



## CREATING A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

*Creating a positive environment and communicating in an effective way is crucial to successfully including people with disability in sport and active recreation*

### Attitudes

It is widely recognised that people with disability face disadvantages in life. Although they may experience physical barriers, often these disadvantages can be linked to other people's negative or poor attitude to disability. These attitudes are often based on a lack of experience, education and understanding. Attitudes are reflected in how a person acts, responds and behaves around someone with disability. Concentrating on what a person with disability cannot do perpetuates a negative attitude.

When coaching athletes with disability it is essential to concentrate on what they can do rather than what they can't. It is also important to note that a pitying 'poor you' attitude can be just as harmful to an athlete with disability.

By understanding why some people have negative attitudes and learning how to positively influence them, positive change can start to occur. Rather than asking 'Why should I include?' you should ask, 'How can I include?'

### Terminology

Language is a critical part of how beliefs and perspectives of individuals and societies are formed. It can be a reflection of a culture's thoughts, feelings and concepts. Certain words, as a result of cultural custom, degrade and diminish people with disability. Often the language used to refer to people with disability has been negative, judgmental and couched in medical jargon.

While there are no hard and fast rules about what should and should not be said when referring to people with disability, there are a few accepted terms that can help to break down some of the social stigmas associated with disability.

It is appropriate, as a general rule, to use the words and expressions that put a person ahead of their disability. 'People with disability' is the approved term used in Australia. It is important that the words you use imply dignity and do not categorise people because of their impairment. Also, it is suggested that disability is only mentioned if it is necessary in the context of the conversation.

WORDS TO WATCH FOR AND/OR AVOID	ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVES
Abnormal, subnormal – negative terms that imply failure to function ‘normally’	Specify the disability
Cripple, crippled – these terms convey an image of an ugly and twisted body	A physical disability or a mobility disability
Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound – a wheelchair provides mobility, not restriction	Uses a wheelchair or a wheelchair user
Afflicted with or suffering from – most people with disability do not see themselves as afflicted or suffering	The person has (specify the disability)
Mentally retarded, defective, feeble-minded, imbecile, moron, retarded – offensive and inaccurate	Person with an intellectual disability or person with a learning difficulty
Defective, deformed – degrading terms	Specify the disability
The blind	Person who is blind or person with a vision impairment
Mongol – outdated and derogatory	Person with Down syndrome
Spastic – offensive and inaccurate term used (most often) in reference to a person with cerebral palsy	Person with disability
Invalid	Person with disability
The deaf (community)	Acceptable in terms of the community
The deaf (individual person)	Person who is deaf
Insane, lunatic, maniac, mental patient, neurotic, psycho	Person with a psychiatric disability or person with a mental illness or person with (specify the condition)

## Communicating with people with disability

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 prejudge their requirements. There are no hard and fast rules when talking about disability.

### General tips

- 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.
- If you want to know what help or assistance a person with disability needs, ask them! They are best qualified to tell you. 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.
- When talking in groups address people by 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. Don't talk about 'here' and 'there'.
- 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.
- