

## UNDERSTANDING AND CHALLENGING ABLEISM

Nearly one in five (19%) people in the United States are living with a disability. Disabilities can be physical or cognitive, visible or invisible, severe or minor. Ableism, which is bias or discrimination against people with disabilities, can take many forms, including: employment, housing and other institutional discrimination; lack of accessibility on streets, buildings and public transportation; stereotyping and ableist language, lack of media portrayals or stereotyped depictions of people with disabilities; bullying; low expectations, isolation and pity. While ableism is not often discussed when we talk about our identities and bias, it is important that students understand and reflect on examples of ableism in their own lives and in society because it contributes to a culture of intolerance and injustice.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand what ableism is and the many ways it manifests, reflect on specific examples of ableism and categorize them, and consider ways they can be allies and take actions to confront and challenge ableism.

See these additional ADL resources: Lesson plans “[‘The Present’ and Living with a Disability](#),” “[The Sound of Silence in Football: Derrick Coleman](#)” and “[Equal Treatment, Equal Access: Raising Awareness about People with Disabilities and Their Struggle for Equal Rights](#)” and [Children’s and Young Adult Books on Ability, Disability and Ableism](#).

[NOTE: In discussing the topic of people with disabilities with students, be sensitive and thoughtful about whether you have students with disabilities in your class, especially “invisible” ones or those not readily identifiable. Carefully consider the sensitivity of your students, the extent to which you have discussed the topic before and whether you might want to talk with those students in advance. If you haven’t already established ground rules in the classroom, use ADL’s resource [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#) to do so.]

**Grade Level:** grades 7–12

**Time:** 45–60 minutes

**Common Core Anchor Standards:** Reading, Speaking and Listening, Language

### Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand what ableism is and will be able to identify and categorize specific examples of ableism.
- Students will learn about the different ways in which ableism takes place: on interpersonal, institutional and internalized levels.
- Students will identify ways they can be allies and actions they can take to challenge ableism.

**Material:**

- [Categories of Ableism Worksheet](#) (one copy for each student)
- “Let’s Talk about Ableism: What it Means and Why Everyone Should Care” (Scary Mommy, [www.scarymommy.com/ableism-what-it-means-why-everyone-should-care/](http://www.scarymommy.com/ableism-what-it-means-why-everyone-should-care/), one copy for each student)

**Compelling Question:** What can we do about ableism in our society?

**Vocabulary:**

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s [“Glossary of Education Terms.”](#))

- ableist
- accommodations
- assessment
- cerebral palsy
- cognitive
- developmental disabilities
- dignity
- empathize
- equitable
- inclusion
- institution
- internalize
- intersectionality
- intervention
- invisible
- normalize
- oppression
- overt
- rehabilitation
- representation
- semantics
- sensitive

**WHAT IS ABLEISM?**

1. Ask students: *Does anyone know what ableism is?* Using what they know of the word “able” or “ability” and the suffix “ism,” elicit a definition as follows:

**Ableism** is prejudice and/or discrimination against people with mental and/or physical disabilities.

2. Ask students: *Do you think ableism refers to people with physical disabilities only? Why or why not?* Explain that although many people think of people with disabilities with mobility, hearing or vision impairments, disabilities can be mental/cognitive as well. Ask students: *What does the word disability mean?* Provide a definition as follows:

**Disability** is a mental or physical condition that restricts an individual's ability to engage in one or more major life activities (e.g. seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, communicating, sensing, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, working or caring for oneself).

3. Ask students to share examples of people with disabilities or you can share your own examples. Make sure that the examples cover different areas of disabilities.

**TURN AND TALK: EXAMPLES AND CATEGORIES OF ABLEISM**

1. Instruct students to turn to a person sitting next to them and respond to this question: *What are some examples of ableism that you have experienced personally or observed/witnessed?* Have students in their pairs take notes and record their combined responses on a piece of paper. Explain that they should not use names of people they know personally or specific situations that could identify individual people in their communities.

2. Bring the students back together and have them share aloud the examples on their lists and record them on the board/smart board. If something is shared more than once, put a check mark next to the item. Be as exhaustive as possible. The list might look something like this:
  - Assuming people with disabilities can't do anything and are helpless
  - Feeling pity for people with disabilities
  - Using offensive and ableist language and words like: retarded, lame, spaz, psychotic, crippled
  - People with disabilities thinking they can't do certain things because of their disability
  - Students with disabilities getting bullied in school
  - Assuming that you can see whether someone has a disability, assuming it is visible
  - The lack of people with disabilities in the media (e.g. movies, TV shows, apps, etc.)
  - Jobs not providing the necessary accommodations for people with disabilities to perform their work functions
  - Public transportation that isn't accessible for people with disabilities (mobility, sight, etc.)
  - People with disabilities being isolated from and/or invisible to the general population
3. After generating the list, explain to students that now they are going to place all of these examples into certain categories. The categories are ones that most forms of bias and discrimination fit into: **interpersonal**, **institutional** and **internalized**.
4. Ask students if they know what these words mean. Take a few minutes to hear their responses and then share the following explanations below. To help with the explanation, share (or ask for) examples of each, but the examples shared should be ones that do not involve ableism but rather focus on another manifestation of bias and prejudice.

