



Disability Awareness 101

Familiarizing children with disabilities can help resolve questions they may have, change attitudes, and break down barriers such as misunderstandings or fear. Use these disability categories to have conversations with children, provide accurate information about disabilities, and create understanding about challenges that children may have as well as what their unique strengths are. A brief summary of disability categories, examples of some of the specific disabilities that fall in these areas, and discussion tips can provide programmers and educators with simple tools to get started. It is important to remember that every child is unique and special. Children with special needs can be at various levels of development and/or may experience disabilities in more than one category.

Disability Categories

Physical 	<p>Relates to issues that affect a child's motor system. These include orthopedic impairments that involve bones, muscles, and joints or neurological impairments that involve the nervous system, brain, and spinal cord, which make it difficult to move, stand, sit, walk, play, or reach. Some people may use adaptive equipment and/or mobility devices to help them be more independent.</p>	<p>Some disabilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cerebral palsy • Muscular dystrophy • Traumatic brain injury • Spina bifida • Spinal cord injury 	<p>Discussion example: Cody has difficulty using his legs to run, but he can still race using his wheelchair. Watch how fast he is!</p>
Sensory 	<p>Relates to a child's inability or difficulty gathering, understanding, and processing information from the environment through any of the senses including sight, touch, smell, hearing, taste, vestibular, and proprioception.</p>	<p>Some disabilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearing • Vision • Sensory processing • Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) 	<p>Discussion example: Melissa reads books in a different way. She uses her fingers and sense of touch instead of her eyes and sense of sight.</p>
Communication 	<p>Relates to difficulties a child has communicating verbally due to limited comprehension, use of language, and/or oral motor development. Communication consists of expressive language (what you say) and receptive language (what you understand).</p>	<p>Some disabilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech (Ex. articulation, abnormal voice, fluency) • Voice (Ex. abnormal pitch, volume, quality) • Language (Ex. receptive, expressive) • Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) 	<p>Discussion example: Kelly uses a communication system to let us know what she wants to play, tell us how she feels, and to participate in games.</p>
Social-Emotional 	<p>Relates to a child's inability to effectively manage behavior which may result in social or emotional outbursts or reactions to situations, or cause difficulty interacting with others in developmentally appropriate ways.</p>	<p>Some disabilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional (Ex. depression, bipolar, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders) • Behavioral (Ex. oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder) • Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) 	<p>Discussion example: When Dante is in a new place, he needs time and space to adjust to his environment. He likes to observe others first, but will be ready to play soon.</p>
Cognitive 	<p>Relates to a child's difficulty in processing information, reasoning, comprehension, memory, expressing information/emotions, and/or ability to control attention or impulses.</p>	<p>Some disabilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual or developmental disability • Learning disability • Down syndrome • Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) • Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) 	<p>Discussion example: Sometimes James may need extra time and help learning new things, but he loves to play and have fun with you.</p>

Talking Disability

It is critical for adults and children to feel comfortable talking about disabilities in order to promote positive awareness and convey messages of empowerment. Remember to use **“people-first”** language in which the person is always placed before the disability and to keep the emphasis on what they can do. People are complex and unique – a disability is just one aspect of who they are. For example:

• Do Say:	Instead Of:
• Child with autism	Autistic child
• Friend who uses a wheelchair	Friend who is bound or confined to a wheelchair
• Children with disabilities or special needs	Disabled children or special needs children
• Accessible buses, bathrooms, reserved parking	Handicapped buses, bathrooms, parking
• People with cognitive or developmental disabilities	Delayed, slow, mentally retarded

To further promote disability awareness, try some of the following ideas:

- Use children’s literature that includes positive stories and images about individuals with disabilities.
- Invite adults with disabilities to come visit your class or program so children can ask them questions in a safe and inviting atmosphere.
- Use disability simulation activities to discuss how people with disabilities can still do the same things – just differently.
- Teach children sign language.
- Set up a supervised time when children can explore and use adaptive equipment or assistive devices.
- Include books, dolls, puzzles, photos, and other toys that are diverse and include people with disabilities.

Additional Resources

AblePlay ableplay.org

Center for Disease Control and Prevention
cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth

Character Counts! charactercounts.org

Character Education Partnership character.org

Council for Exceptional Education cec.sped.org

Friends Who Care easterseals.com

Friendship Circle friendshipcircle.org

Kids Included Together kitonline.org

National Inclusion Project inclusionproject.org

Special Olympics specialolympics.org

Spread the Word to End the R-Word r-word.org

"Play is fun, everyone needs it, and it should be available to all people everywhere."

Jordan Thomas

Founder and President of the Jordan Thomas Foundation, providing prosthetics for children in need

