



THROUGH THE LENS: CAPTURING INCLUSION



A Toolkit on outdoor photography for the empowerment of people with intellectual disabilities



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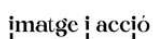


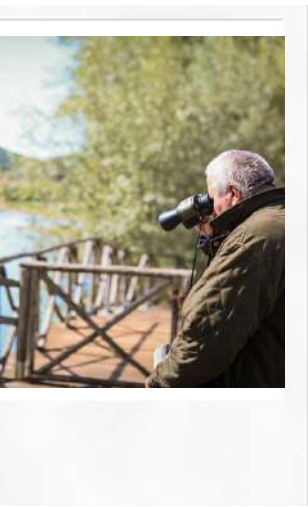
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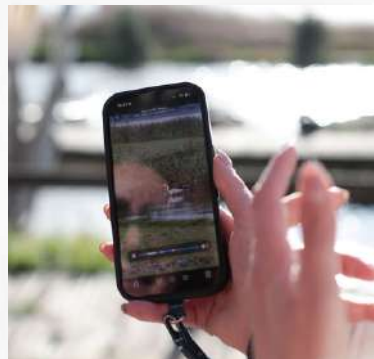


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INTRODUCTION

Why a project on photography as a tool for promoting social inclusion?

Drawing from the THRULens Consortium's experience and project research, it became evident that **people with intellectual disabilities (PIDs)** face major **obstacles in accessing natural heritage**. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020), only 38% of PIDs participate in cultural and leisure activities, compared with 64% of the general population.

When PIDs are excluded from outdoor experiences, they are also denied the physical, emotional, and mental **benefits** that contact with nature can offer - benefits widely recognised for enhancing well-being and fostering a stronger sense of belonging. When designed inclusively, outdoor activities can foster a deeper connection with natural heritage, transforming rural environments from barriers into spaces of **empowerment** for PIDs.

Despite clear evidence of its benefits, outdoor participation remains inaccessible to many, reinforcing the social exclusion and discrimination experienced by PIDs. According to the Consortium's experience, this limited participation stems largely from the lack of appropriate support and adapted communication tools, which further deepen their exclusion.

One of the most significant barriers identified is the continued reliance on **traditional communication methods**, which often fail to meet the needs of PIDs. Therefore, raising awareness and improving knowledge of tools and strategies that better meet the needs of PIDs is crucial for all adult educators who wish to make their activities inclusive, regardless of their field.

In this context, **photography** can serve as a powerful bridge—offering an alternative means of self-expression and interaction with the environment. Used as an educational and creative tool, photography can empower PIDs by enhancing their ability to communicate, share their perspectives, and actively engage with the world around them.

The THRULENS project aims to address this gap by strengthening the competencies of adult educators working in the fields of outdoor education, social inclusion, and photography. It provides them with methodologies and practical resources to integrate photography into outdoor learning to empower PIDs.

The THRULens pursues the following **specific objectives** (SOs):

- SO1: Develop adult educators' skills in using photography, nature, and outdoor environments as powerful, inclusive tools for empowerment.
- SO2: Promote social inclusion through photography workshops focused on natural heritage, enabling PIDs to use photography for communication and empowerment.

- SO3: Facilitate self-expression opportunities for PIDs through photography, strengthening their self-esteem and social skills.
- SO4: Raise community awareness on social inclusion at local, national, and EU levels. SO5: Encourage civic engagement by involving PIDs in community-based photography projects.

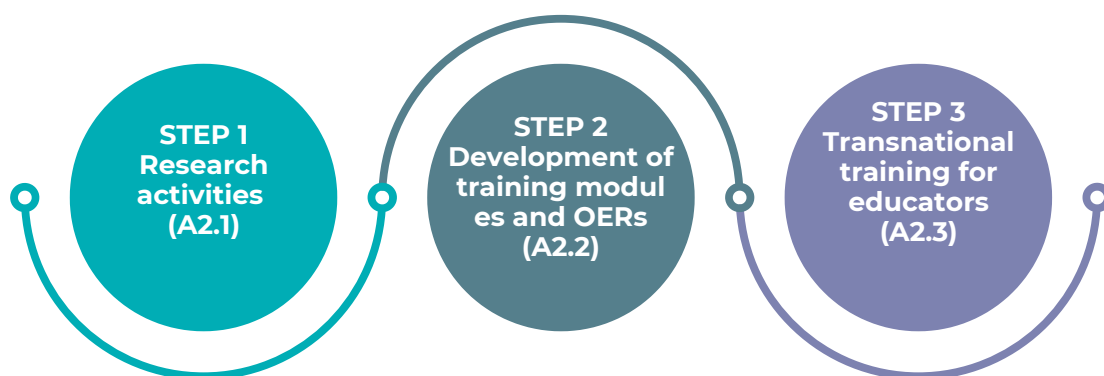
To achieve these objectives, we planned the following **results**:

1. **Toolkit** on outdoor photography methodology for educators, designed to integrate photography into educational programs for PIDs and outdoor learning environments.
2. **Transnational training course** to equip educators to use nature photography as a tool to empower PIDs.
3. **Photography exhibitions** showcasing PIDs' work and highlighting their key role in the creative process, while raising awareness about social inclusion in the community, overcoming the stigma surrounding PIDs.

Our approach aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly the rights to community inclusion, accessible education, cultural participation, and freedom of expression. It contributes to the EU Disability Strategy 2021–2030 by promoting equal participation, accessible learning, and inclusive leisure opportunities. It also reflects the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Guidelines, supporting learner-centred, accessible, and innovative non-formal learning methods.

The THRULens Journey: from research to action

This Toolkit is the main result of a set of activities carried out between September 2025 and February 2026. Its development followed three main steps:



STEP 1: RESEARCH ACTIVITIES (A2.1)

The Consortium researched using outdoor photography as a tool to enhance communication and advance social inclusion initiatives, as well as the main principles of participatory photography supporting the social inclusion of PIDs.

The research consisted of two parts:

1. *Desk research* to collect good practices, existing projects, and experiences of organizations that already use participatory photography and outdoor education for inclusion. Each partner was asked to complete an online form providing information on existing projects and organisational experiences at the local, regional, national, or European level that already use participatory photography and outdoor education to promote inclusion. Each partner was required to identify and describe at least 2 good practices or existing projects. In total, **9 good practices and existing projects** were identified through the desk research.

2. *Field research* to collect educators' needs and feedback on how participatory photography and outdoor education can be used for inclusion. Based on their field of expertise, each partner was required to identify at least 5 people - either within or outside their organisation—to complete the online surveys:

- Survey for educators of PIDs (Responsible: VIVA + LAS).
- Survey for outdoor educators (Responsible: Trekkify).
- Survey for photography/image educators (Responsible: Imatge i Acció).

In total, **28 educators** were consulted during the research phase.

STEP 2: IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TRAINING MODULES AND OERS (A2.2)

The analysis of the research results made it possible to identify the key training modules needed to equip adult educators with the fundamentals of outdoor photography and to show how this creative tool can empower PIDs through hands-on, experience-based activities.

STEP 3: TRANSNATIONAL TRAINING FOR EDUCATORS IN VALENCIA (A2.3)

During the Transnational Training hosted by IMATGE I ACCIÓ in Valencia (Spain), educators had the opportunity to test the practical activities included in the Toolkit. This experience allowed them to gain direct, hands-on familiarity with the proposed methods, strengthen their confidence, and ensure they are fully prepared to implement these techniques effectively in their own contexts.

The training was also crucial for the THRULens Consortium, as it provided a real learning environment in which to test, refine, and validate the Toolkit, confirming its usability and impact before wider implementation.

Purpose and principles of the THRULens Toolkit

This Toolkit is designed as a practical and accessible resource for adult educators who wish to explore how outdoor photography can be used as an inclusive educational tool that fosters empowerment, self-expression, autonomy, and active participation of PIDs.

The Toolkit is designed for **adult educators working in the fields of social inclusion, outdoor learning, and visual storytelling**, and aims to equip them with:

- **Hands-on, ready-to-use and easy transferable activities** that combine outdoor experiences with accessible photography practices;
- **Experiential learning methods** that foster creativity, autonomy, cooperation, and active engagement;
- Meaningful opportunities for participants to express themselves, share personal perspectives, and **take part in community and cultural life**.

What's next on the THRULENS journey?

The next step is to test the project methodology through **pilot activities** involving PIDs and the educators trained under A2.3. The piloting partners (VIVA, in collaboration with Trekkify from Italy, Imatge i Acció from Spain, and LAA from Latvia) will implement these activities nationally, engaging both educators and PIDs to validate and refine the THRULens methodology.

The **Photo Outdoor Piloting** will consist of approximately 20 hours of practical outdoor photography sessions in each piloting country. These sessions will not only strengthen participants' technical photography skills but also promote social interaction, creativity, and a deeper connection with nature.

Each participant will create a **personal outdoor photo portfolio** showcasing the images captured during the sessions. A selection of these photos (chosen by the participants themselves) will be printed in A4 format and presented in the project's **final exhibition**, celebrating their creativity and personal expression.

Getting the most out of the THRULens Toolkit

The Toolkit and its practical activities have been designed to be flexible, adaptable, and easily expanded by educators who wish to tailor them to their specific contexts.

The training materials draw on Open Educational Resources (OERs) carefully selected or developed by the project partners.

to match the learning objectives and expected outcomes of each module.

To support effective use of this Toolkit, we propose the following **recommendations**:

Before starting

- Assess participants' abilities, needs, and communication preferences.
- Select the most accessible devices available (smartphones/tablets/basic cameras).
- Choose safe and familiar outdoor environments for the first sessions
- Prepare inclusive visual supports (e.g. pictograms, photo examples, step-by-step guides).

During activities

- Create a safe and welcoming learning environment.
- Encourage participants to make choices and take the lead in the creative process.
- Combine pair or group tasks to promote interaction and teamwork.

After each session

- Facilitate brief and inclusive reflection moments.
- Review the photos collectively, using them as a tool to encourage communication, storytelling, and personal expression.
- Collect feedback from participants and educators.

In-session guidance

- Document each learner's progress (through portfolio, printed images etc.).
- Connect activities with nature sites and local cultural heritage.
- Adapt and expand the Toolkit materials according to your context.
- Continuously revise activities using participant and educator feedback.

Close cooperation with educators from all key sectors (social inclusion, outdoor education, and visual arts) is essential for the success of the THRULens approach. Only by bringing together these diverse perspectives can we ensure that the Toolkit remains accessible, relevant, and impactful. This cross-sector collaboration enriches the learning process, strengthens the quality of the activities, and guarantees that outdoor photography becomes a meaningful and empowering experience for all participants.

The Toolkit is available [here](#) in English, Italian, Latvian, and Spanish.

We invite you to explore, download, and adapt its resources to your local context, so they can further develop through practice, creativity, and inclusion.



CHAPTER 1

Photography as an
educational and
empowerment tool

* Introduction

Looking through a camera, or simply looking as if we were holding one, invites us to open our eyes with full attention. This attitude of pause and visual listening awakens curiosity, teaches us to discover invisible details, broadens our ability to observe, and helps us settle into the present moment with calm and personal meaning. The practice of photography supports emotional regulation, well-being, and connection with the environment and with nature, essential elements in inclusive learning processes and in supporting adults with intellectual disabilities.

When employed as a socio-educational tool, photography extends beyond mere technical skill. Its true value lies in providing a safe, open, and accessible space for exploration, expression, and creation. Each time someone takes a photograph, they make choices about what matters to them, what they wish to remember, and what they want to share. This simple act nurtures autonomy, self-worth, and the ability to shape one's own narrative. Differences are transformed into unique perspectives that enrich the group and deepen the sense of belonging.

The educator or facilitator's role is to guide this process with respect, attentive listening, and trust. Indeed, creativity flourishes when there are conditions of safety, freedom, and care. Creating an environment without judgment, comparison, or fear of making mistakes allows each participant to feel capable and valued.

In this context, the camera becomes a bridge, opening conversations, sparking discoveries, and connecting the inner world with the outer. This support is especially important when working with PIDS, as photography can provide a clear, motivating, and accessible channel for self-expression.

This module provides a framework for using photography as a tool for social inclusion and personal empowerment, combining creativity, mindfulness, and nature-based experiences to support learning, discovery, and well-being. It equips educators to integrate photography as an accessible and meaningful practice in their activities.

Photography teaches us to see - and more importantly, to look within. In that simple act lies a profound potential for personal growth and collective transformation.

* Learning objectives

By the end of this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Understand the value of photography as a universal language, capable of overcoming communication barriers and encouraging the participation of adults with intellectual disabilities.
2. Identify the potential of photography as a socio-educational tool that can strengthen connections with the natural environment and the community, and promote meaningful outdoor experiences.
3. Recognise the importance of visual narrative and self-representation
4. Explore the expressive, narrative, and therapeutic value of images, especially when combined with principles of mindfulness and conscious observation.

* Learning outcomes

Upon completing this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Explain why photography facilitates inclusive participation and how it can be adapted to remove communication barriers in educational contexts.
2. Plan outdoor photographic activities that encourage mindful observation, connection with the natural or urban environment, and social interaction.
3. Facilitate processes of visual storytelling and self-representation, supporting participants in communicating their stories and perspectives through images.
4. Apply strategies to integrate photography as a well-being resource, promoting calm, presence, and emotional expression through mindful observation.
5. Create spaces for visual dialogue where photographs are used to foster empathy.



Photography as an educational and empowerment tool

In educational and socio-educational contexts, photography has become an accessible means to foster personal expression, empowerment, and social inclusion.

Its visual and immediate nature makes photography particularly effective for adults with intellectual disabilities, offering a channel to express and explore experiences, emotions, and relationships from their own perspective.

