

How to Talk to Kids About Disability



Quick History as to Why We Do Not Know How to Talk About Disability

Back not even two generations ago, people with disabilities were routinely shut away in institutions. They were not seen – not part of society. That is one of the reasons why buildings were not made for the disabled. When they left these institutions, they were still shut out of society out of shame or actual physical barriers. It wasn't till the 1950s that the federal government created aid for the disabled. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was enacted in 1975! IDEA was a four-part piece of legislation that helped provide access to the public school system for students with disabilities. The ADA of 1990 also propelled access to the public sphere (even if a little) for people with disabilities. Technologies and medicine have made it more possible for the disabled to be independent members of society. So, there is a reason why there is very little knowledge in what to say to children. Our society has very little experience!

What This Handout Will Cover

This handout will help to confidently handle the situation in public when a child stares and then asks questions. This handout will also provide a guide in furthering this conversation in private.

In Public:

Why do children stare? They are staring to figure out what *is* the difference.

Questions

Children are trying to understand the world outside their home. It is natural for you to be embarrassed but it is also natural to have a child ask you – their confidante - to explain it to them.

The way you REACT, teaches the child EVERYTHING they will need to know about disability.

Example Questions/Answers:

- Why do they walk that way?
Maybe they have a disability. Their legs work differently than yours.
- What happened to their 'xyz'?'
I don't know. Maybe something did happen, or maybe they were born that way.
- Why are they acting like that?
Maybe that is their way to help calm himself.
- What is that stick for?
*White stick - cannot see and use that stick to see where they are about to step.
Cane – it is called a cane and it helps them walk.*
- Why are they in a wheelchair?
The wheelchair helps them get around like how your legs help you get around.
- What are those on his legs?
Those are called braces and they help support his legs to walk.
- Why are they using their hands like that? (If you see people signing)
He's talking using his hands because at least one of those people is deaf and can't hear – see the other person/people are signing too, so they all know sign language.
- In a situation where there is a person who uses a feeding tube.
They have a feeding tube because it helps them eat. Some people are not able to eat well through their mouth. A feeding tube can help a person get nutrition and food into their bellies.

General Answers to Use:

- A nice addition to an answer could be to say to your child, "Why don't you say hello/wave?" (especially if they were staring)
- Another response could be: "Would you like to ask?" For this one, you must read the disabled person. They may not want to be bothered; which is fine. Or they might be receptive to a conversation. How do you read them? You read them just like anyone else in public. You are probably "reading" people all the time as to whether they are open to conversation. But not everyone will be interested in talking about themselves at all, or more specifically about their disability. Kids often get a better response than adults though, as their genuine curiosity is sincere and generally without judgement. If the response isn't welcoming to the question, reassure the child and remind them that everyone has times they do or don't want to talk about things and that's ok.

- Be factual and honest about what you do and don't know

In Private:

While there's no need to specifically bring up the person once you are in private, unless this is something you routinely do with other people, the child may bring it up. . Ask them what they remember noticing and encourage them to think about what they can do that's cool and what might be similar to what the person they saw could do.

Examples You Can Ask:

- What do you think they enjoy? (like how you love at<x>)?
- I wonder what else she does that is very awesome!
- Also emphasize what is the same between your child and the disabled person: "I bet they can draw just like you!"
- If you noticed something specific like a color they were wearing a lot of, or a sticker or character on a hat, that's a good place to talk about as it's the same kind of thing you'd use to make any assumptions about other people you might discuss, disabled or not.

General Questions a Child Might Ask:

- What is a disability?
A person's body or brain works differently. Their legs may not work like yours or their eyes can't see or their ears can't hear. But that does not diminish who they are. Many times when one body part of a person works differently, the person learns to use other parts of themselves in different, stronger ways. Many disabled people can do what other people do but differently!
- Why do people have disabilities?
Sometimes they were born that way or they got hurt and this is how their body healed. Some changes happen all at once, and others change over time. Everyone is deserving of dignity and respect. You can ask me questions and we can try to answer them together."
- Why does that person not talk or sound different?
I don't know. Here's one reason someone might sound like that.
Some people who are d/Deaf might not speak at all or their voice might sound different because they aren't hearing what other's voices sound like nor their own voice.
Some people can't speak some or all of the time and use other ways to communicate.
What's important is the communication, not how someone does it.
- Why does the person look like that?
I'm not sure. What do you want to know about?
(at this point you are just trying to understand what the child has noticed and is asking about)
- Why is that person rocking/flapping/banging their head like that?
Sometimes we have emotions that are really strong and overwhelming (can be happy, sad, scary etc) and we find ways to bring us back to center. While some people might twirl their hair, bite their nails, fidget, take a deep breath or do a happy dance, other

people need to do different, sometimes bigger movements or make sounds to comfort themselves.

- Why did that happen to them?
Be honest if you do not know.
- What if the child is afraid of people with disabilities?
Ask them what makes them afraid. Maybe it's as simple as they don't know what to say to them! Explain to them they are just like you and go say hi! Maybe they worry about getting it themselves. But getting them to explain to you WHY they are frightened usually ends up being something simple.
- Expressing sorrow for the disabled person is natural reaction but remember EVERYONE has struggles, including your child. Remind him/her of that.
- When talking about their own fears or how the disabled person might be sad or scared, remind them that change can be hard, but humans are resilient and over time learn to adapt and become comfortable with things that were once scary or hard.

Things to Stay Away From

- Making assumptions about ability
- Restricting the community to 'inspirational' stories
- Comparing everyone to what's 'normal' or 'typical'
- Touching service animals or people's equipment
- Forced familiarity or intimacy
- Offering to pray for someone with a disability (or their family) unless specifically requested. It is usually perceived as pity.

Other Topics of Conversation

From Disabled People:

- "Nothing about us, without us!" means center and learn from the experiences of disabled people.
- Sometimes well-intentioned efforts are unwanted.
- Address the individual directly - As opposed to their caregiver.
- Respect the preferred identity - 'Autistic person' vs. 'person with Autism.'
- People with disabilities don't need to be pitied, cured or fixed- Disabilities are a source of pride for many people.

Final Thoughts

Be honest, be matter-of-fact and be positive (or neutral)!

For a deeper dive into conversations with your child, a parent might want to consider these general thoughts about disability:

- Not all disabilities are visible

- Disability is a normal part of the human experience
- Some people are born with their disabilities, others acquire them throughout life.
- Not everyone with even the same disability feels the same way about it.
- People with disabilities might do things differently than they do.
- People with disabilities might look unlike other people they've seen before.
- There are many ways to be disabled.

Useful Definitions

Disability: Disability comes from the challenges a person faces because of the way their body or brain works within a certain environment. Having a disability does not mean someone doesn't have ability.

Ability: Ability comes from the parts of ourselves that make it easier for us to do things in certain environments. Everyone has ability. There are lots of different types of ability.

Physical disability: When someone's body works differently. Sometimes you can see it and other times you cannot.

Learning disability: When someone needs support to learn and understand things.

Mental health: Everyone has mental health, which is made up of our feelings. Some people's emotions work differently, so they might feel more sad, angry, or nervous.

Books to Read with Your Child

To find a list of books to read with your child or books your child can read themselves, you can visit: <https://www.disabilityaccessibility.com/book> and check out the [book list](#) that is part of the resources provided for this workshop.