circus is for EVERY BODY

A toolkit for accessible circus projects.

"When I wake up on
a Tuesday morning,
I'm in a good mood.
It's like, after school,
I'm doing circus"

Young participant

WELCOME

This toolkit is designed for circus organisations. It provides information on running inclusive circus workshops and making circus accessible to D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent young people.



Introduction

At Galway Community Circus, we use circus to support the personal, social and creative development of young people. Circus is a naturally inclusive artform, with a growing body of research proving its physical and mental health benefits. In particular, participation has been shown to support confidence, resilience, mental wellbeing, physical literacy and connection.

Yet a common misconception persists; circus is only for a select few with exceptional physical ability. This can result in the exclusion of young people who might otherwise thrive in this space. Changing this is at the heart of our work.

With support from Rethink Ireland's Disability, Participation and Awareness Fund, RTÉ's Toy Show Appeal and Community Foundation Ireland, we recently delivered *Circus Is For EVERY BODY* – a project focused on making circus accessible to D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent young people. Over six months we delivered weekly workshops with young people from Galway Autism Partnership, Enable Ireland and Scoil Chaitríona, most of whom were trying circus for the first time. Week by week, our rising circus stars built skills in aerial, acrobatics, balance and creative expression. More importantly, they built confidence and trust – in themselves and in each other.

Young people tried new things, faced fears, and began to break barriers that were restricting them in their daily lives. What stood out was not just what they achieved, but how they approached it: with curiosity, positivity and determination. As facilitators, we were constantly learning too. It was a privilege to witness such courage and creativity and be part of a journey shaped so strongly by the young people themselves.

The project culminated in the creation and performance of *Take Up Space*, a joyful new circus show. In partnership with Extraordinary Bodies (UK), we delivered two creative residencies where disabled and non-disabled artists collaborated with the young people and our team to co-create the piece, which premiered in Galway on 22nd February 2026. This partnership brought incredibly valuable expertise alongside vital representation, demonstrating what becomes possible when '*EVERY BODY*' is included on an equal stage.

While *Take Up Space* marked the end of this chapter, it is not the end of the story. The relationships, skills and confidence built will last far beyond the performance.

by Becca Clayton and Alex Stewart, Galway Community Circus



What are the steps to creating a project like this?



"No matter who you are working with, they will always show you a different way of doing it, because of how it works best for them"

Maríosa Hume,
Circus Trainer, Galway Community Circus

1 It all starts with your idea

If someone told you that everybody – no matter their age, fitness level, background, ability or disability – could experience the joy of practising circus, would you believe them? At Galway Community Circus, we wanted to create a project that would enable EVERY BODY to take part.

Think about:

- [ ] Now is the time to be ambitious. Who could be involved and who would benefit from participation?
- [ ] Where can you find inspiration? Look for examples of your idea in action from other inclusive circus projects around the world.
- [ ] Are you considering accessibility in all aspects of the project, from the ideas stage to final performances?
- [ ] Are you including access costs for artists, participants and audiences in your budget?
- [ ] Can you secure funding from multiple sources if the project is large scale?

From our initial idea, our project involved:

12 weeks of fun classes

30 young people taking part

3 partnerships built

2 Finding partners & building relationships

The project worked with Galway Autism Partnership, Enable Ireland and young people from Scoil Chaitríona, a local primary school. They were engaged at the application stage and gave letters of support and detailed their access needs.

To do:

- [ ] Have several partner options, as some may drop out due to capacity issues before the project commences.
- [ ] Establish communication and trust with partners at the beginning and throughout the project - reiterate details and dates to pass onto parents, support workers and young people.
- [ ] Be enthusiastic. The excitment of the team at the start of the project will transmit to the partners.
- [ ] Have an agreement in place with the partners, such as a Memorandum of Understanding, stating what is needed from them in the partnership and what you will provide.
- [ ] Find suitable circus partners in Ireland or abroad. Those with experience of working with disabled artists and inclusive practices will bring an abundance of knowledge.