1.1 Beyond barriers: the language of images as a tool for participation

Photography is a universal language that allows communication without relying on verbal skills, making it a valuable tool for encouraging active participation. Through the camera, each person observes, selects, and represents their view of the world, practicing decision-making and personal expression.

Visual language breaks down barriers, as it doesn't rely on complex linguistic structures. In inclusive methodologies like those of [ANDANAfoto](#) or the [Peace Photography Guide by Imaging Peace](#), Photography is used to democratize participation: anyone can contribute images, share them, and spark dialogue.

The camera serves as a neutral mediator, balancing group relationships and valuing diversity as richness.

1.2 The social value of (outdoor) photography as a practice of connection with the environment

Outdoor photography invites us to slow down, observe, and deeply connect with nature, with ourselves, and with the people around us. By walking, exploring, and pausing to notice details in the natural environment that often go unnoticed, participants cultivate mindfulness, enhancing both physical vitality and emotional well-being, as highlighted by studies from the [European Environment Agency](#).

Photographing the outdoors transforms simple observation into active engagement: the textures of leaves, the play of light on water, the rhythm of urban and natural landscapes - all become subjects through which individuals explore their surroundings and express their perspective.

Each image nurtures emotional connection and awareness, promoting calm, curiosity, and focus.

Moreover, these photographs act as social bridges, making visible what holds personal significance, celebrating individual viewpoints, and strengthening a shared sense of belonging. Outdoor photography does more than reflect the world, it deepens our relationship with it, transforming exploration into creativity and connection.

1.3 Visual storytelling, self-representation, and confidence

Visual storytelling enables the construction of narratives through images. When applied to outdoor photography, this approach allows participants to engage actively with their environment, capturing the natural world, community spaces, or everyday surroundings. By deciding what and how to photograph, participants practice autonomy, strengthen self-confidence, and find avenues to express emotions, experiences, and memories, reducing communication barriers in the process.

Methodologies like Photovoice demonstrate that participatory photography transforms people's roles, turning them into protagonists of their own narratives. Sharing visual stories fosters self-efficacy, communication, and empowerment. Self-representation allows individuals to reveal their identity, directly enhancing self-esteem, facilitating social interaction, and promoting empathy and group cohesion.

In this way, outdoor participatory photography becomes more than a creative activity: it serves as a **bridge** between the individual and the community, between inner experiences and shared understanding, and between observation and meaningful engagement with the environment.

1.4 Expressive value and emotional well-being

Photography, when integrated with mindfulness principles, has strong expressive potential. Observing through the lens involves slowing down and connecting with the present, supporting emotional regulation and self-awareness.

Although this project is educational rather than clinical, photography naturally provides therapeutic benefits by enabling the expression and transformation of personal experiences. Images function as safe mirrors of personal experience. Sharing them in a respectful environment boosts self-esteem and generates cohesion and meaning.

Resources such as *Mindfulness for Educators* or *Empowering Adult Educators through Art-Based Methodologies* (see the resources listed at the end of the chapter) highlight the power of art to foster well-being and spaces for expression in education.

1.5 Outdoor photography: inclusion and environmental awareness



Outdoor photography is particularly accessible and engaging, blending movement, exploration, creativity, and immersion in nature.

It allows for working on multiple dimensions of inclusive learning: observation, orientation, decision-making, well-being, and social participation.

The natural environment promotes multisensory learning that sparks curiosity and motivation. This sensory richness supports mindfulness and strengthens functional skills, self-esteem, and connection to the environment.

Additionally, it places everyone in a shared context without hierarchies, where differences are reduced and collaboration and spontaneous dialogue are encouraged.

Outdoor photography can also foster environmental awareness by encouraging participants to observe their surroundings from fresh perspectives. Documenting natural elements helps cultivate a closer relationship with the environment, reinforcing attitudes of care, stewardship, and belonging. Resources such as the [Peace Photography Guide](#) highlight its potential to promote empathy and environmental responsibility.

Overall, outdoor photography is a creative, inclusive, and meaningful tool: it strengthens autonomy, supports emotional well-being, and encourages a conscious, respectful, and engaged relationship with the natural world.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.1

TALKING OBJECTS - BEYOND BARRIERS: THE LANGUAGE OF IMAGES AS A TOOL FOR PARTICIPATION



MATERIALS

- Small objects from the environment.
- Cameras or smartphones.
- Paper eyes (optional).

Objective:

- To encourage inclusive participation and accessible communication through the free choice of an object from the environment and its personal interpretation through photography.

The educator presents objects from the surroundings (leaves, stones, a bench, a flower, etc.). Each participant chooses one object and takes four photos from different angles. Paper eyes may be placed on the objects, the educator shows the photos, possibly with paper eyes attached for reference: paper eyes on a leaf, paper eyes on a trunk, etc. Each participant explains what the object represents for them, relating it to their emotions, day, or personal memories. They may use words, gestures, pictograms, or receive support from the educator. All photos are shared with the group (e.g., via projector or WhatsApp).

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.2

THREE WAYS OF SEEING THE PLACE



MATERIALS

- Cameras or smartphones.
- Outdoor space (park, garden, neighborhood).

Objective:

- To enhance connection with the environment through guided observation at different visual distances.

The group gathers in an outdoor space (park, neighborhood, garden, or plaza). The educator invites them to capture three types of images:

1. Something close: a small detail, texture, or intimate element.
2. Something far: a building, a horizon, a tree, or a distant point.
3. Something that evokes a memory: an element that brings up a personal emotion or memory.

Then, the group comes together to share their photos and reflect on how perception changes depending on distance or personal meaning.



MATERIALS

- Cameras or smartphones.
- Accessible natural or community space.
- Printer or projector
- Wall or board for creating a photo mural.

Objective:

- To explore a community space through a photo walk that encourages movement, participation, and collective observation of the environment.

The group goes on a short walk through an accessible natural or community space.

Each participant photographs elements they find beautiful or meaningful: a tree, a flower, a river, a shadow, a reflection, or any everyday item that catches their eye.

At the end, the images are printed or projected to create a community mural.

The educator facilitates a group discussion about what the place represents, what was discovered, and what was meaningful to each person.

The activity fosters social interaction, spatial orientation, exploration, and community building.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.4

MY SPECIAL OBJECT - VISUAL NARRATIVE, SELF- REPRESENTATION, AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING



MATERIALS

- Cameras/smartphone.
- Notebooks or sheets.
- Pens Space.

Objective:

- To strengthen self-representation, identity, and self-esteem through the choice of an object from the environment that reflects personal tastes, emotions, or characteristics.

Each participant explores the space and chooses a meaningful object (e.g. a flower, a shadow, a tree) to photograph, carefully framing it to express their perspective. They then share why they chose it and what it represents; those who wish may add a short written reflection. To conclude, the educator invites participants to replace the word "object" with "I," turning the activity into a symbolic act of self-representation (e.g. "This object is strong and beautiful" → "I am strong and beautiful").

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.5

ONE EMOTION, ONE PHOTO - REFLECTIONS ON THE THERAPEUTIC, EXPRESSIVE, AND NARRATIVE VALUE OF IMAGES



MATERIALS

- Cameras/smartphones.
- Quiet space.
- Pictograms or keyword cards (optional).

Objective:

- To promote emotional awareness, mindfulness, and calm by translating an emotion into an image.

The group forms a large circle in a quiet space. The educator leads a brief breathing or mindfulness practice with eyes closed. When they open their eyes, without moving yet, each person takes a photo that represents a feeling of calm or peace: it might be a color, a shape, a light, a texture, or any element of the surroundings. Afterward, the images are shared, and each participant associates a word, gesture, or pictogram with their photo. The activity supports emotional regulation, personal expression, and group well-being.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.6

MY VISUAL REFUGE



MATERIALS

- Cameras/smartphones.
- Laptop with works by Rinko Kawauchi or printed images (optional).
- Pictograms or guided phrase cards.

Objective:

- To support emotional well-being and self-awareness by identifying and photographing a place in the surroundings that brings a sense of safety or calm.

You may begin this activity by showing the work of Japanese artist Rinko Kawauchi. Participants explore the environment looking for a spot that brings them a sense of peace, safety, or well-being. They can observe the light, shadow, sounds, shapes, or textures. They photograph that place from several perspectives. In the final group dialogue, each person explains what makes that place special and what feelings it evokes. Pictograms or guided phrases may be used, such as: "*Here I feel...*" or "*This place gives me...*". The activity enhances emotional expression, connection with the environment, and self-reflection.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.7

NATURE EXPLORERS: THE FINDERS - OUTDOOR PHOTOGRAPHY AS A CREATIVE, ACCESSIBLE TOOL FOR INCLUSION AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS



MATERIALS

- Cameras/smartphones.
- Outdoor natural area.
- Images of Paco Llop's work (optional).
- Materials for creating a "biodiversity map" (poster, prints, or projector).

Objective:

- To encourage curiosity, sensory exploration, and environmental awareness through a photographic search for surprising elements in the natural environment.

Educators may start by showing the work of Spanish artist [Paco Llop](#).

Each participant freely explores an outdoor space in search of natural elements that catch their attention: leaves, flowers, shadows, insects, textures, colors, reflections, or unusual shapes.

They take photographs at their own pace and based on their preferences.

Then, all the images are collected to create a "biodiversity map" of the place, where the group observes everything each person has discovered.

The activity promotes observation, creativity, connection with nature, and respect for the environment.

RESOURCES

READINGS



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CHAPTER 2

Empowering
social inclusion through
outdoor learning

* Introduction

This module introduces the concept of outdoor learning and highlights the benefits that nature-based experiences offer to PIDs. The module explores how educators can plan, facilitate, and adapt inclusive outdoor activities, taking into account mobility needs, sensory sensitivities, and environmental factors, to improve empowerment, autonomy, and social inclusion. Educators will learn how outdoor learning can be a tool not only for education, but also for promoting health, inclusion, and active community participation among PIDs.

* Learning objectives

By the end of this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Understand the benefits of outdoor learning for physical and social wellbeing of adults with intellectual disabilities.
2. Design and implement inclusive outdoor activities that answer the diverse needs of participants.
3. Understand and manage factors related to access, sensory needs, and environmental conditions in outdoor learning contexts.

* Learning outcomes

Upon completing this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Explain the principles of outdoor learning and its impact on the wellbeing and social inclusion of PIDs.
2. Develop and adapt outdoor activities that promote participation, empowerment, and self-expression for PIDs.
3. Apply strategies to create safe, accessible outdoor environments, including adjustments for mobility needs and weather conditions.

2

Empowering social inclusion through outdoor learning

Outdoor learning can be a powerful means to foster inclusion, participation, and well-being for all, including adults with intellectual disabilities. In fact, experiences in contact with nature not only promote physical and emotional health, but also the exercise of fundamental rights such as self-determination and equal participation in recreational activities.

In the context of inclusive education, outdoor learning is both a pedagogical approach and a social practice that can strengthen empowerment, autonomy, and a sense of belonging through direct contact with the natural environment.

2.1 Benefits for physical and mental well-being, sensory awareness, and social inclusion

"Living with disabilities can often entail additional organisation and time on mundane chores, so there can be particular value in the feeling of freedom and sense of getting away from everyday demands that can come from being in natural environments." (Engaging people living with disabilities in nature, 2022)

Before discussing the benefits of outdoor learning, it is important to recognise that participation in recreational and community life is not equally accessible to all.

Leisure and participation are fundamental dimensions of quality of life and social inclusion. However, according to recent research (Cochrane & JBI, 2022), PIDs are at risk of reduced participation in community and recreational activities. Their involvement often depends on external factors such as available support, time and living conditions. Promoting accessible outdoor learning activities is therefore essential to improve participation and ensure that leisure time is experienced as a self-determined and empowering area of life.

On the other hand, it is demonstrated the positive impact of outdoor activities on physical and mental health. The concept of green exercise (Barton & Pretty, 2010) highlights the synergistic benefits of physical activity combined with direct contact with nature. Spending time in the outdoors can reduce blood pressure, improve mood, and increase self-esteem. While these benefits are well-documented for the general population, they become even more evident when considering individuals with intellectual disabilities, for whom such experiences foster not only physical activation but also emotional regulation and enhanced body awareness.

For PIDs, outdoor learning also creates unique opportunities for sensory engagement and self-expression. Natural contexts offer rich multi-sensory stimulation: the textures of leaves, the warmth of sunlight, the sound of water or birds, and the smell of the earth. These experiences can be grounding and therapeutic, particularly for individuals with sensory processing differences. Structured outdoor activities that integrate touch, movement, and visual exploration can enhance body awareness and sensory integration, contributing to emotional balance and cognitive development. Equally important are the social and relational benefits of outdoor learning.

Participation in group-based outdoor activities, such as community gardening, inclusive walks, or photography outdoor activities, improves communication, mutual support, and teamwork. Such contexts facilitate inclusion, where individuals share decisions, express preferences, and contribute to collective outcomes.

In this way, outdoor learning becomes a medium for self-representation and connection: individuals are not merely “included” but actively shape the experience.



2.2 Designing inclusive outdoor experiences: from intention to practice



Creating an inclusive outdoor environment is not something that can be improvised, but requires intentional design, preparation and facilitation.

But what does it take for an outdoor environment to be truly inclusive?

First and foremost, it must be accessible (physically, socially, and emotionally). According to Ulster University (n.d.), “*accessibility is about removing barriers enabling users to engage and participate in everyday activities*”.

So, accessibility goes beyond removing physical barriers; it means ensuring that every person, regardless of ability, can participate fully, feel welcomed, and experience a sense of belonging in nature. Indeed, accessibility is more than just physical infrastructure; it also embraces sensory, cognitive and emotional dimensions. Barriers often stem from inadequate infrastructure, limited transport but also lack of accessible information.

To overcome these, outdoor learning must be planned as a co-produced process that integrates the voices and choices of people with disabilities.