**Interpersonal:** The idea that one identity/societal group is better than others gives permission for people to disrespect or mistreat individuals (jokes, slurs, stereotypes, threats, physical assaults, bullying).  
*Example: Someone makes a racist joke at a party.*

**Institutional:** The idea that one group is better than another gets rooted in the institutions—the laws, legal system, police, education/schools, hiring, housing, media images, political power—so that discriminatory or unequal practices are condoned and implemented. *Example: Women earn less than men for doing a similar job, and Black and Latino women earn less than White women.*

**Internalized:** The idea that one group is better than others gets internalized so that people start to believe the stereotypes, prejudice and negative messages about themselves (that they are weak, not smart or competent). *Example: A girl who is overweight doesn't try out for the basketball team because she thinks she won't be good.*
5. Distribute the [Categories of Ableism Worksheet](#) to each student. Explain to students that they are going to work in the same pairs as before to use all of the examples on the board (from #2). Students should place the examples in the categories based on where they think each should go. If they think that an example falls into more than one category, they can note that on the sheet. Model an example if necessary and encourage students to add other examples if time permits. Give students 5–7 minutes for this task.

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**NOTE:** As an alternative, you can do this exercise with the whole class, going through the list from #2 and having students call out into which categories they think they should go. If students feel differently about the placement of an example, engage them in a brief conversation as to why, time permitting.

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6. Reconvene the class and have pairs share aloud what they came up with (if the class didn't do the exercise together). Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - What did you notice as you were doing this activity?
  - Did we all put the same examples in the same categories? Why or why not?
  - Did any of the examples fit into more than one category? How so? Did you and your partner agree or disagree about certain examples?
  - Do you think some of these examples are more serious than others? Explain.
  - Do you think some of these examples are more easily addressed than others? How so?
  - How do other aspects of people's identities (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) impact the discrimination they may experience as a result of having a disability? Explain.

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**NOTE ABOUT INTERSECTIONALITY:** **Intersectionality** is defined as “a way of looking at the overlap and intersections of people’s social group identities (e.g. race, gender, class, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) and addresses the related and intersecting systems of bias, discrimination and oppression.” This is something to keep in mind and address with students during the course of the lesson. Bias and discrimination may manifest differently for people with disabilities based on other aspects of their identity. For example, unemployment rates are highest among women with disabilities.

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## INFORMATION SHARING

1. Explain to students that now they are going to talk about some specific examples of ableism in society. Share the following information by first asking the question posed, then soliciting responses and finally providing the information under the question.

**Employment Question:** *What do you think the unemployment rate is for people with disabilities?*

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2016, 17.9% of people with a disability were employed. In contrast, the employment rate for those without a disability was 65.3%. Further, while the overall unemployment rate was 4.6%, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 10.5%.

Source: [Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics Summary](#) (Washington: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017)

**Accessibility Question:** *What kinds of “barriers” do people with disabilities still face?*

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including: jobs, schools, transportation, and all public/private places that are open to the general public. Even though the ADA was passed into law in 1990, barriers and discrimination remain today. Some of the specific barriers include: communication barriers for people with visual or hearing disabilities; steps and curbs that block people with mobility impairments in a variety of buildings and streets; public transportation without accessibility for people with mobility impairments; the lack of accessible equipment needed for the workplace and home; videos that do not include captioning, etc.

Source: [Common Barriers to Participation Experienced by People with Disabilities](#) (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017)

**Technology Question:** *Are people with disabilities more or less likely to use technology?*

The short answer is less likely; there is a significant divide in the use of technology between those who have a disability and those who do not. Specifically, people with a disability are three times as likely as those without a disability to say they never go online (23% vs. 8%). Adults with a disability are about 20% less likely to subscribe to home broadband and own a traditional computer, a smartphone or tablet. Further, people with disabilities are less likely than those who don't have a disability to report using the internet on a daily basis (50% vs. 79%).

Source: Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin, "[Disabled Americans are less likely to use technology](#)" (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2017)

2. After going through this process, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - What is your reaction to the information presented?
  - What was surprising?
  - What wasn't surprising?
  - Do you think progress has been made for people with disabilities?
  - What do you think still needs improvement?
  - How can we as individuals and a class challenge barriers and help with making improvements?
  - What other questions do you have or what resources would be helpful?
3. Have students add anything new that has come up to their Categories of Ableism Worksheet.

