Meeting and working with people who have a disability.

# Disabilities and Dyslexia Service (DDS)

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# Introduction

It is good practice to reflect upon our actions and language when communicating and working with others. Working with people who have a disability is no different, so treat people with disabilities like people! We should aim not to offend, or reinforce discrimination. Similarly, we should not make assumptions. Don’t be embarrassed to ask what people’s needs are as they are the experts.

There is no guide for communicating with others that takes into account every possible variable and scenario, and it is not prudent to be too prescriptive. However, the following may help to initiate good communication and to forge positive and productive working relationships.

### Meeting and greeting

* Do shake a person's hand. If the person cannot shake hands, acknowledge them with a smile and / or a spoken greeting.
* Use your normal speaking tone when communicating with a person with disability. Do not raise your voice unless you are asked to.
* Do not push or touch a person’s wheelchair without their permission.
* If you are speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair, try to position yourself at eye level to help with conversation.
* Do offer assistance, wait until it is accepted and provide the help in the way the person asks you to - and don't be offended by a refusal.
* Don't make assumptions - remember that anybody may have a hidden impairment or disability.
* Treat people as individuals and treat adults as adults.
* Talk to the disabled person - and not to their assistant or dog.
* Don't ask personal or medical questions.
* Be patient and considerate – some people may take a little longer to speak or respond during a conversation.
* Ask if the person has any questions or if there is anything they would like for you to clarify. Break down complex information if it is helpful to do so.
* If appropriate, repeat what you understand the person to be saying and ask for confirmation if your understanding is correct.
* Don't worry about making mistakes - just ask.

### Meeting people with hearing or speech impairment

* Don't shout at people who are deaf or have a hearing impairment. Position yourself in their vision, and attract their attention with a light touch or a wave if you need to.
* Ask how a person wants to communicate - they may wish to lip-read, for example.
* Lip-reading is tiring and not totally reliable. Speak slowly and clearly, try and provide emphasis with gestures and facial expressions. Face the light, and don't cover your mouth.
* Deaf people may regard British Sign Language (which has a unique grammatical structure) as their first language, not English.
* Be patient with people who have a speech impairment, don't correct them or finish their sentences. If you don't understand, don't pretend you do, just ask the person to repeat if necessary, and tell them what you have understood so far.

### Meeting people with visual impairment

* Tell a visually impaired person who you are. Introduce other people who are there, and say where they are.
* In group discussions, identify the person speaking and who they are speaking to.
* Don't grab a person to guide them - ask if they wish to be guided. Let them take your arm, ask them if they wish to be warned about steps, doors, and other obstacles.
* Do say clearly where a person’s seat is, or (with permission) place their hand on the chair back or arm.
* It’s OK to use a common saying like ‘see you tomorrow’ when speaking with a visually impaired person.
* Remember that a visually impaired person may miss out on gestures or facial expressions.

### Organising Events

* Advertise the accessibility of the venue.
* Consider physical access and space, including parking and toilets - are entrances, lifts, doors, and corridors wide enough?
* Is there enough space for wheelchair uses to wheel in and manoeuvre within a room?
* Is a hearing loop needed?
* Is a sign-language interpreter needed?
* Think about producing literature in forms other than standard print – e.g. large print, audio, Braille, or electronic format. Design your materials to be inclusive!
* During question and answer sessions, it helps if a person answering a question from the floor can repeat it so that everybody has heard or interpreted it.

### Language choices

It is good practice and polite to choose language that promotes equality and aims not to offend.

* Don't use ‘the disabled’ or ‘the blind’, this defines people by their impairment and implies that members of these groups are all the same; do use ‘disabled people’, ‘blind’, or ‘visually impaired people’.
* Medical terms don't reflect the individual, refer to people by name.
* Disabled people are not ‘abnormal’ and non-disabled people are not ‘normal’.
* Avoid referring to disabled people as being ‘brave’, ‘afflicted’, or ‘victims’. Avoid referring to a disabled person as ‘suffering’ from a condition or disability.
* It is not appropriate to use words such as ‘retarded’, ‘backward’, or ‘mentally handicapped’ when referring to people whether they have a disability or not.

Don't worry about making mistakes, but do be aware of the issues. If you are in any doubt, ask a disabled person how they prefer to be described.

### Working with personal assistants and other support workers

Disabled people may be supported by personal assistants, other workers, or support dogs. You may encounter them in academic, training, or social situations.

**Support workers may include:**

* Personal assistants who provide practical and personal support — for example, washing, dressing, going to the toilet, or driving. The same person may sometimes provide support in work or study.
* Sign language interpreters, using British Sign Language to convey speech to Deaf people.
* Lip speakers, conveying speech to deaf lip readers using unvoiced speech.
* Academic support workers e.g. note taking, or book fetching.
* Communication supporters, interpreting unclear speech.
* Assistance dogs: Guide Dogs, Hearing Dogs and Support Dogs.

**Working with support workers and assistance dogs**

Do

* Treat support workers and dogs with courtesy and respect.
* Look at the disabled person when they are speaking to you, even if they are using an interpreter or communication support worker.
* Remember that they all, including dogs, may need: somewhere to sit, something to eat or drink, to go to the toilet, to take a break.

Don’t

* Ask support worker questions about the disabled person they work for. Ask the disabled person.
* Support workers are not there to participate in the event, they are there to support.
* Do not pet or feed working dogs however tempting this may be, they are working.
* If you've hired a disabled person to provide a service (e.g. a lecture or a training session) there's no need to thank their support worker. They'll get their credit and thanks from the disabled person they are supporting.

### Further resources and thanks to:

[Government Guide on inclusive communication](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication)

[Government Guidance – Inclusive language: words to use and avoid when writing about disability](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability)

[University of Cambridge etiquette Guide](https://www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/about-drc/etiquette)

[University of Worcester disability etiquette information](https://scips.worc.ac.uk/etiquette-html/)