



Communicating effectively with people with disability

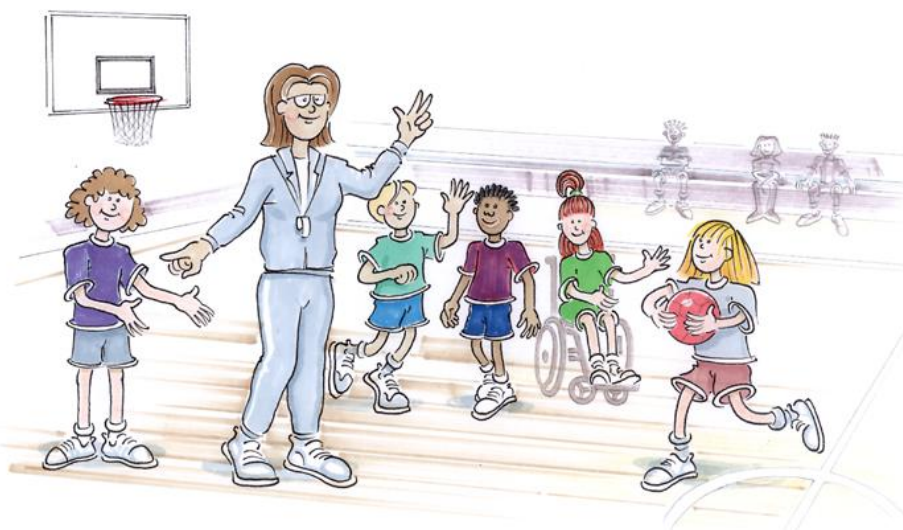
Communicating in a positive way conveys a positive attitude — this is crucial to the success of inclusion

Communicating with people with disability is no different to communicating with people without disability. The most important thing is the ability to listen to an individual's needs and not pre-empt their requirements. There are no hard and fast rules when talking about disability.

Terminology that puts the person first (ahead of the disability) is the accepted norm in Australia: refer to 'people with disability' rather than 'disabled people' or 'the disabled'. It is important that your words imply dignity and do not categorise a person based on their impairment.

General tips for communicating with people with disability

- Speak to the person in an age-appropriate manner. For example, if the person is an adult, speak to them using the same tone you would use when normally addressing an adult.
- Speak to the person, not their coach, friend or assistant. Assume that people can speak for themselves — avoid the 'does he take sugar?' syndrome.
- If you want to know what help or assistance a person with disability needs, ask them! They are best qualified to tell you what they need. If they can manage by themselves, they will soon let you know.



Non-verbal communication

- Remember, people with disability may not always communicate using speech. Some people write messages and/or use computerised systems, symbols, sign language, gestures and eye movements.
- Approach the individual — they will guide you if they use a non-verbal form of communication. Just be willing to try.
- Watch a person's body language and try to respond to any non-verbal cues.
- Begin and end conversations just as you would with anyone else.
- Use all of your communication skills — visual and verbal — and back these up with positive body language and facial expressions. A smile relaxes both you and the person with whom you are communicating.

People using a wheelchair

- When talking to a person in a wheelchair, try to be at eye level with them by sitting in a chair or squatting or kneeling beside them.
- Remember that a person's wheelchair is considered part of their personal space. Do not touch or lean on their chair unless invited to do so.



People with a vision impairment

- When meeting people who are blind or have a vision impairment, address them by name and always give your name.
- Ask them how much they can see. Many people with a vision impairment have a degree of vision — only a small minority are totally blind. Standing in a particular position — for example, directly in front of them or to one side — may suit their visual range and/or acuity.
- If you are giving directions, visual instructions supported by clear verbal information may be useful.
- If a person with a vision impairment requests manual guidance, wait for them to take your arm or elbow and then walk beside them but slightly in front, so they can sense changes in direction. As you move, give verbal information about the surface you are

walking on — for example, steps or slopes, gaps or doors — ensuring that the person you are assisting has time to react to the changes.

People with a hearing impairment

- Communication with a person with a hearing impairment will be enhanced if you ensure that you are standing where they can clearly see your face — this will help if they use lip-reading to support their communication. Avoid standing with the sun or a bright light behind you; it throws your face into shadow.
- Speak clearly without shouting and with normal inflection.
- Attract the person's attention before speaking to them or else they may not realise you are talking to them. A tap on their shoulder from the front or a wave in their peripheral vision is acceptable.
- Be prepared to move to a quieter location if the person with whom you are communicating has trouble hearing or understanding you.

People with a learning disability

- When talking to a person who has a cognitive impairment, keep your explanations brief and clear and check that they have understood what you have told them. There are many different kinds of learning disability and each person's degree of comprehension will vary greatly.
- Talk to people using age-appropriate tone of voice and language. Simplifying the language you use does not necessarily mean treating adults like children. Use short and simple sentence structure.
- Communication is a two-way street: be patient and give people the opportunity to explain what information or assistance they require, and keep in mind that some people may need more time to express themselves.
- Ask the person to repeat themselves if you do not understand. Do not guess; it is more embarrassing when you get it wrong!
- Use all of your communication skills — visual and verbal — and back these up with positive body language and facial expressions. A smile relaxes both you and the person with whom you are communicating.

