



Office for Disability

Communicating with People with a Disability

Communication is one of the most basic needs and rights of all people. Making communication more accessible means thinking about how to communicate and engage with people with a disability and being aware of general points for differing impairments.

General tips for communicating with people with a disability

- Speak to a person with a disability as you would speak to anyone else. Speak in an age-appropriate tone — treat adults as adults.
- If you wish to speak to a person with a disability who is accompanied by another person, for example a friend, a carer, an attendant, or a sign-language interpreter, speak directly to the person with a disability, rather than to the person with them.
- Put the person first, not their disability. For example, use the term ‘a person with a disability’, rather than ‘a disabled person’ and ‘people without disabilities’ rather than ‘the able-bodied’.
- Try to avoid negative phrases such as ‘suffers from’ and ‘crippled’. Use the phrase ‘people who use a wheelchair’ rather than ‘wheelchair bound’.

Communicating with people with physical disabilities

- Remember that a person’s personal space can include their wheelchair and crutches. Do not touch or push a person’s wheelchair or move their crutches or walking stick without their permission.
- When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair, try to find something to sit on in order to be at eye level with them.

Communicating with people with a vision impairment

- When you meet people who have a vision impairment, always address them by name and introduce yourself by name.
- If there are other people with you, tell the vision-impaired person their names, too.
- Speak clearly and in a normal voice — there is no need to raise your voice.
- Remember that people with a vision impairment cannot rely on the same visual cues as people who do not have a vision impairment, so make sure you verbalise any thoughts or feelings.
- If a person is accompanied by a guide dog, do not pat it, feed it or otherwise distract it while it is in a harness. A dog in a harness is working.
- When you enter or leave a room, say something that indicates your presence or that you are leaving. This ensures that the person who has a vision impairment will not be embarrassed by speaking to an empty space.

Communicating with people with a hearing impairment

- Gain the person's attention before speaking. Try a gentle tap on the shoulder, a wave or some other visual signal to gain attention.
- Face the person directly and maintain eye contact.
- Make sure your mouth is visible. Remember not to cover your mouth with your hand or any other object as you talk.
- Look directly at the person while speaking and speak evenly, not too fast or slow.
- Don't exaggerate your mouth movements, as this will make it more difficult to lip-read.
- Use short sentences.
- Keep your volume up and natural — don't shout.

Communicating with people with an intellectual disability

- Before talking, ensure you have the person's attention. Try using their name or eye contact to make sure you have their attention.
- Keep your questions simple and your answers easy to understand.
- Remember that your body language is important, as people with an intellectual disability often rely on visual cues.
- Be prepared to use visual information or to receive visual information from people with an intellectual disability.
- Be specific and direct. Avoid talking using abstracts, acronyms, metaphors or puns.

Further information

The full guide 'Inclusive consultation and communication with people with a disability' is available from the Office for Disability website: www.officefordisability.vic.gov.au.

If you would like to receive this document in an accessible format, contact the Office for Disability:

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