Mobility needs

Physical accessibility and mobility considerations should always be integrated into the planning of outdoor learning activities.

However, this becomes even more crucial when the target group includes PIDs. Accessibility in this context goes beyond compliance with infrastructure standards; it represents a commitment to equity, dignity, and participation. Ensuring that every participant can move, explore, and engage in nature safely and comfortably transforms outdoor learning into a truly inclusive experience.

Sensory sensitivities

For participants with sensory sensitivities, anticipation and gradual exposure play a key role in fostering comfort and confidence. Inviting them to explore the environment through different senses (such as touch, hearing, or smell) enhances engagement while ensuring their sensory limits are respected.

Educators have a key role in ensuring that PIDs are well prepared for outdoor activities so that the experience is safe, engaging, and fully accessible. Educators can use a wide range of strategies and tools - such as pre-visit materials, tactile maps, photographs, or resources in Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), - to help individuals anticipate and better understand the outdoor experience.

During activities, providing quiet areas, noise-reducing equipment, or structured breaks can help prevent sensory overload. It is crucial not to improvise outdoor activities, but instead to understand in advance the specific needs of the PIDs you are spending time with. For this reason, the participation of support persons (such as educators, caregivers, or family members) who know each individual's needs is essential to ensure that the outdoor experience is safe, comfortable, and truly inclusive. Every PID has their own unique needs, preferences, and challenges. What works well for one individual may not necessarily be effective for another.

This is why flexibility and personalization are key when planning outdoor activities. Educators and facilitators should take time to observe, listen, and adapt their approaches to each participant, adjusting the level of support, communication style, and type of activity to ensure that everyone can participate meaningfully and enjoy the experience at their own pace.

Weather-related adaptations

Weather conditions can significantly affect participation, especially for adults with intellectual disabilities, who may experience discomfort, anxiety or sensory stress due to sudden environmental changes. Activities should therefore include flexible options that take into account temperature, light and precipitation, as well as access to shade, shelter and appropriate clothing. Visual or tactile aids can help participants anticipate weather-related adjustments, for example by showing photos of rain before the activity.

In colder or rainier seasons, semi-outdoor or equivalent protected environments (such as verandas, sensory gardens or greenhouses) can maintain continuity and in the meantime ensure safety and comfort. When outdoor access is limited, alternative indoor activities that preserve a tangible connection to nature can be introduced, for example, creating nature soundscapes by listening to and recognising natural sounds such as rain, wind, or birdsong to promote relaxation and sensory awareness. Another valuable practice is weather journaling or *photo diaries*, where participants observe and record changes in weather or light, perhaps from a window, combining observation with visual or tactile expression.

Once again, the participation of support persons, such as educators, caregivers, or family members, is crucial to assist PIDs in managing unforeseen circumstances or changes of plan, such as those caused by weather conditions.

These unexpected situations can significantly affect how outdoor activities are carried out, and having trusted support figures present helps ensure continuity, safety, and emotional stability.





MATERIALS

- Notebook or sketchbook for each participant, pens, pencils, or markers.
- Optional: camera/polaroid for photo documentation.

Objective:

- To explore a community space through a photo walk that encourages movement, participation, and collective observation of the environment.

Present the participants with a brief explanation of the journaling process and the benefits of observing nature. Highlight key environmental elements like sounds, plants, and weather conditions.

Each participant chooses a “sit spot” in the outdoor space. For 10–15 minutes, they quietly observe their surroundings and record:



*something they **see***



*something they **hear***



*something they **smell***



*something they **feel***

Participants draw a simple map of their surroundings with themselves at the center.

Lines radiate toward the sources of sounds (birds, wind, water), noting what they hear and its direction; short lines indicate close sounds; long lines indicate distant sounds.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.9

INCLUSIVE OUTDOOR ACTIVITY CHECKLIST



Objective:

- To support the planning and facilitation of inclusive outdoor learning experiences through a practical checklist for educators.

This checklist is designed to help ensure that activities are accessible, sensory-friendly, and responsive to the diverse needs of all participants.



MATERIALS

- **Annex 1** - Use this checklist before, during, and after your sessions to guide preparation, monitor participation, and reflect on future improvements.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.10

NATURE SCAVENGER HUNT: DISCOVERING WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD



Objective:

- To encourage participants to notice and document elements of nature that evoke positive emotions.

Scavenger hunt walk: participants walk along a designated outdoor path. They seek and document items or scenes that make them feel good completing the template provided by the educator.

The template includes a list of natural elements and sensory experiences they might encounter along the walk (e.g., flowers, textures, the sound of birds, a surface they enjoy touching, or the scent of fresh leaves). It also provides blank spaces where participants can draw or write about what makes them feel good, helping them reflect on their personal reactions to nature.



MATERIALS

- **Annex 2** - You can provide participants with this template to record their observations during the activity.



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CHAPTER 3

From understanding to
inclusion: engaging
with people with
intellectual disabilities

* Introduction

This module provides a foundational understanding of intellectual disability and its impact on learning, communication, and participation in outdoor activities. It explores the different ways in which PIDs communicate, highlighting the importance of recognising individual communication styles and responding to them appropriately. The module introduces key principles for building inclusive interactions (predictable structure, clear communication, meaningful choice-making, and respectful relationships that strengthen a person's autonomy and sense of safety).

In addition, the module focuses on how photography can support meaningful communication and participation for PIDs. During outdoor activities, individuals often express their interests, preferences, and emotions through actions, gestures, or spontaneous choices rather than verbal explanations. By paying attention to non-verbal expression and to moments in which attention and motivation emerge naturally, educators can recognise participants' initiatives and transform them into meaningful opportunities for learning and self-expression.

The module presents strategies to support non-verbal communication and enhance attention through concrete choices in outdoor photography.

* Learning objectives

By the end of this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Understand the impact of intellectual disability (ID) on learning, communication, and participation.
2. Recognise different forms of communication, including non-verbal signals used by PIDs.
3. Develop skills for creating inclusive and respectful interactions that support safety, autonomy, and active engagement.
4. Recognise and support non-verbal forms of expression in outdoor photography activities.
5. Apply strategies that enhance attention and motivation through meaningful choices.
6. Create learning environments where participants' spontaneous actions guide communication and participation.

* Learning outcomes

Upon completing this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Adapt communication and the learning environment according to the needs and strengths of PIDs.
2. Identify and interpret non-verbal signals (gaze, movements, gestures, choices) and use them to guide interaction.
3. Establish inclusive, clear, and collaborative interactions that enable PIDs to participate safely and express themselves.
4. Recognise non-verbal signals, actions, and spontaneous choices as meaningful forms of communication during outdoor photography activities.
5. Use strategies that enhance attention and motivation by building on participants' interests, preferences, and naturally emerging focus.
6. Facilitate inclusive learning experiences where participants' non-verbal expressions and decisions guide the pace, direction, and meaning of the activity.

3

From understanding to inclusion: engaging with people with intellectual disabilities

3.1 Understanding intellectual disability

Intellectual disability is a developmental condition that affects a **person's ability to process information, learn, and adapt to everyday situations**. ID may appear as difficulties in understanding abstract concepts, planning multi-step actions, navigating social situations, or accurately interpreting other people's emotions.

Participation in learning and social activities largely depends on how accessible, clear, and predictable the environment and communication are. PIDs often find it easier to understand concrete and visually clear information that is based on practical experience and allows learning step by step.

Visual supports such as images or photographs help PIDs better understand their surroundings, recognise emotions, and organise more complex information, making the learning process more accessible.

A clear sequence of tasks, enough time to process information, and opportunities to repeat actions are equally important for building understanding. A safe and predictable environment also helps reduce anxiety and supports trust.

These **adjustments** are crucial in creative and practical activities such as outdoor photography, where clear steps and concrete tasks help PIDs feel safe and engaged. This allows them to use their strengths – learning through experience, repetition, and hands-on activity. It is important to recognise that PIDs differ greatly in their abilities, interests, communication styles, and ways of participating.

There is **no single approach that works for everyone**, effective support is based on individual needs, strengths, and learning pace. Inclusive pedagogy does not focus on a person's difficulties but seeks ways to use their abilities, interests, and choices to foster active participation and learning.

When the environment and communication are adapted, PIDs can participate fully in learning and social interaction, express their thoughts and interests, and develop new skills. **This forms the basis of inclusive practice, where every person's voice and experience matter (even when that voice is expressed through visual or non-verbal means).**

3.2 Intellectual disability and communication

Communication is an area in which PIDs may encounter various **challenges**. These difficulties can appear both in understanding information and in expressing it to others, especially in situations where complex language, fast speech, or abstract concepts are used.

Some PIDs may find it hard to maintain attention and follow spoken information for a longer time, while others may struggle to find the right words or form a clear and connected sentence, even when they understand the situation well.

It is important to recognise that **communication difficulties** are not related to a person's ability to think, but to **how information is structured and how clear the situation is**. Many PIDs process information more effectively when they can take it in at their own pace and when it is presented in a clear and concrete way. Repetition, simple wording, and visual support help ensure that the main idea is understood and can be used in further interaction.

A large part of communication for PIDs takes place non-verbally. A person's gaze, body movement, facial expression, reaction to specific objects or situations, and spontaneously made choices often provide essential information about their interests, needs, and emotional state. These signals are a meaningful and authentic form of communication, especially in situations where spoken language is limited or creates anxiety.

Non-verbal forms of expression allow a person to share their viewpoint even when words are not available or are difficult to formulate. Some PIDs may also have difficulties recognising emotions or interpreting social situations, particularly when signals are complex or contradictory. This means that the quality of communication is strongly influenced by the environment in which it takes place: the calmer, more predictable, and clearly structured the situation is, the easier it becomes to understand information and maintain mutual understanding.

Effective communication requires the use of supportive methods: visual examples, pictures, practical demonstrations, simple and clear choices, step-by-step instructions, and gestures. Such approaches not only make information easier to understand but also reduce anxiety and strengthen trust. When a person is given enough time to respond and has the opportunity to express themselves in a way that suits them, greater participation and self-confidence are encouraged.

Communication for PIDs is based not only on **spoken language** but also on **interaction, perception, and trusting relationships**. When the communication process is adapted to a person's individual needs and pace, they are not only better able to understand the information provided but also feel safer expressing their opinion, taking part in conversation, and making decisions. This approach helps build relationships in which the person can express themselves freely, including non-verbally (for example, through photography).

Photography as a means of communication offers particularly meaningful support, as an image turns an experience into a concrete form that can be talked about, reflected on, or simply shown to others. Photography makes it easier to express thoughts and emotions because it provides a visual support for conversation and allows a person to participate actively—choosing what to photograph, what to show, and what to highlight. Photography becomes a tool of communication that respects the pace and expressive style of a person with ID.

3.3 Building inclusive interactions: effective communication with PIDs

Inclusive interaction with PIDs is grounded in partnership, mutual respect, and well-defined structures that ensure safety and support individuals in expressing their views.

Unlike everyday communication, inclusive interaction focuses not on how information is transmitted, but on how relationships are built, relationships in which the person feels heard and included. Effective interaction begins with the educator's or support person's ability to notice and value the individual's initiative, even when it appears in subtle ways, such as a gaze, a movement, a choice of object, or a reaction to the environment.

These initiatives offer meaningful information about the person's interests and intentions. When they are acknowledged and used to shape the activity, the person experiences that their presence and choices matter. A predictable and transparent structure is essential for creating inclusive interaction. PIDs feel safer when they know what will happen, how long it will take, and how they can participate.



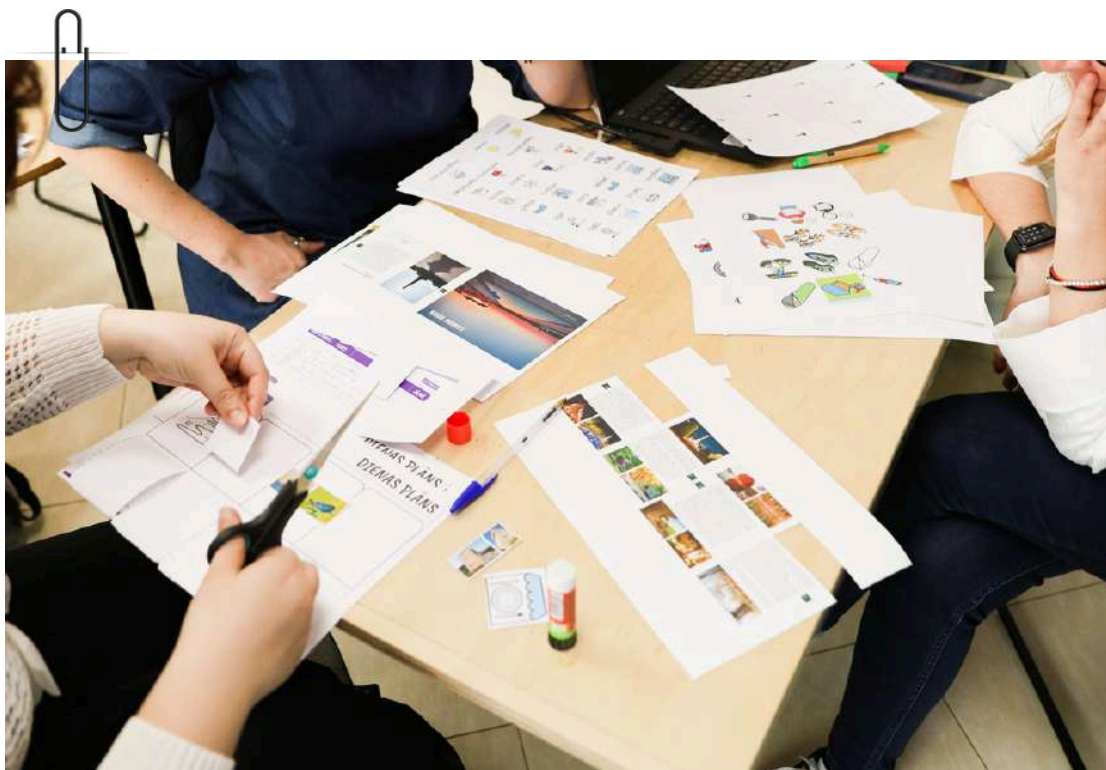
For this reason, the following approaches are especially effective for building inclusive interactions with PIDs:

- providing short and clear action steps,
- using visual supports to illustrate the activity,
- giving clear indications of when an activity starts and finishes,
- maintaining a consistent routine that reduces anxiety and promotes participation.