"The importance demonstrated throughout the project by the team at Galway Community Circus to include, support and above all be genuinely kind and welcoming towards everyone was heartwarming"

Máire Bríd Ní Chongaile
Galway Autism Partnership





"I find myself a lot coming back to try and understand different conditions and how to be appropriate to the young people emotionally, socially and also physically"

Hazar Azzeh,
Outreach Coordinator & Circus Trainer,
Galway Community Circus

3 It's all in the planning

To do:

- [ ] Who do you need to make the project happen? Do you need to hire additional staff or freelance people?
- [ ] Do a skills audit amongst staff to see what skills are available within the team, such as Irish Sign Language or inclusion training.
- [ ] Hold regular meetings with the team to allow for discussions and updates. Be flexible in arrangements, classes and teaching.
- [ ] Allow constant communication about logistics with the partners and trainers to help to keep the week to week classes on course.
- [ ] Involve the support workers in the workshops and the performances. Consider bringing the staff & support workers in for a circus class before the project to give them a flavour of what it is about.
- [ ] Maintain continuity in the support workers that attend the weekly workshops. This is so important in making them feel part of the process and will encourage them to join in. They will need to understand their roles both in supporting the young people and being part of the show.

Alongside 20 Galway Community Circus staff, we involved:

25 support workers

11 Extraordinary Bodies staff & artists

2 additional Irish circus artists

"As a disabled person, your parents are often very protective. They have to fight so hard in the everyday that they find it hard to let go.
Having weeks like this is hugely important. They allow parents to let go and truly see what their young person is capable of"

Charlotte Evans,
Extraordinary Bodies





4 Access & inclusion

Inclusive activities are so important and need time and resources to do properly and meaningfully.

Actions:

- [ ] Design an easy read guide to send to young people and parents that clearly state the milestones of the project. Write in plain language and use simple layouts, bullet points, and plain colours.
- [ ] There may be diverse groups with differing concentration spans who will be involved. A wide range of activities with clear instructions and lots of patience are required. Make sure the young people can always see the trainer's face and be as visual as possible.
- [ ] Allow trainers to adapt their equipment, training methods and learning techniques for specific needs, such as making the strings on poi shorter to suit wheelchair users or teaching hat tricks that can be easily done in a seated position. Have dedicated riggers to adapt the workshop space to suit the participants.
- [ ] Ensure the trainers are young person focused, meeting them where they are at and have enough trainers to give one to one support.
- [ ] Use a speaker and microphone system for D/deaf and hard of hearing participants.
- [ ] Have a quiet space, separate to the main training areas, with comfortable seating and sensory-friendly lighting and toys. This is necessary for breaks, and it can be designed with the help of partners.
- [ ] Continue to ask partners and support workers about access needs throughout the project. They are attuned to the young people's needs and will know best how to assist them.



"I couldn't imagine
a wheelchair user
doing circus tricks.
After watching them doing it,
I was like,
oh my gosh!
I even didn't think that our
service users could do that.
We were nearly always
overprotecting them,
and it's opened our eyes
that they're able to do more"

Emilia Lisiewska,
Contact Team Lead, Enable Ireland

"We wanted to bring role models, because you might think that you are the only disabled person in circus. So, for us, it was really important to connect the young people with other disabled circus artists'.

Eilís Davis,
Artistic Director for Young Artists, Extraordinary Bodies



5 Weekly classes & residencies

The residencies with disabled and non-disabled artists from Extraordinary Bodies offered not only artistic expertise but also powerful representation. They showed what is possible when EVERY BODY belongs on stage. The theme of 'Take Up Space' allowed the trainers and young people to focus on the importance of being seen and heard in the world.

Actions:

- [ ] Always ensure dignity and safety of the young people.
- [ ] Confidence for the young people is key and that they are in a safe, relaxed environment.
- [ ] The social aspect of the weekly classes is just as vital as learning circus skills.
- [ ] Start with taster sessions such as balancing, feathers, flower sticks, scarf juggling to ease the young people into learning circus skills.
- [ ] The most important thing is to ask the participants questions. They know themselves best and can say what their needs are.
- [ ] If possible, allow the partner groups to meet at the venue for workshops in advance for time to get some food, toilet breaks, etc.
- [ ] Co-creation of the final performance is crucial. Use the ideas of the young people throughout and let them decide what they want to do.
- [ ] Buy a circus kit for the partners to keep and tailor it to their particular needs. They can continue to practice circus skills after the project.
- [ ] Most importantly, embrace the chaos!



