements within your auditorium and toilets. If you care about your audience and the quality of their experience at your venue then you need to address such issues. Do this and they are more likely to return.

For some young disabled people, a problem is having no one to accompany him or her to a venue. Perhaps venues could explore setting up a 'buddy' system. If your venue has a 'friends' scheme, perhaps they could be encouraged to take this on, with some assistance and disability equality training.

Making people feel comfortable in your venue does not stop at the staff. Your disability policy needs to have the full support of your Board and Director, as well as all the staff. Perhaps you should be thinking about setting up user groups representing all your stakeholders so your policies, procedures, and maybe even programming are aimed at complete inclusion. Think about working more closely with disability agencies and families with disabled children and young people, so that you can provide the necessary information and support in ways that are most likely to make their visit an enjoyable one.

When queuing for their tickets it is important to realize that families don't want to stand out or be made to feel different just because their child or young person finds it difficult to queue. Perhaps think about this and have a policy on trying to help them so that they do not have to stand in a long queue.

• Parking

Where possible it is important for your venue to provide disabled parking facilities. Again, make sure that families know the right information about parking in advance. Providing this information at the time they book their tickets will help them immensely.

• Front of House

All staff should be trained to a standard level of competence on awareness of general access issues - not just wheelchair access. Your venue should constantly review its access arrangements, both as a minimum requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act, and from a customer focus.

A good idea is to develop a checklist of access needs, which you could discuss with your customers. Involving user groups means that you will get it right. Once your policy is in place it is crucial that front of house staff be fully trained to provide a consistent service for everyone.

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Overcoming barriers to inclusion

There are many barriers that face families with disabled children and young people. Here are some examples of barriers and some solutions that can assist in making their visit to your venue more positive.

• Box Office

All information should be easily accessible, with all your staff able to answer any queries for families with disabled children and young people. This will alleviate any difficulties that they might face when booking their tickets. For many, telephone queuing systems are frustrating, with no option for specific advice for families with disabled children and young people.

All your box office staff should be trained and made aware of concessions policies for families with disabled children and young people and how these concessions operate. A possible suggestion for you to consider, if you do not do it already, is that 'carers go free' to accommodate access issues.

For people making enquiries in person or by phone, it is important that all staff know the right information about access issues in your venue - including disabled facilities, concession arrangements and provision for parking. It is really important that you are honest with families on what you can offer them in advance of their visit.

• Signage

In some venues signage can be a problem and over designed for disabled people. It would be helpful if you could provide information in a variety of ways and formats. For example, large print, Braille or taped information will ensure that you are catering for every person's needs. A good approach is that all information is provided in simple words and pictures - remember a picture speaks a thousand words and is easy for people to understand. A good creative approach should incorporate as many of these as possible. Signage must be clear and at a height that is particularly useful for wheelchair users.



• Seating

Some children and young people find it difficult to stand for any length of time. Always make sure there are sufficient seating areas, particularly in theatre foyers. Your staff should always be on hand to assist families if needed.

When it comes to performance time it is important that families with disabled children and young people are able to sit together. For many families with disabled children and young people it has been the case that they do not end up sitting together. Think about allowing for more integrated seating arrangements. Families with a child or young person who is a wheelchair user would rather sit together like any other family, even if it means that they are separated but sitting directly behind. This would greatly add to families having an overall positive experience of your venue.

In some venues there are not enough wheelchair spaces. Sometimes they are positioned in relation to restricted viewing arrangements or on a higher level which could potentially be difficult in case of an evacuation procedure. If your venue does not have evacuation chairs it might be worth investing in some.

• Restaurants

In some cases restaurants do not actively welcome customers with disabilities or families with disabled children and young people. Theatre venues should be different. Families might just want to start or end their visit with a meal. For families with children and young people who are disabled it is important that they are made to feel welcome.

Some guidelines for your venue to think about to combat their fears:

- **Always make sure that your restaurant and bar staff are fully included in disability training. This could be a family's first port of call so it is important that all your staff should be fully aware of how to deal with disability issues.**
- **Think about having a designated seating area in your restaurant with specific space/s for wheelchair users.**

• Toilets

In some venues there are not enough accessible toilets. Many venues have only one or two accessible toilets, making waiting times during busy shows very long. Accessible toilets are often sited in men's and women's toilet blocks, making it difficult and embarrassing for carers of the opposite sex.

Toilets that are shared with baby changing facilities have not got enough floor space for wheelchair users, can be unhygienic and can involve long waiting times. Baby changing facilities are not the right height for changing older children.

The space within many accessible toilets is only the basic minimum, which does not allow for two adult carers and a wheelchair user.

Things to think about:

- **The number of accessible toilets in your venue needs to be related to the size of your venue.**
- **Baby-changing facilities should be separate, not part of an accessible toilet space.**
- **There should be large space toilets for families to keep safely together.**
- **There should be separate accessible toilets, rather than using space within male or female only toilet blocks.**

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Understanding different forms of disability

It's not always about physical disabilities. Sometimes a child or a young person's disability can be hidden. Sometimes the attitude of some staff and members of the public towards these children and young people can make many parents feel anxious. It is really important that all your staff (box office, front of house and catering staff) should be fully trained to be aware of different behavioural needs and how to react. This would lead to a better understanding about disabilities and be more sympathetic to the needs of families with disabled children and young people.



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Creating an inclusive programme

All venues should actively promote their performances and workshops to encourage and integrate disabled children and young people and their families. Perhaps when planning your programme you could include more supported arts/theatre workshops for children and young people to take part in. By including performances and workshops which can actively include disabled children and young people, you are allowing them to have more opportunities in which to participate in the arts in an integrated, safe and creative setting, which in turn raises awareness of different types of disability from an early age. Always insist on practitioners who have experience in dealing with disabled children and young people.



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A final thought

Remember the more you learn about disability issues the more families with disabled children and young people will be appreciative of the enjoyable and comfortable experience they have in your venue. It is also just as important for your staff to feel comfortable and competent when dealing with different forms of disabilities. You must never become complacent once your policy is in place. You can always keep learning and improving so that your audiences know that a visit to your venue will be a welcoming one.

'There's nothing that can't be done'

Much of the research for these guidelines has been taken from the Arts for All report produced by Mencap

Useful publications and websites

The Family Factor, written by Catherine Rose, published by East England Arts, 2002, t: 01223 500202,

Family friendliness, audit of recent research and recommendations for the development of family audiences in the arts, Pamela Pfrommer, Arts Council of England, 2002

Family Friendly Final Report, Arts About Manchester, 2001, t: 0161 238 4500, w: www.aam.org.uk, www.familyfriendly.org.uk

Websites

The Family Friendly Initiative
www.family-friendly.net

Centres for Curiosity and Imagination:
www.curiosityandimagination.org.uk

Engage - The National association for gallery education:
www.engage.org

Macrobert WOW project:
www.macrobert.stir.ac.uk/wow

Audience development website:
www.audiencedevelopment.org

Children's Museums website:
www.childrensmuseums.org

Hands on Europe:
www.hands-on-europe.net

The Family Friendly Initiative

The Family Friendly Initiative is funded by the Scottish Arts Council to support and encourage arts venues across Scotland to be more child and family friendly. The Family Friendly Initiative will support venues through:

Training - conferences and seminars throughout the year

Advice and information - on all aspects of being family friendly

A website - for free and up to date access to advice and details of events

Visit the website at: www.family-friendly.net

Future Family Friendly Initiative Guidelines planned:

- Family friendly services and facilities
- Family friendly customer care
- Programming for families
- Marketing to families
- Keeping your venue family friendly
- Others as requested by network participants