**READING ACTIVITY**

1. Distribute a copy of the article "[Let's Talk about Ableism: What it Means and Why Everyone Should Care](#)" to each student. Have students read the article silently for 10–15 minutes. Alternatively, you can assign the article for homework the night before.
2. Engage students in a discussing by asking the following questions:
  - What is the writer's point of view and how do you know?
  - What influenced her perspective?
  - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
  - What stood out for you while reading the article?
  - What are some of the examples of ableism that the writer cites in the article?
  - What are examples of institutional, interpersonal and internalized ableism in the article?
  - After reading the article, what is one thing you could do about ableism in yourself?
  - What are some things you think should be done about ableism in our community and society?
3. Based on the reading and discussion, have students add anything new that has come up to their Categories of Ableism Worksheet.

## ALLY, ADVOCATE, ACTIVIST ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to define the words: **ally**, **advocate** and **activist** and share the following definitions, asking students to come up with an example for each. Explain that there is overlap between the three terms; sometimes a person or group is acting as an ally and an advocate at the same time.

**Ally:** Someone who speaks out on behalf of someone else or takes actions that are supportive of someone else. *Example: Hearing someone make an ableist joke and reaching out to that person and telling them you thought it was wrong.*

**Advocate:** Someone who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy. *Example: Writing a letter to a local newspaper about how small businesses should not prohibit teenagers in their stores.*

**Activist:** Someone who gets involved in activities that are meant to achieve political or social change; this also includes being a member of an organization which is working on change. *Example: Starting a local group that works to address ableism in your school.*

2. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking:
  - What do the three words (ally, advocate, activist) have in common?
  - Why do people engage in ally, advocacy and activist behavior?
  - What impact does acting as an ally, advocate and/or activist have on the people engaging in it?
  - What message does it send to others?
3. Explain to students that now they are going to think together about what can be done about ableism by engaging in role playing around being an ally, advocate or activist. Divide students into seven small groups based on these individuals or constituency groups:
  - Individual citizen
  - School administrator
  - Legislator (Mayor, Senator, Congressperson, City Council)
  - Community-based or non-governmental organization
  - Small business owner
  - Faith-based organization
  - News reporter

Playing the role of the group/person assigned to them, have students brainstorm what they can do about incidents of ableism from the perspective of their assigned role. For example, if they are in the small business group, one of their ideas may be to conduct a study to understand the extent to which the businesses in their community are accessible to people with disabilities and then make recommendations with their findings. They should also identify whether their specific ideas fall into the category of ally, advocate and/or activist (they could be more than one). Ask the groups to come up with 3–5 ideas that will be shared later with the rest of the class. Give students 10 minutes to complete this task.

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**NOTE:** If students suggest confronting language that is biased against people with disabilities, use ADL's [Challenging Biased Language](#) for strategies and suggestions.

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4. Have each small group share their ideas with the whole class. Challenge any stereotypes or inadvertent ableist language the students may use in their presentations as teachable moments.

5. Based on what ideas they generate, consider turning those ideas into projects that groups of students or the whole class takes on as a class- or school-wide project.

## CLOSING

Do a go-round and have each student share something new they learned or understood about disabilities and ableism.

## ADDITIONAL READING

- [“6 Forms of Ableism We Need to Retire Immediately”](#) (Mic, July 7, 2016)
- [“7 facts about Americans with disabilities”](#) (Pew Research Center, July 27, 2017)
- [“40 Alternatives to These Ableist and Oppressive Words”](#) (Care 2, January 16, 017)
- [“A Point of View: Happiness and disability”](#) (BBC News, June 1, 2014)
- [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division)
- [Common Barriers to Participation Experienced by People with Disabilities](#) (Center for Disease Control, March 17, 2016)
- [Blind People Tell Us Which Questions Annoy Them the Most](#) video (2017, 4 mins., Cut)
- [Deaf People Tell Us Which Questions Annoy Them the Most](#) video (2017, 4 mins., Cut)
- [Doing Social Justice: Thoughts on Ableist Language and Why It Matters](#) (Disability and Representation, September 13, 2017)
- [“For Students With Disabilities, Overcoming Low Expectations Can Be Half the Battle”](#) (*Huffington Post*, November 11, 2017)
- [“In autism arrest, the only thing new was the video”](#) (CNN, April 22, 2017)
- [Nearly 1 in 5 People Have a Disability in the U.S., Census Bureau Reports](#) (U.S. Census, July 25, 2012)

## COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Standard 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Language
Standard 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
Standard 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts to make effective choices for meaning or style and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

## CATEGORIES FOR ABLEISM WORKSHEET

**Directions:** Using the explanations of the following categories, record examples in categories based on where they think each example belongs.

**Interpersonal:** The idea that one identity/societal group is better than others gives permission for people to disrespect or mistreat individuals in the other group (jokes, slurs, stereotypes, threats, physical assaults, bullying).

**Institutional:** The idea that one group is better than another gets rooted in the institutions—the laws, legal system, police, education/schools, hiring, housing, media images, political power—so that they implement discriminatory or unequal practices.

**Internalized:** The idea that one group is better than the other gets internalized so that people starts to believe the stereotypes, prejudice and negative messages about themselves (that they are weak, not smart or competent).

Interpersonal	Institutional	Internalized