

LICM Welcomes All

By Beth Ann Balalaos, Access and Inclusion Program Director,
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Good cultural organizations should be spaces that welcome all. Long Island Children's Museum (LICM) wants to be sure that individuals with disabilities feel that their space is made for them. The Museum's LICM4all program was created to ensure that accessibility goes beyond compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and creates an environment as inclusive as possible to best fit the needs of a multitude of families.

One of the most successful components of LICM4all is the Friendly Hours program. Once a month, during Friendly Hours, the Museum is opened after-hours for a free night of play for children and adults with disabilities and their families. Friendly Hours was designed to provide a judgment-free zone where families can have positive experiences and meet some new friends in the disability community. Accommodations are made to create a welcoming environment: low-

ering lights and sounds throughout the Museum, limiting attendance, and having specially trained staff on hand to welcome guests.

Throughout the year, Friendly Hours programs replicate popular Museum events, including our New Year's Eve and Halloween celebrations, to give visitors with disabilities the opportunity to experience these celebrations in a more manageable environment. Additionally, the LICM Theater offers a sensory friendly performance during each of its productions throughout the season, which are timed as a bonus offering during Friendly Hours. Our hope is that these offerings allow visitors with disabilities and their families to feel supported and seen in a world where they are often forgotten or ignored.

We see this come to fruition when visitors express their positive experiences with LICM4all events: "There are not a lot of places my kids are excited to

go and feel welcome to be their totally unique selves," shared one attendee. "They absolutely love being there, and being in community with other kids like them. This is truly a special experience, and for us too, to be among other families like ours! We feel grateful this exists."

In addition to these successful programs, there are other elements of the LICM4all program to assist families during regular hours at LICM. These include:

- Dedicated Sensory Room – provides visitors who may be feeling overwhelmed or anxious with a place of respite.
- Sensory Backpacks – filled with a weighted lap pad, noise reducing headphones, and other fidget items for use during a Museum visit.
- LICM4all App – enables visitors to travel through the Museum before their visit to feel prepared and ready for play.
- School Resources – Teachers booking trips to LICM or bringing LICM to their school through our Outreach program can speak with me to ensure we

are best fitting the needs of their students who are a part of the Special Education Department.

- Social Guides to assist children and their adults with preparing for their trip to LICM.

I grew up as a student within the Special Education department. I made the decision in my senior year to be fully "mainstreamed" to get a feel for what college would be like. I've always known what it felt like to be seen or labeled as "other." When I began my career at LICM overseeing the LICM4all program, the objective I gave myself was to create a space where kiddos like me could feel that sense of "otherness" slip away. I feel strongly based on the feedback we've received from families that this goal of removing stigma is working. In the future, as the LICM4all program grows, I look forward to the ways we can continue to achieve safety, belonging, and acceptance and for the disability community.

To check us out and experience LICM4all for yourself, visit licm.org/licm4all



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Exclusive Museum Hours • Sensory-Friendly Performances
Dedicated Sensory Room • LICM4all • App Sensory Backpacks

Learn more: www.licm.org/licm4all



Long Island Children's Museum

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