

Accessibility Awareness:

Communicating with People who have Disabilities



Waterloo Region
District School Board

See the Ability in Disability

- Rick Hansen

This handbook was created by the Training Subcommittee of the Waterloo Region DSB Accessibility Working Group in accordance with the Ontarians with Disability Act.

It is designed to provide suggestions on how to communicate with persons who have various disabilities and/or barriers to communications.

Board Policy 1010 - Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities

It is the policy of the Waterloo Region District School Board to provide an environment that builds independence, dignity, inclusiveness, equity, and respect for all of our students, parents/guardians, staff and the public. Further, we are committed to providing access to our sites and services, including the implementation, use and application of appropriate assistive technology and alternative forms of communication, in accordance with the Accessibility Standards established pursuant to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.



Meeting Someone

When you meet someone with a disability, greet them as you would normally greet anyone. Treat them as you would like to be treated yourself. Talk directly to them, not to an aide, friend, or interpreter.

Be sure to include a person with a disability in conversation and activities as you would anyone else. They know what they can do and want to do; let it be their decision whether or not to participate.

Lack of knowledge or misinformation may lead you to shy away from interacting with people with certain disabilities. Preconceptions about disabilities such as mental illness, Cerebral Palsy, Tourette's Syndrome and other disabilities often lead to a lack of acceptance. We are all complex human beings; a disability is just one aspect of a person.

Only touch a person with a disability when there is a good reason such as shaking hands in greeting or if the person has requested assistance or in an emergency situation.

Invisible Disabilities

Not all disabilities are readily apparent. A person may have trouble following a conversation, may not respond when you call or wave, may make a request that seems strange to you, or may say or do something that seems inappropriate. The person may have an invisible disability, such as low vision, a hearing or learning disability, traumatic brain injury, mental impairment, or mental illness.

Assisting People with Disabilities

Ask first if the person wants help rather than automatically giving assistance. Follow the person's cues, and ask if you are not sure. Be the assistant, not the director; ask how you can help and listen for instructions.

Lack of Mobility

If the person uses a wheelchair, sit and converse at their level. Ask permission before you assist by pushing a person's wheelchair.

For someone who requires a mobility device or aid, it should be considered as part of the user's personal space and it must be respected and accommodated.

Blind or Low Vision

You can offer to let a person who is blind hold your arm and be guided by you. Don't be offended if they refuse your offer of assistance. It's their choice how independent they choose to be.

Non-Verbal or Non-Vocal

Some people who are non-verbal or non-vocal prefer to write their communications down on paper, some use sign-language and some use other types of communication aids. These methods can be slow and require patience. Use yes and no questions for easier communication.

Speech Impairment

If a person has a speech impairment, listen carefully and patiently. Ask the person to repeat what they said if you don't understand. If they don't understand you when you speak, try again. Demonstrate that your communication with them is important to you.

Hearing Impairment

For people who are deaf or hard of hearing, follow their lead and use gestures or writing as a means of communicating. Gently touch a person who is deaf on the arm to get their attention.

Creating Accessible Meetings and Events

It is helpful for you to ask a person with a disability what types of accommodations are needed for their attendance and participation at a meeting. When advertising a meeting or in-service include the phrase "Should you require accommodations in order to participate in this meeting, please contact...(name) at (phone number or e-mail address).

Depending on the person's abilities, you may need a sign language interpreter, FM system, hearing-assist system or communications devices. Any equipment should be in good working order.

Be sensitive to the setting for the event or meeting. A noisy or dark environment might make it difficult for people with low vision, speech, or hearing difficulties.

You may need to make sure doorways are clear and provide sufficient open space for use of mobility aids. Be prepared to accommodate a guide or service dog. Persons with allergies or chemical sensitivities may need to be accommodated.

Language and Terminology

The language we use in communicating with persons with disabilities is important. A useful reference is always to address the person first not the disability. For example, “a person with a disability” is a much better phrase than “a disabled person.”

To assist in your selection of vocabulary, below are some examples of terms that may be offensive along with suggested alternatives.

Do not use	Use instead
Cripple(d) Lame Handicapped Physically challenged Differently abled Invalid	Individual or person with a disability
Suffers from... Afflicted by... Stricken with... Victim of...	A person who has Cerebral Palsy. A person with a disability is not a victim, and having a disability should not be equated with suffering.
Restricted to.... Confined to.... Wheelchair user Wheelchair-bound	Person with a disability who uses a wheelchair, walker etc.
Blind (The)	A person who is blind.
Visually Impaired (The)	A person with a visual disability.
Deaf (The)	A person who is deaf.
Hearing Impaired (The)	A person who is hard of hearing.
Epileptic (The)	A person who has epilepsy.
Fit, attack or spell	Seizure
Spastic	A person who has spasms.

Do not use	Use instead
Insane Mad Crazy Lunatic Neurotic Unsound mind Schizophrenic (The)	A person with a mental health disability.
Non reader Illiterate	A person with a learning disability
(Mentally) Retarded Moron Idiot Simple	A person with an intellectual disability.
Mongoloid	A person with Down's Syndrome.
Aged (The) Elderly (The)	Seniors



Definition of Disability

The Ontarians with Disability Act adopts the broad definition for disability that is set out in the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Disability is:

- Any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical coordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device
- A condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability;
- A learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language;
- A mental disorder, or
- An injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997.

Definition of Barrier

A “barrier” is anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability, including a physical barrier, an architectural barrier, an informational or communications barrier, an attitudinal barrier, a technological barrier, a policy or a practice.

Staff Resources:

If you have a question about communicating with persons with a disability, contact the Resilience Helpline at 1-866-644-0326 or (TTY): 1-888-384-1152



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