Another key element is the opportunity to make meaningful choices. Inclusive interaction does not develop when a person is only asked to follow instructions. It develops when the person can influence the direction of the activity. This can be encouraged by offering simple but significant options: where to go, what to photograph, which object or place to explore more closely, or whom to work with. Choice is not only a form of participation—it is an experience of autonomy. The quality of the relationship is crucial. A person with ID participates successfully when they feel safe, accepted, and not rushed.

A respectful attitude involves:

- waiting for a response without pressure,
- accepting refusal as a valid answer,
- responding to signals calmly and with genuine interest,
- offering support without taking over control.



Such an environment allows interaction to become collaboration rather than the execution of instructions. The educator's role is to guide the process in a supportive way, not to direct it unilaterally. Photography adds a visible place and a voice within the interaction. It allows participation without pressure to speak, because choosing to take a photo, show an image, or point to an object is already a form of communication. When the educator responds to these choices (showing interest, asking simple questions, or offering possibilities to continue) the relationship becomes grounded in equality and respect. Inclusive interaction is not a single technique but an ongoing process in which the PID is seen as a full partner with their own interests, preferences, and perspectives.

Such an approach not only improves communication but also strengthens engagement, emotional safety, and creative expression, forming the foundation for the strategies to support non-verbal expression described in the following chapters.

3.4. Strategies to facilitate non-verbal expression

Nonverbal communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, and it becomes especially crucial when working with PIDs. In everyday life, much of what we communicate is not spoken but expressed through non-linguistic channels (through gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, eye contact, interpersonal distance, and even subtle forms of touch). These signals can accompany verbal language, reinforcing meaning, or they can completely replace words, conveying intentions, emotions, interest, availability, or refusal.

For participants with limited access to spoken language, **nonverbal cues are often the primary mode of expressing themselves.** A smile, a frown, a lean forward, or a gentle touch can reveal preferences, needs, emotions, or initiatives that might otherwise remain unrecognized. By paying careful attention to these signals, educators and facilitators can better understand participants' experiences, respond appropriately, and support their autonomy and self-expression. Recognizing and valuing nonverbal communication not only enhances interaction but also fosters trust, connection, and meaningful engagement, turning subtle gestures into powerful tools for relationship-building and personal empowerment.

A fundamental first step in facilitating nonverbal expression is understanding the **channels** involved: kinesics (body movements, gestures, orientation), paralanguage (tone, intensity, and rhythm of the voice), proxemics (use of interpersonal space), and tactile behaviors.

These regulate speaking turns, express emotions, and provide clues about communication intentions. In an educational context, carefully observing signals allows us to understand when a person wants to initiate an interaction, when they are in difficulty, or when they show curiosity about an object or activity.

The APA Guidelines for Assessment and Intervention with Persons with Disabilities emphasize the importance of adapting communication to individual characteristics of the person. This means creating an environment that reduces sensory and cognitive barriers, proposing slow rhythms, using clear communication, and giving the person time to express themselves through their favorite channels. The guidelines insist that professionals must be attentive to nonverbal cues, interpret them in context, and adapt their communication to foster participation and agency. This also involves knowing the communication profile of each participant and the ability to modify the interaction with flexibility.

In outdoor participatory photography, **nonverbal cues** can serve as a powerful **form of expression**. We can employ strategies such as observing a person's gestures, glances, or approach to understand what they wish to photograph; using interpersonal distance and movement in space as cues to guide their choices; or reading facial expressions and shifts in posture as indicators of interest or discomfort. These behaviors help create a communicative environment that does not rely on verbal language.

The role of the educator is fundamental. The APA Guidelines draw attention to the need to create a respectful and accessible climate, in which every form of communication is recognized and valued.

Facilitating nonverbality means responding to signals, restoring comprehensibility to intentions, and modeling clear and non-judgmental communication methods. It also means giving the person the opportunity to initiate an action, make a choice, and signal preferences through their spontaneous gestures. When professionals engage in an active listening attitude towards bodily and proxemic signals, communication becomes more fluid and nonverbal expression can emerge as a tool for participation and self-determination. Facilitating nonverbal expression requires understanding nonverbal communication channels, adapting the environment and interactions accordingly, and maintaining a relational approach grounded in respect, attentive observation, and sensitive responsiveness.

Applying these principles to photographic practice highlights nonverbal communication as a valuable, expressive, and inclusive form of language.

When leading educational activities with PIDs, outdoor and photography educators should always collaborate closely with trained professionals to ensure safety, provide appropriate support, and enable effective communication. See [Annex 3](#) for the Nonverbal Communication Checklist for Educators.

3.5 Strategies to enhance attention and motivation

Active and motivated participation influences the involvement of PIDs in educational activities. Self-Determination Theory, widely used in education and clinical settings, proposes that intrinsic motivation emerges when three fundamental psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relationship are supported. These needs are important for creating inclusive and participatory contexts, such as those envisioned within a photography journey.

Supporting autonomy means offering opportunities for choice and initiative. When a person perceives that they can influence their own path, motivation naturally increases. In working with PIDs, this can translate into offering simple choices such as selecting between two subjects to photograph, deciding when to take the shot, and choosing the location from which to observe the environment. Educational action is thus a process of co-construction where nonverbal preferences or preferences expressed in alternative ways are recognized as forms of self-determination.

The second need, that of **competence**, concerns the perception of being able to carry out an activity and grasp its progress. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that motivation grows when tasks are accessible, calibrated, and accompanied by clear feedback. In line with the APA Guidelines, this involves adapting the photographic activity using simple tools, providing brief instructions, demonstrating with visual examples on how to perform an action, and enhancing each step forward, regardless of the technical result of the image. The presence of a predictable, non-judgmental and organized environment to reduce sensory distractions helps maintain attention and avoid situations of overload, as recommended by the APA guidelines.

The third need, the **relationship**, concerns the perception of being recognized, heard and accepted. Motivation is most stable when the person senses that the adult is engaged, attentive, and sensitive to communicative cues. Mutual attention occurs through continuous nonverbal exchanges such as body orientation, interpersonal distance, eye contact and postural variations. The educator, responding appropriately to these signals, helps the participant maintain concentration and perceive the relationship as a safe place. A positive relational climate supports attention and allows us to transform photographic activity into a space of shared expression.

Attention can also be sustained through structuring the environment and the sequence of activities. The APA Guidelines emphasize the importance of removing barriers and adapting contexts so that individuals can participate decisively. This may include reducing sensory distractors, alternating moments of free exploration with more guided phases, or providing regular breaks. The activity should not be presented as overly complex, as this can reduce attention. Instead, it should be broken down into clear, manageable steps to help participants focus on each phase.

Finally, motivation and attention are fostered when the activity is perceived as important. Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that interest increases when a personal connection to the activity is established. In photography, this can happen by allowing the person to photograph elements towards which they spontaneously show curiosity. The nonverbal cues described above can be used as indicators to understand what attracts attention and to transform that interest into a motivational starting point.

Strategies to support attention and motivation in participatory photography include promoting autonomy through simple, adaptable choices, fostering competence with accessible tasks and clear feedback, and strengthening the educational relationship by responding to nonverbal cue, creating inclusive, motivating experiences that respect each participant's communication abilities.

To enhance attention and motivation among PIDs, educators should first collaborate closely with trained professionals to ensure safety, provide appropriate support, and facilitate meaningful participation.



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PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.11

BODY LEADS – FOLLOWING THE BODY AS A NON-VERBAL CHOICE



MATERIALS

- Cameras or smartphones.
- Outdoor or indoor accessible space.

Objective:

- To support non-verbal expression by recognising body movement, gaze, and proximity as meaningful photographic choices.

The educator invites participants to move freely and slowly within the chosen space. No verbal instructions are given about what to photograph. Participants are encouraged to explore at their own pace.

As participants move, the educator observes body signals such as stopping in front of an object, approaching a specific area, touching a surface, or looking at something for a longer time. When a participant clearly orients their body toward a subject, this orientation is considered a choice.

The educator acknowledges the choice with a simple gesture or a few words (for example, nodding or saying “here”) and supports the participant in taking the photograph if needed. The educator avoids asking direct questions and does not suggest subjects.

The activity ends when each participant has taken one or more photos based on their spontaneous bodily orientation. A short moment of shared observation can follow, where photos are simply viewed without interpretation.



MATERIALS

- Cameras or smartphones.
- Quite indoor or outdoor space.
- Three clearly visible positions or objects.

Objective:

- To support participation through clear structure and simple choice.

The educator selects two possible subjects to photograph, such as two objects, two areas of the space, or two visual elements. The options are presented clearly and simultaneously, without verbal explanations.

The educator prepares three visible positions in the space, arranged in a simple line or curve.

The participant is invited to observe the space. No verbal instruction is given.

The educator waits and observes where the participant's attention goes. When the participant shows interest in one position, the educator recognizes this as a choice and supports the participant in moving there.

A photograph is taken of the moment. The educator then gently shifts attention to the next position, allowing the participant to decide whether to continue.

The activity ends after one or more steps, depending on the participant's interest.



MATERIALS

- Cameras or smartphones.
- Calm and accessible environment.

Objective:

- To strengthen attention, motivation, and self-efficacy by recognising small, achievable actions during the photographic process.

The educator introduces the photographic activity as a sequence of very simple actions, without time pressure. Participants are invited to identify something that interests them, approach it, hold the camera, and take a photo.

The educator observes each step and acknowledges successful actions as they happen. Feedback is given in a simple and immediate way, such as a smile, a nod, or a short word of encouragement. No evaluation of the aesthetic quality of the photo is provided.

Participants proceed at their own pace, focusing on one action at a time. The educator avoids correcting movements or rushing the process. The emphasis remains on the experience of being able to complete each step.

The activity concludes when participants have taken one or more photographs and experienced a sense of completion. A brief moment of shared observation may follow, focusing on participation rather than results.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.14

STILL FRAME - NOTICING SMALL DIFFERENCES



MATERIALS

- Cameras or smartphones.
- Natural or everyday elements with repeated forms (plants, pots, objects, tiles).

Objective:

- To enhance attention and non-verbal expression by focusing on subtle visual differences within a repetitive setting.

The educator invites participants to stop in front of a group of similar elements, such as plants, objects, or repeated shapes. Participants are encouraged to remain still for a short time and observe quietly.

Without giving verbal instructions, the educator allows participants to notice small differences in colour, shape, size, or direction. When a participant shows interest in one specific element—by looking longer, leaning closer, or pointing—the educator acknowledges the choice.

The participant then takes a photograph of the chosen detail. The activity ends when each participant has captured one or more images based on their focused observation. Photos can be briefly viewed together without verbal interpretation.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.15

TINY CREATIONS - EXPRESSING IDENTITY THROUGH SMALL DETAILS



MATERIALS

- Simple creative materials (fabric, paper, corks, natural elements).
- Cameras or smartphones.
- Table or outdoor surface.

Objective:

- To support personal expression and participation through the creation and observation of small handmade figures or objects.

The educator provides simple materials and invites participants to create a small figure or object without a model. Each participant adds one or two chosen details. The figures are then placed together in a shared space, observed, and photographed individually or as a group. The educator supports the process by acknowledging choices and allowing time for observation.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.16

SEED MOMENT – PHOTOGRAPHING BEGINNINGS



MATERIALS

- Seeds.
- Soil or pots
- Cameras. or smartphones
- Quiet outdoor or indoor space.

Objective:

- To strengthen attention, calm, and patience by focusing on slow and meaningful actions.

The educator gives each participant a seed and invites them to hold it in their hands for a moment, noticing its shape and texture. Participants are then invited to place the seed gently into the soil.

Before covering the seed, participants take a close-up photograph of the moment when the seed touches the ground. The activity is carried out slowly and without verbal explanation.

The activity ends once the photo has been taken. Images can be viewed briefly, focusing on the act rather than the result.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.17

GROUNDING CIRCLE – BEING PRESENT TOGETHER



MATERIALS

- Cameras or smartphones.
- Open space (indoor or outdoor).

Objective:

- To promote group connection, shared presence, and non-verbal participation.

The educator invites participants to stand in a circle, with their feet oriented toward the centre. A short pause is given to feel the ground and notice the shared space.

Participants are then invited to look down and take a photograph of the circle formed by the group. No explanation or discussion is required during the activity.

The educator acknowledges participation and brings the activity to a close once the photo is taken. Images may be viewed together to reinforce the sense of collective presence.



CHAPTER 4

Developing inclusive
outdoor photography
experiences

* Introduction

Outdoor photography offers a privileged setting to promote inclusive, meaningful, and accessible educational experiences for adults with intellectual disabilities.

Natural or community environments facilitate free exploration, emotional connection with the space, and the development of personal and social skills.

Unlike the rigidity of enclosed spaces, the outdoors offers freedom of movement, observation, sensory experience, and decision-making, creating opportunities for participation that respect each person's pace, interests, and abilities.

This chapter presents a step-by-step framework for designing and facilitating inclusive outdoor photography experiences.

The process is structured into five steps:

1. Introducing the basics of photography;
2. Preparing the body and senses for observation;
3. Integrating photographic practice into learning processes;
4. Creating a portfolio that collects and highlights the value of the images produced;
5. Assessing and reflecting on outdoor photography activities.

