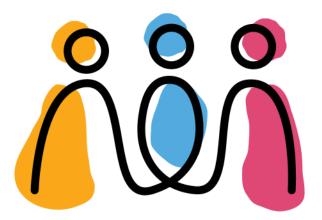


This simple summary explores what service provider practices support belonging in the lives of people with intellectual disability.



This is a plain language interpretation of the published journal article titled "We're not really into helping, we're into being useful": Service Provider Practices that Support Belonging in the Lives of People Labelled with Intellectual Disability. This is one in a series of briefs co-produced from The Belonging Project, an inclusive research project exploring belonging with people with intellectual disabilities.

ABOUT THE BELONGING PROJECT

An inclusive research partnership between <u>Skills Society</u> and the University of Alberta, <u>The Belonging Project</u> explored the conditions, processes, and actions that support opportunities for belonging in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROJECT ON OUR WEBPAGE: www.skillssociety.ca/projects/the-belonging-project







Introduction.

Supporting belonging in the lives of people with intellectual disability is an important goal of policy and practice. Yet, many people with intellectual disability and their allies tell us that they face barriers to finding belonging and that they are lonely and socially isolated. One part of helping to get more belonging in people's lives is to better understand how community disability service providers can support people's belonging. Community disability service providers have a lot of influence over the lives of the people they support. They can both get in the way of people's belonging and they can help support people's belonging. This simple summary explores what helpful practices service providers can do to support people's belonging from the perspective of five people with intellectual disability and 9 disability services leaders living in Alberta.

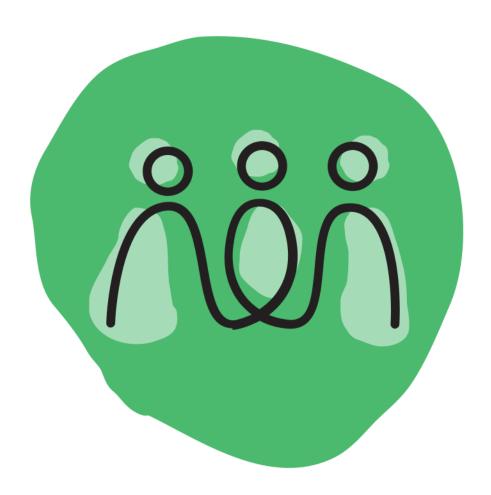
What We Did.

The Belonging Project was an inclusive research project that explored belonging with five adults with intellectual disability. Each of the participants talked to researchers in an interview at their house, shared stories from their life, gave a tour of their home, and chose up to four spaces or relationships of belonging they wanted to explore further in a go-along style interview. Participants took researchers to all kinds of places including a community kitchen, places they volunteered and worked, a bowling alley, and coffee shops. Participants also introduced researchers to their partners, friends, support workers, and family members. Researchers also interviewed nine policy, advocacy, and service provider leaders.

Researchers had ethics approval from the University of Alberta. Researchers recorded what was shared and used the information to write three journal articles that are published in academic journals. The researchers also worked with community leaders to create simple summaries of each article (like this one!) and other tools and training materials for support workers.

The researchers recognized the ways research has sometimes been used to harm people with disabilities in the past. The researchers were careful in the design of the project to make the process as inclusive, welcoming, and safe as possible. The researchers are also doing their best to make sure what was learned from the project is made accessible to different people including the participants, other people with disabilities and their allies, service providers, and other researchers.





Meet the People Behind this Project.

This project was a shared endeavour that involved collaborative exchange and reciprocity in the co-creation of knowledge.

MEET THE CORE PARTICIPANTS

Christine, Jonah, Kevin, Sarah, and Cara have an intellectual disability and shared their experiences of belonging. They helped shape the research process by choosing where we did go-along interviews, identifying others we should connect with, including support workers, friends, and family members, and helping determine what happened with the art created during the creative workshop.



Christine¹ is an articulate young woman and animal lover who enjoys watching professional wrestling and hanging out with her fiancé.



Kevin is a self-described 'people lover' who is passionate about drama and takes pride in giving back to his community.



Jonah is a sensitive and caring young man who values his friends and family and enjoys bowling, video games, and volunteering in his community.



Sarah is a fierce self-advocate and problem solver with a vibrant, free spirit and love of visiting over a hot cup of coffee.



Cara is a soft-spoken and friendly artist who loves to paint and draw and share her warm energy with others.

MEET THE POLICY, ADVOCACY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

Iris, William, Laura, Tyra, Julia, Deanne, Samesh, Charles, and Declan are leaders currently working or recently retired from the disability services sector. They shared their experiences and thoughts on what supports and hinders belonging in one-on-one interviews with researchers.

MEET THE PARTNER COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

Skills Society is a not-for-profit rights and service organization that provides daily living supports to adults with intellectual disability. Leaders were involved in shaping the research questions, supported participant recruitment, and were partners in the design and dissemination of community-based knowledge products.

MEET THE RESEARCHERS

Paige Reeves was the lead researcher who stewarded this project as part of her PhD work at the University of Alberta. She drew on her knowledge of qualitative research, strong connections in the community, and her experiences as a sister, friend, and paid support to people with intellectual disability in the design and implementation of this project.

