



How to talk to children about disability: tips for parents and carers

This resource will help you to talk to your children about disability in an honest and positive way.

People with disability want parents and carers to talk openly about disability with their children, and expose them to lots of examples of people who look and act in different ways.

“ I wish parents wouldn’t be silent. I want parents to tell their child that everyone is different ... I want parents to expose their children to diverse people — people of different colours, races, genders, appearances, disability — so that encountering someone with visible difference is not a surprise. ”

– Carly Findlay (disability activist)

What is disability?

Everyone is different! People with disability have bodies or brains that mean they might do some things a bit differently. For example, some people eat through a feeding tube in their stomach, speak with their hands and listen with their eyes, or move around in a wheelchair. Some people’s brains like routines, or have thoughts that go really, really fast!

What causes disability?

The social model of disability explains disability is not caused by individual differences in people’s bodies and brains. It is created by the barriers people face in our society that stop them from taking part in the same way as non-disabled people. Society needs to change so that differences are celebrated and people with disability can participate just like everyone else.

Embrace children's curiosity

Encourage your child's questions and consider it an opportunity to talk about a new and interesting topic. Children are naturally open and their questions come from a desire to learn rather than from judgement.

If you know the person with disability, you can ask them if it's OK for your child to ask them some questions. However as we don't generally encourage children to ask questions of strangers, this also applies to people with disability. If your child has already asked a stranger with disability a question, you can ask politely if the person would mind answering your child's question, and be OK if they say no.

Talk honestly and factually about differences

Answer any questions calmly, using matter-of-fact language. Explain how people's bodies or brains can work differently, and how any required equipment works. For example:

Child: "Why can't Sam walk?"

Adult: "I'm not sure, he might have been born like that, or he might have had an accident."



Child: "Why does Lotti use a wheelchair?"

Adult: "Some people move around with their legs, Lotti uses a wheelchair to get around."



Child: "Why doesn't Sarah sit on the mat for sharing time?"

Adult: "Some children's brains work better when they are moving around, so not sitting on the mat helps Sarah to learn."

Keep it positive

Talk about people with disability with kindness, openness, and respect, and your kids will do the same. **Do say** "person with disability", "disabled", "Deaf", or "neurodiverse". **Don't say** "handicapped," "differently-abled," or "special needs" as these terms frame disability as a negative thing and are offensive to people with disability.

Emphasise similarities and shared interests

The most important thing to remember is to let your children know that people with disability are more similar than they are different. People with disability want the same things as everyone else: To have friends, play, be loved, laugh, feel included and participate in activities with their friends and family.

Celebrate diversity, including neurodiversity

We are all different in some way and we all need help sometimes. Did you know that one in 5 people in Australia have a disability? Explain that disability is just a normal part of life. Wouldn't it be boring if everyone was the same! Celebrate neurodiversity, which includes Autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, among many others. Our bodies and our brains all work in different ways and that's a good thing as the world needs all different types of people.

Teach kindness and sensitivity

Talk with children about how they can look out for their friends, and the importance of using kind words and including everyone. It's important to teach children that teasing and leaving people out can hurt. Invite children with disability to parties and playdates, as you would with any other children.

“ **Children with disability can be left out because we don't know what's possible ... children have very different perceptions of disability to adults, and they can play with children with disability without seeming to notice the disability** ”

- Karen Dimmock (CEO Association of Children with a Disability)

What about if my child has a disability?

Talking to your child about their disability

- Acknowledge your child's disability.
- Be matter of fact.
- Be honest but keep information age appropriate.
- Invite your child to ask questions.
- Talk about who is helping your child.
- Help your child identify what to say to others.
- Focus on your child's strengths.
- Identify healthy role models your child can relate to.
- Seek support for yourself and your child.

More information: [Very Well Family website](#).



Talking to other people about your child's disability

- Talking about your child's disability can help people understand your child and your situation.
- If you emphasise your child's strengths, it helps people see your child as a whole person, not just a disability.
- When you talk about your child's disability, who you talk to, and what you say is up to you.
- Talking about your child's disability with your partner and other children can be good for your family relationships.

More information: [Raising Children Network website](#).

Activities and resources to help you get started

1. **Talk to your child about people with disability.** This might be people that they know, or from media or books. Ask them if they have any questions. Answer any questions in an honest and direct way.

Focus on all the ways in which people with disability are the same as other people. Talk about visible disabilities, invisible disabilities, physical disabilities and neurodiversity.

2. **Learn some of your favourite children's songs in Auslan.** There are lots of great YouTube videos to help you, for example **You are my Sunshine**, **Sing a Rainbow**.
3. **Show children representations of diverse people.** Some good examples include:

TV:

Play School and Through the Windows – various presenters and children with disability (ABC)

Sesame Street and Autism video - Julia has Autism (YouTube)

Goldie and Bear – Goldie's mum uses a wheelchair (Disney)

Pablo – Pablo has Autism (ABC)

Daniel Tiger's Neighbourhood – Chrissie wears braces to help her walk (Netflix)

Books from the library:

The Same But Different Too (Karl Newson)

All Bodies Are Good Bodies (Charlotte Barkla)

Come Over To My House (Eliza Hull)

What Happened To You? (James Catchpole)

Why Johnny Doesn't Flap (Clay Morton)

You're Fabulous As You Are (Sophie Beer)

We Are All Different (Asa Gilland)

A Visit To The Zoo – with Auslan flashcards (Jen Blyth & Kerrie Taylor)

Can Bears Ski? (Raymond Antrobus)



International Day of
People with Disability

This resource was created by Surf Coast Shire Council to celebrate International Day of People with Disability 2023.

For more information about Council's work to support disability Access and Inclusion, visit:

surfcoast.vic.gov.au/Community/Access-for-all.