Each step combines practical guidance, pedagogical criteria, and accessible activities that can be adapted to different levels of support. Inclusive photography is not focused on technique, but on perspective: on the ability to notice what draws attention, on the curiosity to explore the environment, on personal expression, and on the construction of meaning through images. Therefore, educational guidance emphasizes simplicity, clarity, slow observation, and mindfulness as a way of being in the world. Taking photographs outdoors is an opportunity to learn to pause, breathe, discover details, and engage in dialogue with the environment.

At the same time, these experiences strengthen self-esteem, autonomy, and social participation.

The images produced become tools for communication, sharing experiences, and being an active part of a group.

The creation of a final portfolio allows for the recognition of achievements and the development of a personal visual narrative, reinforcing personal empowerment and community inclusion.

Assessment and reflection play a key role in outdoor photography activities. Simple self-reflection tools help participants recognise their own decisions, preferences, and feelings as they engage with the environment. These moments allow educators to value each person's contribution and to strengthen empowerment, participation, and a sense of belonging within the group.

Altogether, this chapter offers concrete resources for educators and facilitators to design accessible, creative, and transformative photographic experiences in natural and community spaces, promoting well-being, participation, and a sense of belonging.

Learning objectives

By the end of this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Understand the basic principles of inclusive outdoor photography, including the use of cameras, mobile phones, and adapted materials for different levels of support.
2. Identify tools and strategies to teach photography in a simple, practical, and accessible way, integrating framing, choice of subject, natural light, and exploration of the environment.
3. Recognize the importance of activating the senses, the body, and mindfulness as a preliminary step to encourage conscious observation and participation in outdoor settings.
4. Design inclusive photographic activities in natural or community spaces, adapting pace, support, and goals to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities.
5. Integrate outdoor photography into broader educational experiences, connecting it with emotional well-being, autonomy, social learning, and community participation.
6. Value the photographic portfolio as a tool for expression, recognition, personal empowerment, and the construction of visual identity.
7. Identify simple methods that support participants in recognising their own choices, preferences, and contributions during outdoor photography activities.
8. Apply reflection tools that help participants express how they felt and what they decided, using both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication.

* Learning outcomes

Upon completing this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Apply the basic principles of accessible outdoor photography, using cameras, mobile phones, or other tools adapted to participants' needs.
2. Clearly and systematically guide the practical use of the camera, supporting the understanding of framing, subject selection, and the management of natural light.
3. Facilitate body-awareness and sensory-activation dynamics prior to the photographic activity, encouraging greater mindfulness and presence in the environment.
4. Plan inclusive photographic activities in natural and community settings, adjusting support, materials, and timing to suit different levels of autonomy and comprehension.
5. Integrate outdoor photography into meaningful educational experiences, connecting images with emotions, learning, exploration, connection with nature, and community participation.
6. Support participants in selecting and organizing their photographs to create a personal or collective portfolio, acknowledging their achievements, interests, and modes of expression.
7. Support participants in recognising their own decisions, preferences, and actions during outdoor photography sessions through simple and accessible reflection tools.
8. Facilitate moments of reflection where participants can express how they felt and what they chose, using verbal or non-verbal forms of communication.

4 Developing inclusive outdoor photography experiences

Outdoor photography is a powerful educational tool to foster participation, autonomy, and well-being in adults with intellectual disabilities.

Working in natural or community settings facilitates free exploration, sensory connection, and personal expression. Moreover, the act of taking photographs allows for the integration of movement, contact with the environment, social interaction, and meaningful learning.

This chapter outlines a gradual five-step process that guides educators in creating inclusive, accessible, and engaging photographic experiences, adapted to different levels of support.

In planning and implementing inclusive outdoor photography experiences, the THRULens Consortium proposes a five-step approach based on the steps detailed below.



4.1 Step 1 - Introducing the basics of photography



The first step involves **becoming familiar with the camera** in a simple and accessible way. The main goal is to help each person gain confidence and discover that they can create images without needing technical knowledge. That's why the introduction to the tool should be clear, slow, and respectful.

Basic actions are demonstrated, such as turning the device on and off, holding the camera or mobile phone with both hands, using the touchscreen or shutter button, and reviewing the captured image. Choosing the right equipment is essential for ensuring accessibility: mobile phones with simple cameras, lightweight compact cameras, tablets with large screens, or adapted devices for participants with higher support needs (large buttons, stabilizing straps, wheelchair mounts, or voice-activated triggers). Allowing each person to choose their own device boosts motivation and encourages autonomy.

Once familiarity is established, **framing** can be introduced as a way of deciding what to capture. There is no need for technical language, participants can simply explore basic distinctions such as near and far, up and down, or horizontal and vertical.

Subject selection is also explored using simple questions like: *"What do you like?"*, *"What catches your attention?"*, or *"What do you want to show?"* This process of choosing makes photography an exercise in personal discovery.

Observation of **natural light** is introduced experientially: stepping into the shade, moving into sunlight, noticing reflections, and observing how colors change when the body is turned.

This sensory, hands-on approach allows participants to make visual decisions without relying on theoretical knowledge. It establishes photography as an act of choice, exploration, curiosity, and personal expression.

4.2 Step 2 - Preparing the body and senses for observation

Outdoor photography requires **activating the senses**, paying attention to the body, and connecting with the environment. This second step incorporates short mindfulness practices that help focus the mind and reduce anxiety: deep breathing, feeling the feet on the ground, noticing body posture, listening to surrounding sounds, or sensing the air temperature.

These actions prepare the gaze and foster presence in the here and now.

Participants are invited to explore the environment before taking photos, noticing colors, textures, shadows, movements, changes in light, or small details that often go unnoticed. For many people with intellectual disabilities, this multisensory approach enhances focus, spatial awareness, and decision-making.

It also supports emotional self-regulation and well-being, creating a calm atmosphere that makes the photographic experience more conscious, safe, and enjoyable.

4.3 Step 3 - integrating photographic practice into learning processes

Once the group is comfortable with the camera and sensory observation, photography can be **incorporated into broader educational activities** that make use of natural or community environments.

For educators specializing in outdoor education, this step involves viewing the outdoors as a pedagogical resource, a space that sparks curiosity, encourages movement, and supports diverse forms of exploration. Facilitating outdoor activities requires ensuring physical accessibility, anticipating mobility support needs, considering the safety of the environment, and providing routes or activities adapted to different levels of autonomy.

When working with PIDs, educators must be mindful of cognitive, sensory, and communication diversity. This includes using short, clear instructions, visual or gestural aids, breaking tasks into small steps, respecting individual rhythms, and providing advance notice of what will happen during the activity.

Support should promote autonomy, decision-making, and personal expression, avoiding overprotection or directing the participant's gaze.

Activities must be predictable, accessible, and flexible, so that each person can participate according to their abilities and interests.

For photography educators, the goal is not to emphasize technical skill, but to provide simple and accessible tools. Concepts like framing, distance, light, or subject selection can be explained through visual demonstrations, everyday examples, and guided explorations of the surroundings.

Whether using a phone, tablet, or adapted device, the camera should be presented as an accessible means to discover, observe, and communicate.

Outdoor photographic activities can take the form of walks with small missions, thematic collections (colors, lights, textures), pair explorations, visual challenges, narrative sequences, or neighborhood tours.

These approaches promote movement, social interaction, emotional well-being, and learning about the natural and community environment. C

Collaboration with professionals experienced in working with PIDs is essential to ensure safety, provide appropriate support, and enable meaningful participation.

4.4 Step 4 – Creating an outdoor photography portfolio

The outdoor photography portfolio is a tool for empowerment, recognition, and personal expression.

It is not just a collection of photos, but a visual narrative that reflects each participant's gaze, interests, emotions, and discoveries.

It can take many forms:

➔ a series of 5 to 10 selected images



➔ a visual diary



➔ a photographic map of the neighborhood or natural surroundings



➔ a nature journal, or a narrative sequence linked to emotions or memories



Creating the portfolio enhances self-esteem, autonomy, and a sense of achievement. It also results in a final product that can be shared with family, the group, or the community, making visible the capacities and unique perspective of each participant. It is a meaningful conclusion that transforms the photographic experience into a complete and deeply human educational process.

4.5 Step 5 - Assessing and reflecting on outdoor photography activities through participant self-reflection tools

Self-reflection tools are designed to help participants recognize what they did, the choices they made, and how they felt during outdoor photography activities. The underlying principle is that each person can better understand their own role in the process without having someone else decide for them or interpret their intentions. This approach is grounded in the supported decision-making model.

In practical activities, this approach enables participants to view photography as a space where they can direct their own actions, deciding what to observe, when to pause, where to position themselves, what to approach, and what to leave behind. Even when communication is primarily nonverbal, preferences emerge through gestures, gaze, and spontaneous movements. By attending to these cues, educators can recognize participants as active agents, capable of guiding the experience and shaping the photographic journey.

Self-reflection tools do not have to be complex or abstract but can be short moments in which the person points to a photograph that represents a significant moment or chooses, between two images, the one he feels most his own. Even a simple gesture, such as touching a photo or nodding in front of your choice, can be a way to recognize the person's awareness of their contribution. **The key is not to understand why, but to let the participant see and feel that the choice is their own.**

It is essential that the educator does not replace the participant's decisions but enables them by providing time, minimizing pressure, clarifying options, and respecting hesitations. The same approach applies during the reflection phase: rather than questioning the participant, the educator accompanies them in explaining what they have done. Even small actions, such as selecting a photo from several options, can strengthen confidence and reinforce the sense of autonomy.

Outdoor participatory photography becomes an ideal experience to support personal reflection where the person sees a concrete result of their initiative and can recognize what they have chosen, what they have done with others and what they have communicated. This strengthens autonomy, participation and motivation to continue.

4.6 Tips for planning and delivering accessible outdoor learning activities

- ➔ Plan ahead: select accessible, safe, and well-equipped locations.
- ➔ Use inclusive communication: provide simple, clear instructions supported by gestures, images, symbols, or AAC pictograms.
- ➔ Provide tangible materials: offer printed images that participants can handle.
- ➔ Adopt a multisensory approach: engage sight, hearing, touch, and mindful observation.
- ➔ Ensure supervision and support: educators' presence guarantees safety and guidance.
- ➔ Encourage reflection and sharing: discuss photographs, experiences, and emotions to foster self-awareness, belonging, and social cohesion.
- ➔ Enhance autonomy and expression: allow participants to choose subjects and create their own narratives.



PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.18

STEP 1 - INTRODUCING THE BASICS OF PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTING TO KNOW MY CAMERA



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.

Objective:

- To help participants become familiar with the camera or phone, fostering autonomy and confidence in its use.

The educator distributes different devices (phones, compact cameras, tablets). Slowly and visually, they demonstrate how to turn them on, hold them, use the screen, and press the shutter button.

Participants practice turning the device on and off, taking a photo, and reviewing it. They can repeat as many times as needed.

A short game is played: “take a photo of your shoe,” “take a photo of the sky,” “take a photo of your friend.”

The goal is to remove the fear of the device and show that it can be handled with minimal support.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.19

STEP 1 - INTRODUCING THE BASICS OF PHOTOGRAPHY: EXPLORING FRAMING: NEAR, FAR, UP, DOWN



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.
- Safe indoor or outdoor space to move freely.

Objective:

- To understand framing in a simple way through body movement and visual decisions.

In a safe outdoor space, the educator asks the group to take four photos: one close-up; one from a distance; one looking upward; one looking downward.

Afterwards, they review the photos on screen and discuss what changes. They may repeat the activity by choosing an object they like and photographing it from different positions.

This activity strengthens decision-making, observation, and basic framing skills.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.20

STEP 2 - INTEGRATING PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE INTO LEARNING PROCESSES: SEEING WITH THE HANDS



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.
- Natural or tactile elements to touch (leaves, stones, bark, fabrics, etc.).
- Pictograms or cards to describe sensations (optional).

Objective:

- To promote multisensory observation and connection with the environment before taking photos.

Participants touch different elements of the environment: a leaf, a stone, a texture, tree bark. Then, they photograph the object or corner that gave them the most pleasant or curious sensation. The educator encourages them to describe what they felt using words, gestures, or pictograms. This activity is especially useful for people with language difficulties and enhances sensory attention.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.21

STEP 3 - INTEGRATING PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE INTO LEARNING PROCESSES: "COLOR COLLECTION OF THE PLACE"



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.
- Indoor or outdoor space with colorful elements to photograph.

Objective:

- To integrate photography, environmental observation, and visual learning through a simple thematic activity.

The educator invites participants to choose a color (green, blue, red, yellow). Each person must find and photograph three elements in the environment that match that color.

Afterwards, they share their photos with the group and build a "color palette of the place." This activity supports perception, attention to detail, spatial exploration, and creativity.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.22

STEP 4 - CREATING A PORTFOLIO THAT COLLECTS AND HIGHLIGHTS THE VALUE OF THE IMAGES PRODUCED: "I CHOOSE MY 5 FAVORITE PHOTOS"



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.
- Computer, tablet, or printer to review and save photos.
- Digital folders or printed materials to store selected photos.

Objective:

- To guide intentional photo selection and support personal decision-making.

Each participant reviews the photos taken during the session or project. With the educator's support, they select five they especially like.

Simple criteria can be used: *"I like it," "It reminds me of something nice," "It's my favorite color," "I feel good when I look at it."*

The selected images are printed or saved in a digital group folder.

This activity fosters autonomy, self-esteem, and personal recognition.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.23

STEP 4 - CREATING A PORTFOLIO THAT COLLECTS AND HIGHLIGHTS THE VALUE OF THE IMAGES PRODUCED: "MY VISUAL STORY IN 6 STEPS"



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.
- Computer, tablet, or printer to review and save photos.