Shanon Phelan and David McConnell, researchers at the University of Alberta and Dalhousie University, supervised and mentored Paige. They have been doing research in the family and disability field for over forty years combined and have lived experience as caregivers and advocates for people with intellectual disabilities.



What we learned.

This paper tried to answer the question: What service provider practices support the belonging of adults with intellectual disability? We explored things like how service providers can help and get in the way of people's belonging.

"YOU HAVE TO HAVE YOUR HEART WITH THEM": CENTERING BELONGING, INCLUSION, AND RIGHTS.

Disability services leaders that were interviewed described how an organization's philosophical viewpoint shapes belonging opportunities and that while most organizations ensure the safety and care of individuals, not all promote rights and inclusion equally. Leaders distinguished between supporting safety and taking care of basic needs and facilitating belonging, highlighting that the latter requires a particular approach and ethic grounded in mutual respect and a recognition that people with intellectual disabilities are deserving of the same rights and opportunities as anyone else. Bernila, a frontline support worker described this ethic this way:

"But you know, if you don't have compassion with this individual, you cannot do it. You have to have your heart with them...I hate seeing [support workers] that are just warm bodies. I don't like that. You know, it breaks my heart."

Also a part of this approach was being critical of and engaging in ongoing reflection about systemic issues affecting service delivery. For example, Tyra reminded that organizations need to acknowledge their roles within the systems they work and the ways they can contribute to oppression.

"IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO JUST ASK PEOPLE": CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF-EXPLORATION AND 'DREAMING'

Leaders emphasized that opportunities for self-exploration, trying new things, and goal-setting are crucial for fostering belonging. However, supporting opportunities for self-exploration was portrayed as complex work, due in part to what Laura called "devaluing social forces" that perpetuate people labelled with intellectual disabilities as "the eternal child, the fool, or the deviant". Leaders described the ways these ideas can be reproduced by people served, their families, and paid supports and as a result shape perceived possibilities for people.

"There is something that needs to be talked about, the assumption, 'if you just ask people, everything will be good'. This idea 'if you just ask people, what do you want to do with your life?... that whatever answer they give is all that's needed'...we get this all the time from frontline staff: 'we asked the person what they want, they want to keep bowling and swimming'. So there's something around this conundrum of choice"

 Excerpt from Interview with William, a Sector Leader

In response to this complexity, Leaders articulated a need to move beyond simply asking people what they want, recognizing they may have internalized oppression. William noted the tension service providers face between respecting individual choices and challenging them not to settle for the status quo.

Leaders drew attention to the time it takes to build a trusted relationship with the person supported and the need to look beyond initial assumptions. Practices such as listening with your head, your heart, with everything in you, carefully attending to body language, watching for how the person responds in different situations, trial and error, and getting curious were identified as important to learning what a person wants or likes in support of their belonging.

"YOU'RE MORE SIMILAR THAN YOU ARE DIFFERENT": FACILITATING CONNECTIONS TO PEOPLE AND PLACE

Supporting opportunities for belonging often involved being very intentional about facilitating connections between the person and others. Support workers undertook preparatory actions like connecting with a person or group ahead of time, creating space for questions about diagnostic labels and support needs, and continuously scanning for related activities, groups, or roles a person could join.

"...a lot of times people think if you just get people around each other, belonging or inclusion results, but anybody who's tried to do this work or support it knows that isn't the case..."

- Excerpt from Interview with William, a Sector Leader

Leaders emphasized the need to facilitate not just access to an activity or group, but also deeper connection within. Practices such as identifying a group gatekeeper, finding commonalities to foster connection, and facilitating conversation between the person supported and others were identified as helpful in deepening connections.

"We've been kept apart for too long...how do we work with community in a different way so that they're noticing who is missing?"

 Excerpt from Interview with Laura, a Sector Leader

Support workers played an influential and essential role in shaping belonging opportunities and were observed to navigate difficult tensions around when to step in and when to step back in social settings. Supporting belonging opportunities was a complex balance of supporting the person to participate while also, as Laura put it, "working with community so that they're noticing who is missing".



What Can We Do?

Despite advancements in rights for people with intellectual disability, they still experience a lot of exclusion and loneliness. Supporting belonging is complex work and our current funding and support systems are not set up well to support belonging even though they often claim to have belonging as a key goal. Striving for belonging, instead of just physical presence can help us push for more for the people we serve and is an important part of supporting people's social inclusion.

BIG AND SMALL ACTIONS WE CAN TAKE.

Continue to innovate around person centred planning processes that create space for individuals to share what they want and explore new possibilities for themselves

Develop tools and resources that help support workers understand what belonging means and how to get better at supporting it

Prioritize supporting genuine relationships, building trust, and getting to really know the person being supported as well as protecting their safety and well being

Advocate for more just funding and support systems that center the perspectives and experiences of people with intellectual disabilities and their supporters

Recognize the ways that everyone can be supported to be leaders of their life, regardless of how much support they need. With the right support everyone can be centered in making decisions that affect their life Create opportunities for everyone who works in disability services to reflect on their own assumptions about disability and inclusion and help people shift their perspectives to be more empowering and inclusive