"My approach to make circus accessible to people with different abilities is to always check in with them - what they want, how they feel, make sure they're comfortable"

Chloe Commins,
Irish aerial artist

6 Venue & Performance

Checklist:

- [ ] Use a familiar venue for the workshops and shows if possible.
- [ ] Is the venue accessible – are there numerous accessible toilets? Are rehearsal rooms, dressing rooms, backstage and on stage accessible? Are there areas of the venue that are not accessible?
- [ ] Is the space well lit? Can you control or limit noise in the space?
- [ ] Is it easy to find your way around the venue and is there signage at a suitable height?
- [ ] Is accessible parking available? Are there drop off points? Can the venue be reached by local transport?
- [ ] Will there be time for the young people to familiarise themselves with the space before performing?
- [ ] Let the audience know what access supports are available at the venue.
- [ ] Do you need to provide ISL interpretation or audio description during the performance? Are captions needed?
- [ ] Is the performance relaxed – lowered volumes and lighting, a comfortable attitude to noise and movement from the audience. Let your audience know in advance.
- [ ] For speeches, Q & A sessions, etc think about who is represented.
- [ ] Discuss with young people about how many shows they are able for. Assess their energy on the performance days.



"They push themselves outside their own comfort zones every day. So, I think they are more like superheroes"

Lisa O'Farrell,
Lead Circus Trainer, Galway Community Circus

7 Documentation & Evaluation

Actions:

- [ ] An evaluator is vital for the project. They will give an overview of the project outcomes and outputs and if they were met. The evaluation report will give a roadmap for future implementation and will be useful for your next funding application.
- [ ] Weekly progress reports on the make-up of classes and the progression of the young people help to measure development.
- [ ] Photos and videos of the weekly workshops can help circus partners to establish the proficiency of the young people and the circus skills practiced.
- [ ] Conduct interviews/audio recordings with staff, partners, support workers and young people to gather feedback and gauge if access needs and were met on the project.
- [ ] Learn from what went well and didn't go well on the project and share your findings with the wider circus community.

During 'Circus is for EVERY BODY', we created a documentary film about the project, featuring interviews with the young people, their parents, carers, partners, trainers and organisers. This really enabled buy in from everyone and helped to maintain momentum. It was a great way to record testimonies on what went well or not so well on the project. The film will be used as a promotional tool for future funding.

"My daughter who took part said it was the best day of her life"

Parent of participant.



8 Young people's perspective

Get out and do circus, you'll enjoy it!

The support staff are great. They really help us.

Ask us what we would like to do in the workshops and shows.

Having snacks, breaks and the quiet space are really important.

We need a safe space to work.

It's okay to make mistakes.

We need lots of practice time before doing shows.

We love to meet new people.

We love to have a group lunch and eat pizza together.

Have fun!

Everyone is equal.

Keep telling us what will be happening.

Wear something comfortable. Don't wear jewellery, but a watch is okay.

We get to move around a lot and try new things.



Thanks to our funders

Circus is for EVERY BODY was funded by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality via the Disability, Participation & Awareness Fund 3.0 managed by Rethink Ireland, the RTÉ Toy Show Appeal via the Community Foundation Ireland, The Arts Council of Ireland and Galway City Council Arts Office.

Credits

Galway Community Circus: Lynn Carroll, Rebecca Clayton, Alan Meaney, Maeve Keane, Alexandra Stewart, Anet Moore, Julia Capparós Vega, Tony Mahon, Peter Duncan, Lisa O'Farrell, Maríosa Hume, Anna Vittorini, Hazar Azzeh, Freddy Burrows, Marjolein Wagter, Sofia Perez, Sofia Ozaeta, Cleménce Noel, Ines Garcia Montero.

Extraordinary Bodies: Jamie Beddard, Billy Alwen, Eilís Davis, Alicia White, Saul Baum, Ryan Murphy, Maia Ayling, Saskia Collyns, Charlotte Evans, Tilly Lee Kronick, Jonathan Leitch.

Additional featured artist: Chloe Commins.

Enable Ireland: Marie Rodrigez, Amber Heneghan, Ann Keon, Emilia Lisiewska, Aoife Mullarkey, Sylvester Okundia, Paul Clarke, Denise Maloney, Marian O'Boyle.

Galway Autism Partnership: Maire Bríd Ní Chonghaile, Rachel Ruddy, Lavinia Ward, Lucia Freire, Ursula Crampton and all the Junior Facilitator Team at GAP.

Scoil Chaitríona: Mairéad Fagan, Dave Gleeson, Marian Hopkins, Judith Hulgraine.

An easy read version is also available.
This toolkit was written by Alan Meaney.
Design by Hopscotch Multimedia.

Galway Community Circus

Find us: galwaycommunitycircus.com
Email: info@galwaycommunitycircus.com

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