Objective:

- To create a small narrative portfolio that reflects interests, emotions, or experiences.

The educator proposes building a story with six outdoor photos:

1. Something I like.
2. Something that brings me calm.
3. Something that surprises me.
4. Something small.
5. Something big.
6. My favorite place.

Each person arranges their photos in order, adds a title or chooses a pictogram to accompany them.

Optionally, they can record an audio explaining why they chose those images.

This activity strengthens personal expression, sequencing, memory, and communication.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.24

STEP 4 - CREATING A PORTFOLIO THAT COLLECTS AND HIGHLIGHTS THE VALUE OF THE IMAGES PRODUCED: "THE SEQUENCE OF MY DECISIONS"



Objective:

- To support participants in reflecting on the small decisions made during the photo walk by arranging their images in a preferred order.

The activity is based on the reconstruction of the path taken. The educator shows some photos taken at different times and invites the person to order them as they wish. There is no correct sequence. The point is to help the person see that, along the walk, they have made several small decisions such as stopping in front of something, approaching a subject, changing direction, or deciding to shoot. When the person arranges the photos according to their preference they are already reflecting on their choices without the need for words. The educator can confirm with a simple comment, such as "you're the one who decided where to put it", reinforcing the perception of agency without interpreting.



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.
- Computer, tablet, or printer to review and save photos.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.25

STEP 4 - CREATING A PORTFOLIO THAT COLLECTS AND HIGHLIGHTS THE VALUE OF THE IMAGES PRODUCED: "THE PHOTO I WANT TO SHOW OTHERS"



Objective:

- To encourage participation and social inclusion by allowing participants to choose and share a meaningful photo with the group.

This activity links decision-making and social participation. The person is asked to choose a photo to share with the group. Here too the choice can be non-verbal (point, take the photo, look at it for longer). The meaning of the activity is to give the person an opportunity for participation that is visible and recognized by others. The moment the person shows the photo, others can simply observe and listen, without evaluative comments. The person sees that their choice has value for the group and this strengthens participation, trust and a sense of belonging.



MATERIALS

- Compact cameras, smartphones, or tablets.
- Computer, tablet, or printer to review photos.
- Space to share photos (screen or printed photos).



MATERIALS

- Rock salt.
- Coloured chalks.
- Paper.
- Scissors.
- Pencils or pens.
- Spoons.
- Small jars or bowls.
- Glass bottle.
- Funnel.

Objective:

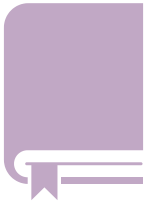
- To evaluate how effective the activity was and to give each participant the opportunity to express their emotions and opinions about the outdoor photography experience.

This activity helps participants share how they felt during the outdoor photo session. Through a simple moment of review and reflection, each person can talk about what they learned, what they enjoyed, and which emotions they experienced. These reflection moments are also useful for educators to plan future activities based on the group's feedback. Divide the salt into different bowls. Use scissors to scrape the coloured chalks so that each bowl contains a different colour. The number of colours can be chosen by the educator (for example four). Prepare a card for each colour with a key word associated to it (e.g. things learned, emotions felt, participation, new friendships, suggestions). Place the bowls with spoons in a circle around the glass bottle.

Participants stand in a circle. One at a time, following the educator's example, they choose the colour that best represents their feelings or thoughts about the outdoor photography activity. They pour a spoonful of the coloured salt into the bottle and explain their choice.

At the end, the bottle can be kept as a small gift and as a memory of the experience shared with the group.

This activity has been adapted from the [Hi Ability Toolkit](#).



RESOURCES

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* Introduction

Photography not only allows us to observe the world, but also to share it. When adults with intellectual disabilities show their images, their interests, emotions, and ways of relating to the environment become visible. This chapter offers guidance on how to transform the photographs created during project activities into exhibitions and participatory events that promote inclusion, dialogue, and community recognition.

Exhibitions are conceived as accessible spaces where each person can tell their story and actively participate in building a collective narrative.

Through processes such as image selection, creating texts or visual supports, and organizing the exhibition space, autonomy, self-expression, and self-esteem are fostered.

The goal is not to display “pretty pictures,” but to give value to personal perspectives and create a meaningful encounter between participants, families, educators, and the community, while challenging stereotypes and overcoming stigma in the process.

The chapter also covers inclusive curation, ensuring that exhibitions are clear, accessible, and easy to navigate for all visitors. It offers guidance on engaging the community, fostering social cohesion, and creating open spaces for participation, whether indoors or in outdoor environments.

Finally, it highlights communication and outreach strategies that help share the project’s outcomes and learning in an ethical, sensitive, and approachable way.

* Learning objectives

By the end of this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Understand the educational and community value of photographic exhibitions as a tool to make inclusion visible, promote social participation, and strengthen both personal and collective identity.
2. Learn how to support participants in building their visual narratives, facilitating image selection, the use of accessible supports, and the expression of their own stories.
3. Develop criteria for designing and curating accessible and inclusive exhibitions, considering physical, cognitive, sensory, and communicative accessibility.
4. Identify strategies to engage the community and foster social cohesion through participatory events that connect participants, families, organizations, and the wider public.
5. Recognize effective methods to document and share learning processes, using accessible formats (short texts, pictograms, audio guides, videos, etc.) that reflect diverse ways of communicating.
6. Apply principles of ethical communication and responsible dissemination, ensuring accessible informed consent and promoting messages that value the abilities, diversity, and participation of all people.

* Learning outcomes

Upon completing this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Support participants in presenting their photographs, helping them explain their images using accessible tools and respecting their preferred modes of communication.
2. Organize an inclusive exhibition layout, selecting formats, display supports, and spatial arrangements that ensure understanding, safety, and accessibility for a wide range of visitors.
3. Coordinate cultural mediation activities, such as guided tours, participatory dynamics, or moments of dialogue between authors, families, and the community, ensuring equitable participation.
4. Develop accessible support materials, such as easy-to-read panels, audio descriptions, short videos, or visual sequences that facilitate understanding of the exhibition.
5. Manage public outreach for the project, creating clear and respectful messages, choosing appropriate communication channels, and using images and testimonies with accessible informed consent.

5

Making inclusion visible: exhibiting, engaging, and sharing stories



The photographs produced during an educational process represent far more than visual outputs: they are personal narratives, reflecting how each participant perceives the world, what sparks their curiosity, and how they engage with their environment. Each image embodies a decision - what to approach, what to observe, what to remember - and thus becomes a meaningful expression of identity.

For adults with intellectual disabilities, **sharing these images in a public space is an act of visibility and empowerment.** Exhibiting their work affirms that their perspectives matter, that their ways of seeing are unique and valuable, and that their voices deserve recognition within the cultural and social fabric of the community. This public presence strengthens self-esteem, fosters a sense of authorship, and reinforces the right to fully participate in cultural and creative life.

Exhibitions and participatory events transform individual photographic narratives into shared spaces of encounter. Families, educators, neighbors, cultural organizations, and institutions should be invited to engage with the perspectives of the authors. In this context, each participant's gaze becomes a bridge-connecting people, challenging assumptions, and opening new pathways for dialogue. When photographic work is presented in an inclusive and accessible manner, it fosters social cohesion by encouraging conversation, nurturing empathy, and demonstrating that diversity is not a barrier but a source of richness.

By making inclusion visible, exhibitions play a transformative role. They shift the focus from disability to capability, from deficit to creativity, from invisibility to presence. In doing so, they help reshape cultural narratives about intellectual disability and promote a more open, participatory, and inclusive society.

5.1 Participatory exhibitions and visual narratives

Inclusive photographic exhibitions are conceived as spaces where the authors can tell their own stories while also contributing to a collective narrative. By selecting images, deciding how to present them, and accompanying them with words, gestures, or visual supports, individuals exercise autonomy and agency.

Photography becomes an accessible means of communication, capable of conveying emotions, experiences, and connections that cannot always be expressed verbally.

Visual narrative fosters reflection, memory, and mutual recognition, reinforcing each participant's active presence in their community.

5.2 Accessible curation and Inclusion in the exhibition space

Outdoor photo exhibitions are designed to bring people together, celebrate diversity, and create shared learning experiences. However, as partners have observed, accessibility remains a significant challenge for PIDs.

For this reason, ensuring that the event is fully accessible is crucial. For further guidance, see the resource [Organising Cultural Events for All](#).

Designing an accessible exhibition involves addressing three key dimensions:

1. Physical accessibility relates to the removal of architectural barriers, comfortable arrangement of artworks, and clear signage.
2. Cognitive accessibility includes short, understandable panels, easy-to-read texts, pictograms, or visual aids that support content comprehension.
3. Sensory accessibility refers to appropriate contrasts, accessible font sizes, and the possibility of incorporating audio descriptions or videos with subtitles.

Inclusive curation does more than display images, it ensures that all visitors can enjoy and understand them.

Involving the authors in every curatorial decision, photo selection, layout, display height, background color, or presentation format, reinforces a sense of ownership and ensures the exhibition truly reflects their perspectives.

The exhibition should not be defined solely by aesthetic criteria, but guided by the educational and participatory goals of the process.

5.3 Community, social cohesion, and cultural participation

Inclusive photography exhibitions help strengthen relationships among participants, families, professionals, neighbors, and community stakeholders.

They offer opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities to actively take part in the cultural life of their communities, playing a visible and valued role.

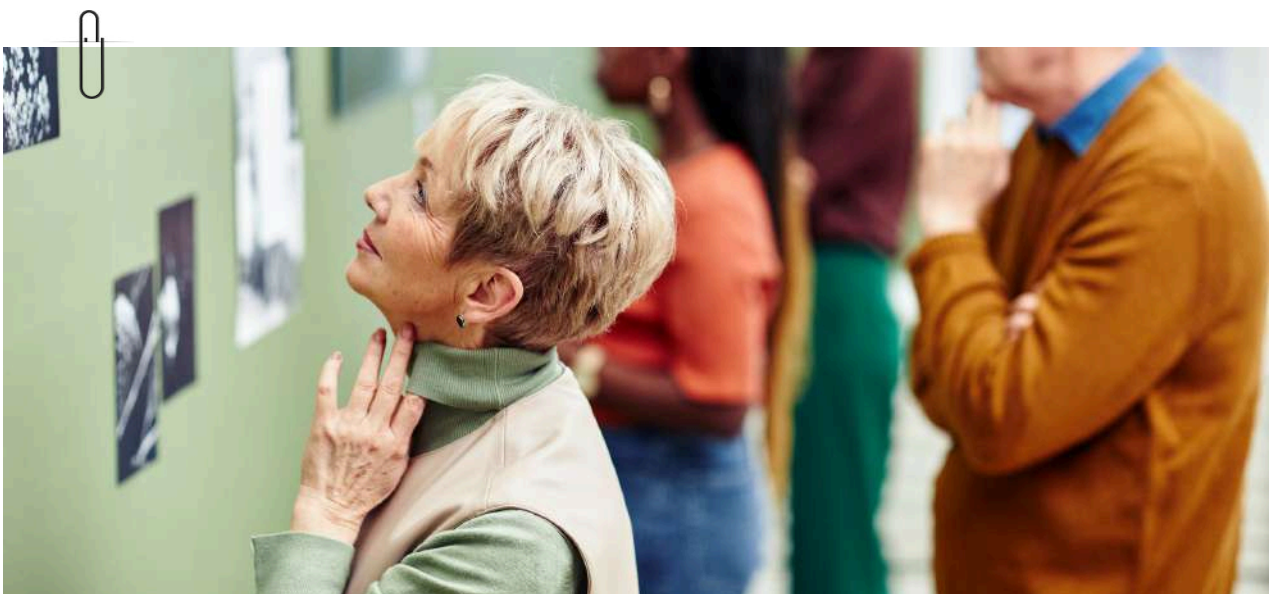
Engaging the community in the design, opening, or visit of the exhibition promotes understanding, respect, and the reduction of prejudice.

Participatory events can include short presentations by the authors, guided tours, small group activities, family-oriented sessions, or creative workshops.

The involvement of local partners reinforces this transformation by anchoring the exhibition within the community's public life. Their support contributes to sustainability, ensures continuity beyond the duration of the project, and strengthens alliances between the disability sector, cultural institutions, and civil society.

Through these partnerships, inclusion becomes not only visible but collectively supported and celebrated. For example, collaboration with the municipality and local hiking clubs can enrich the exhibition's impact. Municipal partners can support organisations working with PIDs by providing public space for the exhibition, offering logistical assistance, and increasing visibility within community activities.

At the same time, hiking clubs can help integrate the exhibition into outdoor routes, making it a natural part of local cultural and recreational life. Together, these partners expand the exhibition's reach and ensure that inclusion becomes a shared community commitment.



5.4 Sharing processes, learning, and transformation

An exhibition not only displays finished images but also reveals the learning processes that made them possible.

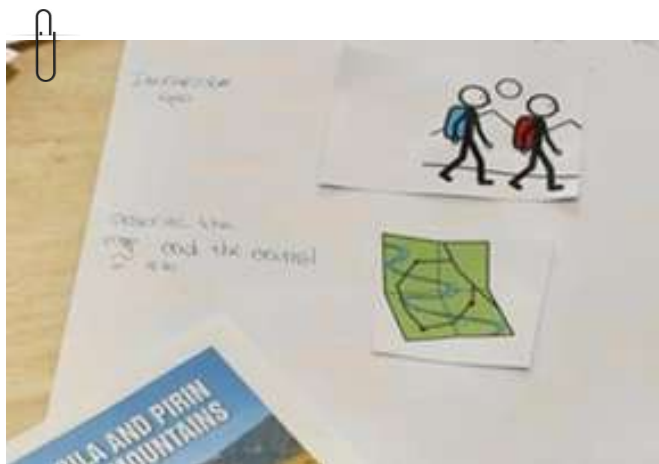
Documenting the journey, photo outings, image selection, group dynamics, personal discoveries, helps to showcase skills, interests, and progress.

For PIDs, sharing these learning experiences enhances self-esteem, motivation, and social recognition.

There are many ways to present these processes:

- easy-to-read panels
- visual diaries
- short videos
- audio guides recorded by the participants
- photographic sequences explained through pictograms.

These tools complement the exhibition and enable visitors with different learning styles to understand the lived experience.



5.5 Ethical communication and accessible dissemination

Communication about the exhibition and its results should follow an ethical, thoughtful, and respectful approach toward each participant's identity.

This includes providing accessible consent forms for the use of images, clearly explaining the objectives of dissemination, and ensuring that photographs do not reinforce stereotypes or paternalistic views.

Outreach can rely on various channels: accessible social media, websites, easy-to-read posters, partnerships with cultural organizations, local media, or outdoor photography walks.

A well-planned communication strategy increases the project's impact and strengthens its contribution to social inclusion.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.27

DESIGNING AN ACCESSIBLE PANEL FOR THE EXHIBITION



MATERIALS

- Printed photograph.
- Easy-to-read panel template.
- ARASAAC pictograms
- Printer.
- Glue or tape.
- Markers.
- Smartphone or tablet for audio recording (optional).

Objective:

- To create easy-to-read information panels using pictograms or visual supports to accompany the photos in the final exhibition.

Each participant selects the photograph they want to exhibit and works with the educator to create a simple panel. Easy-to-read templates, pictograms ([ARASAAC](#)), and visual examples are provided.

First, a short title is chosen for the photo. Then, a brief sentence is written explaining what the photo means to the participant. Those who prefer may record an audio instead of writing.

Finally, the panel is designed, placing the photo, the text or pictogram, and any colors the participant chooses. These panels will be part of the final exhibition, helping all visitors understand the works.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.28

COOPERATIVE PHOTO EXHIBITION SETUP



MATERIALS

- Printed photographs.
- Information panels.
- Wall panels or boards.
- Removable tape or hooks.

Objective:

- To encourage active participation in the physical setup of the exhibition, fostering autonomy and decision-making.

The group gathers to plan the layout of the exhibition. The educator explains how an exhibition is organized: appropriate heights, flow of the space, grouping by themes, cognitive and physical accessibility. Every small decision is made with input from the authors: which photo goes first, what background they prefer, where to place panels, how to create a comfortable path. Participants help by gluing, hanging, or placing their photos with support, always ensuring safety. This reinforces the idea that the exhibition belongs to the group and reflects their perspectives.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.29

ONE-DAY MEDIATORS: INCLUSIVE GUIDED TOUR



MATERIALS

- Photographs and panels.
- Visual cue cards or pictograms.
- Smartphone or tablet (for audio, if needed).

Objective:

- To prepare participants to explain their work to visitors, families, or the community in an accessible and confident way.

Each person chooses a simple phrase, audio, or gesture to explain their photograph.

The educator helps structure the presentation with visual supports.

In pairs, participants rehearse brief guided tours in the hallway, practicing how to point to the image, explain why they chose it, and answer simple questions.

Finally, another group of participants, staff members, or family members is invited to join a “test visit.” This builds confidence, improves communication skills, and enhances pride in the work done.

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY NR.30

PROJECTED PRESENTATION IN THE AUDITORIUM



MATERIALS

- Computer.
- Projector and screen.
- Slideshow file.
- Speakers or microphone (if available).

Objective:

- To give participants a safe, accessible, and supported public presentation experience using audiovisual projection.

Each participant selects one photograph to project in large format. The educator prepares a simple digital slideshow with the group’s images. In the auditorium, with soft lighting and a calm atmosphere, each person goes on stage (or stays seated if they prefer) and presents their image.

They may speak, play a recorded audio, use pictograms, or be supported by the educator.

The large projection allows the audience to clearly see the image and hear the story. After each presentation, the group and audience may give compliments, ask simple questions, or share thoughts. This dynamic strengthens self-esteem, visibility, and social participation.



MATERIALS

- Printed photographs.
- Easy-to-read cards or pictograms.
- Paper or cardboard.
- Markers.

Objective:

- To encourage active family participation through a cultural event where participants present their photographs, share emotions, and engage in dialogue with loved ones—strengthening bonds and mutual recognition.

An accessible gathering is organized between participants, families, and educators in a calm space (the center, a community venue, etc.).

Before the event, each participant selects one or two photos to share with their family and prepares a short explanation with support from the educator. This can be oral, an easy-to-read phrase, pictograms, or a short audio.

The educator introduces the event, explaining how photography has supported each person's learning and expression process.

Then, in small groups, participants show their images to their families, explain their meaning, and answer simple questions.

Families are invited to share memories, emotions, or reflections related to the image, fostering warm, two-way dialogue.

Afterward, a joint activity is proposed: each family creates a "family panel" with a phrase or drawing about what they've discovered through the photograph.

This panel can be part of the final exhibition.

The gathering ends with a brief group sharing and collective appreciation.

The activity promotes family involvement, boosts participants' self-esteem, and turns photography into a bridge of connection between home, community, and the educational project.



MATERIALS

- Smartphone or tablet (video recording).
- Simple interview guide.
- Quiet space.

Objective:

- To promote meaningful dialogue between a participant and a family member, where the family member acts as interviewer and the participant explains their photograph—reinforcing communication, autonomy, and emotional bonds through a short audiovisual format.

The educator invites each participant to choose one of their most meaningful photographs.

In a previously scheduled session, a family member takes the role of interviewer.

Before the recording, the educator provides a simple guide with open, accessible questions such as:

- What did you like about this photo?
- What were you looking at when you took it?
- How does this image make you feel?
- Do you want to tell me more about that moment?

The interview is held in a quiet, softly lit space. The educator helps set up the camera (phone or tablet) and remains nearby to ensure comfort and accessibility.

Supports like pictograms, visual cards, easy-read prompts, or extra time can be naturally included.

This becomes a genuine and intimate moment: the family member listens, asks, and values the participant's perspective; the participant feels seen, heard, and understood.

The result is a short one-minute video that can be projected during the exhibition or shown in a dedicated audiovisual space.

Visitors get to know the story behind each image through a warm family conversation filled with authenticity and diversity.



MATERIALS

- Computer.
- Design software.
- Selected photographs.
- Printer (for physical version).

Objective:

- To design an accessible catalogue featuring a selection of participant photographs, with texts, pictograms, or short audio recordings—documenting the creative process and sharing it with the community in a clear, aesthetic, and inclusive way.

The educator invites the group to create the project's official catalogue.

Each participant selects 1–3 photos to include. Using an accessible template designed by the educational team, they create a simple info sheet for each photo, which may include:

- a title chosen by the author
- a short, easy-to-read sentence
- pictograms representing the emotion, action, or place
- a recorded audio description
- icons or colors representing feelings or themes.

The educator compiles the sheets and works with participants to decide on the catalogue's structure—by theme, author, color, natural space, or any other category chosen collaboratively.

Participants may also choose layout styles: light or dark backgrounds, simple borders, accessible fonts, or group-representative colors.

The catalogue is designed using simple tools (Canva, PowerPoint, Publisher, etc.).

Once finalized, it's printed in an accessible format (A4, large print, high contrast), and a digital version is created to share via email, social media, or QR code at the exhibition.

The catalogue becomes an inclusive resource that documents the process, honors the participants' vision, and allows the photographs to travel beyond the exhibition—keeping the project experience alive.



MATERIALS

- Computer.
- Paper or digital calendar templates.
- Printer (if creating a physical calendar).
- Art supplies (markers, stickers, etc., optional).
- Photos taken by participants.

Objectives:

- To encourage creativity and self-expression through photography while a tangible outcome to celebrate participants' work.

To create the calendar, start by planning the theme. Decide whether it will follow a seasonal approach, focus on specific themes, or reflect personal experiences. Next, encourage participants to take photos that are meaningful to them—this could include nature, everyday objects, special events, or moments from daily life.

Once the photos are collected, review them together and select one for each month of the calendar. Then, use a digital or physical template to create the calendar, placing the chosen photos in the corresponding months and adding dates and optional decorations. Finally, share and display the completed calendar. Print it or share it digitally, and celebrate the participants' work by displaying it in a common area or giving copies to family and friends.

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CHAPTER 6

Empowering and
inspiring practices

* Introduction

In this final chapter, we explore a selection of inspiring practices identified by our project partners through research carried out across different countries. These inspiring practices highlight diverse ways of using photography to promote personal expression, self-awareness, and creative engagement. Although some initiatives focus directly on social inclusion and the participation of PIDs, all of them demonstrate how photography can strengthen communication, build interpersonal skills, support reflection, and empower individuals to express their unique viewpoints.

* Learning objectives

By the end of this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Understand how participatory photography can foster self-expression, empowerment, and social inclusion.
2. Explore the role of outdoor and nature-based photography as a tool for wellbeing, sensory engagement, and reflective learning
3. Identify practical strategies and methods such as Photovoice, mindful photography, and community-based photo activities, that educators can adapt and integrate into their daily work.
4. Share practical examples and real case studies from the field, demonstrating how these photographic approaches can be implemented in concrete educational contexts.

* Learning outcomes

Upon completing this module, educators and facilitators will be able to:

1. Explain the key benefits of participatory and inclusive photography in supporting self-awareness, communication, and personal empowerment.
2. Implement photography-based educational activities, incorporating outdoor or nature-based components tailored to the needs, interests, and abilities of diverse target groups.
3. Adapt and transfer inspiring practices to their own professional context, selecting methods that strengthen inclusion, community connection, and meaningful engagement with natural and social environments.

6

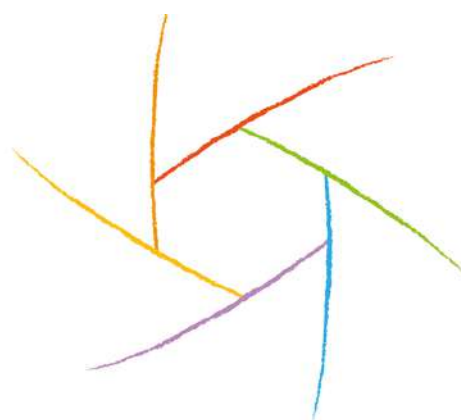
Empowering and inspiring practices

6.1 Inspiring practices from the research activities

Immaginiamoci

This is a photography workshop born from the collaboration between Gruppo Polis and Anna Trento (a photographer from Padua) to allow participants to tell their life stories through images, capturing their desires, “bi-dreams,” things they have done, things they plan to do, and, why not... things to do again.

Through learning basic photographic techniques, participants capture their routines, environments, and interactions, while also being photographed by the instructor to build self-awareness and confidence.



IMMAGINIAMIAMOCI

Photo source.

The workshop consists of **three different phases:**

- 1 An initial introduction to photography, focusing on framing: participants simulate photographic framing by applying the concept of "choice" to printed images, selecting landscapes and objects of various kinds and from different areas of everyday life using a poster created specifically for the activity.
- 2 The main photographic activity, in which participants are invited to tell the story of the world they live in through images.
- 3 A final phase involves creating a calendar featuring photographs taken both by the participants and by the photographer-teacher

Discover more [here](#).

Con gli occhi aperti

This initiative, developed by photographer and educator Juani Cánovas, engages participants in guided photographic workshops where cameras and mobile devices become instruments to “open their eyes” to new ways of seeing —hence the project’s name. The activities often take place outdoors and in natural settings, such as parks, open spaces, or other natural environments, where participants are encouraged to observe elements like light, textures, and landscapes, photograph them, and reflect on the experience.

A notable example is the workshop “Chasing the Scent of Lavender”, which invites participants to engage with nature through their senses and translate these impressions into images. “Con gli occhi aperti” shows how photography, combined with outdoor and nature-based experiences, can serve as a creative and inclusive tool for people of all ages.

Discover more [here](#).

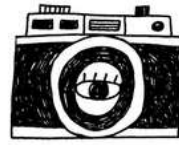
Photovoice for an inclusive campus

This initiative is based on the Photovoice method within participatory action research. Students with disabilities created photo series representing inclusion-related challenges or resources on campus. Images are shared in group sessions, discussed, and organised into common thematic categories. The final output consisted of recommendations for improving campus accessibility.

Among the main outcomes were the identification of environmental barrier, such as architectural obstacles, insufficient signage, and difficult route, and the implementation of corrective actions, including the removal of physical barriers, improvements to tactile pathways, and updates to sign language systems.

Discover more [here](#).

LABORATORI CREATIVI



CON GLI
OCCHI
APERTI

FOTOGRAFIA

#congliocchiaperti

www.juani.net

Photo source.



Photo source.

Photovoice (Fotovoz / Participatory Visual Methodology)

This is a participatory, community-engaged photographic method guided or facilitated by the organizations Fotosynthesis, ANDANAfoto, or other visual arts facilitators.

Photography is used as a tool for self-expression, reflection, and collective dialogue. Participants are given cameras (or mobile devices) to document aspects of their daily lives, environments, challenges, and strengths. The images become the basis for individual reflection and



Photo [source](#).

group discussion, where participants explain why they took each photo, what it represents, and what meaning it holds. Through this process, participants act as co-researchers, creating knowledge and awareness about their own realities.

The resulting photographs and narratives are often presented publicly through exhibitions, publications, or advocacy materials to raise awareness and promote social change. Photovoice can be easily integrated into outdoor and nature-based settings, depending on the project's focus.

Discover more [here](#).

I Have a Dream – Bisogni e Desideri

It is an initiative which is part of the “Bisogni e Desideri 2022” project, managed by Cooperativa Sociale Gea in Novara (Italy), an organization that supports PIDs by providing residential services.

Photography is used as a participatory and educational tool that allows participants with mild intellectual disabilities to explore their interests, express themselves, and increase self-awareness.



Photo [source](#).

Through guided photo activities in real-life settings, such as shops, libraries, cafés, and social enterprises, participants document their experiences, create portraits, and engage with the community. The outcome is a public exhibition, where participants showcase their work, amplify their voices, and raise awareness of their strengths and talents.

Discover more [here](#).

Birdability

The project uses photography as an accessible and inclusive tool to help people with disabilities and other health conditions engage with nature and birdwatching.

The initiative includes two complementary activities.

- *the Offbeat Photography Contest*, where participants described as “birders of all abilities”, are invited to submit creative photographs that capture unique or unexpected birding moments, using photography as a tool for creative expression and community celebration.



Photo source.

The Mindful Birding activity integrates photography into a slow, sensory approach to observing nature. Participants are encouraged to “get absorbed in nature through a camera,” using simple devices, often just a smartphone. This low-barrier approach makes the activity accessible to individuals with mobility challenges or other support needs, allowing them to connect with nature at their own rhythm.

Across both activities, photography acts as a vehicle for inclusion: it provides an alternative entry point into outdoor and nature-based experiences, lowers both skill and equipment barriers, and allows people with diverse abilities to express themselves and build connections with others.

Birdability further demonstrates that individuals with different disabilities can actively and meaningfully engage in outdoor creative practices when supported by adapted approaches, such as choosing accessible trails, enabling slow or seated observation, and highlighting that even a simple phone camera is sufficient.

Discover more [here](#) and watch the [video](#)!

6.2 Reflections on inspiring practices

Outdoor photography, particularly when participatory, not only promotes empowerment and visibility for PIDs but also provides opportunities to share personal perspectives and engage with nature in meaningful ways.

Across all the practices analyzed, photography serves as a **bridge** between creativity, self-expression, and the natural environment. It provides a means for individuals to explore identity, build confidence, and communicate experiences that are often overlooked or unheard. Cameras (or even simple smartphones) allow each person to decide what to notice, frame, capture, and narrate.

When outdoor photography is used to empower PIDs and promote self-awareness, inclusion, and social participation, educators play a crucial role in designing and facilitating inclusive, nature-based photographic activities. They guide participants in observing, capturing, and reflecting on their surroundings, while adapting activities to different abilities and minimizing barriers.

Through methods such as Photovoice, guided nature walks, sensory-based photography sessions, or community explorations, educators create spaces for personal storytelling and shared learning. Ultimately, their support transforms photography into a tool for empowerment, awareness, and connection with both people and the environment.

Together, the inspiring practices highlighted in the previous section demonstrate that when photography is inclusive, reflective, and connected to nature or the community, it creates spaces where people can express themselves, be heard, and experience a sense of belonging.

Photography is not only an art form but also a tool that fosters confidence, participation, connection with nature, and inclusion.

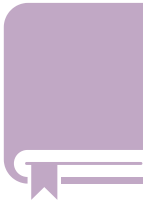
By using **adaptable, low-barrier approaches**, even the simplest camera can help people **observe more** deeply, **express themselves** more freely, and **engage** more fully with the world around them.



Photo source.

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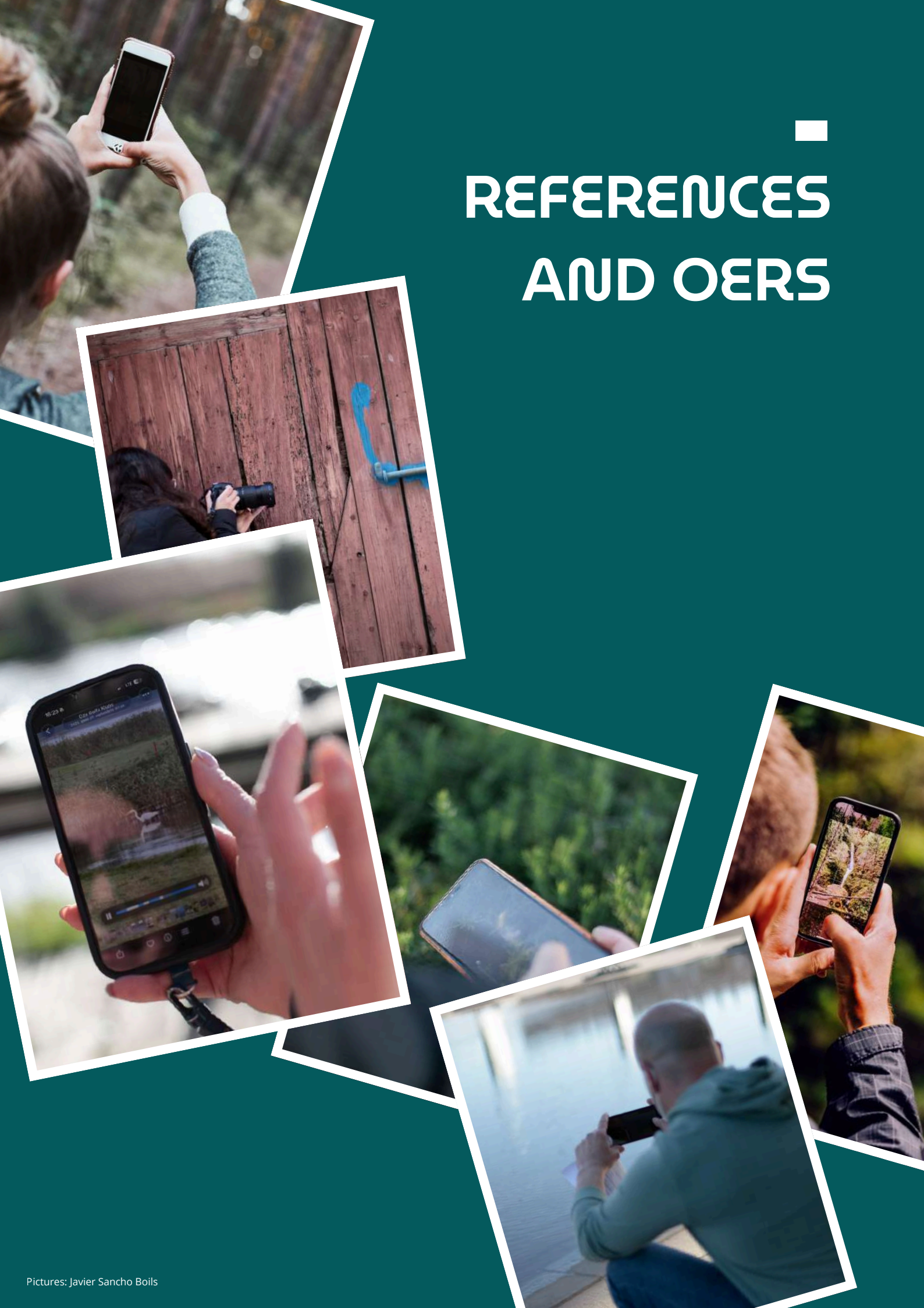
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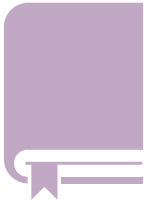
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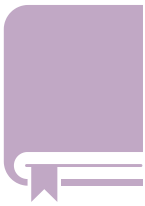
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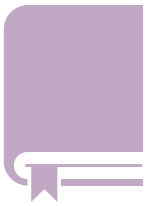
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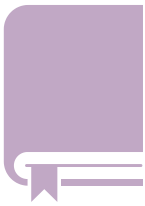
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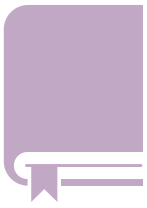
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Immaginiamoci video



ANNEXES



ANNEX 1

Practical checklist
for the design and implementation of
inclusive outdoor learning activities

INCLUSIVE OUTDOOR ACTIVITY

CHECKLIST

1. PRE-VISIT PLANNING

- The outdoor educator(s) coordinate the activities and support the selection of an accessible location – Pathways and terrain are accessible for all participants (walking aids, uneven ground).
- Seating/rest areas are available and accessible.
- Public toilets.
- Sensory needs have been assessed (noise, light, textures, smells).
- Weather contingencies are planned (shade, shelter, clothing guidance).
- Alternative indoor activities with nature connection are prepared if needed.
- Pre-visit materials provided (tactile maps, photos, AAC symbols).
- Safety measures are in place (first aid, emergency contacts, trail safety).
- Meeting with support persons (educators of PIDs, caregivers, or family members) took place to understand the individual needs of participants.
- The educators are committed to the activities.
- Permission to take and share photos/videos has been requested.

2. ACTIVITY DESIGN

- Activities combine physical movement, sensory exploration, and social interaction.
- Instructions are clear and accessible to all participants.
- Opportunities for participant choice and self-expression are included.
- All camera equipment is fully operational, (batteries are fully charged, etc.).

- Engagement of people without disabilities, ideally of the same age as the PIDs, to promote social inclusion.
- A meeting with support persons (educators of PWIDs, caregivers, or family members) took place to validate the activities that will be implemented.
- All educators involved – including those who work with PIDs, outdoor professionals, and photography operators – are fully involved in the design of the activities.
- All educators involved – including outdoor professionals and photography operators – have been informed about the needs of each participant.

3. FACILITATION DURING ACTIVITY

- Participant comfort and engagement are monitored continuously.
- Breaks and quiet spaces are provided as needed.
- Weather adaptations implemented (shade, rain cover, warm clothing).
- A support person (educator of PWIDs, caregiver, or family member) participates to provide direct assistance to the person with intellectual disability.
- The outdoor educator(s) participate in the activities.

4. REFLECTION AND ADAPTATION

- Participants feedback collected on what worked and what could be improved.
- Successful strategies documented for future sessions.
- Observations recorded on participant engagement, autonomy, and emotional response.
- Material showcasing the results achieved produced (e.g., videos, short interviews asking participants for their feedback).

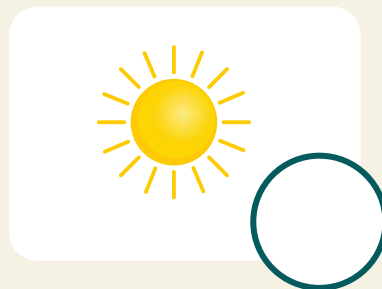
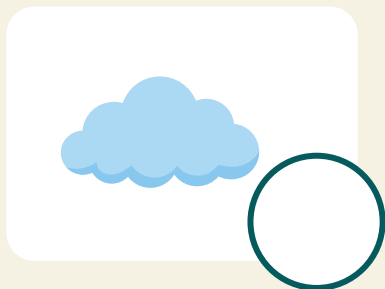
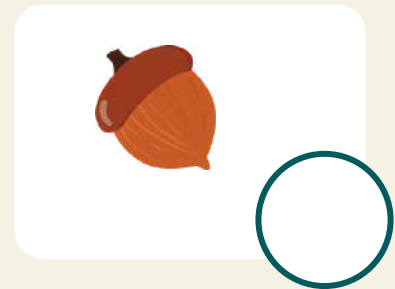
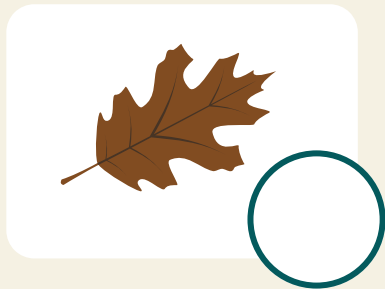
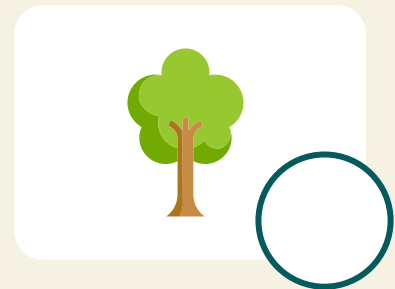
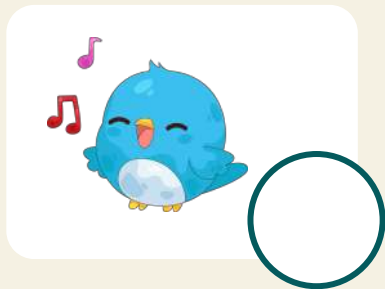


ANNEX 2

Nature scavenger hunt

NATURE SCAVENGER HUNTS

DISCOVERING WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL GOOD



The white spaces can be used to draw or write what makes you feel good, encouraging personal reflection and making observation more accessible and meaningful.



ANNEX 3

Nonverbal communication checklist for
educators

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST FOR EDUCATORS

CHECKLIST

1. OBSERVE CAREFULLY:

- Watch body movements, gestures, facial expressions, posture, and eye contact.
- Notice tone, rhythm, and volume of voice.
- Pay attention to interpersonal distance and movement in space.

2. ADAPT THE ENVIRONMENT:

- Reduce sensory and cognitive barriers (e.g., noise, clutter).
- Maintain a calm pace and give participants time to respond.
- Arrange space so participants can move freely and safely.

3. FOLLOW PARTICIPANTS' SIGNALS:

- Let gestures, gaze, or movement guide what they want to explore or photograph.
- Recognize signs of interest, curiosity, or discomfort
- Respond promptly and sensitively to their nonverbal cues.

4. ENCOURAGE AUTONOMY AND CHOICE:

- Give opportunities to initiate actions and make decisions.
- Support participants in expressing preferences through gestures or movements.

5. FOSTER AN INCLUSIVE CLIMATE:

- Treat every form of communication as valuable.
- Use clear, non-judgmental, and responsive interaction.
- Celebrate each participant's self-expression and participation.

6. USE PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL:

- Allow the camera to become a medium for nonverbal storytelling.
- Help participants capture images that reflect their perspective and interests.
- Facilitate sharing and discussion of images to strengthen connection and self-expression.



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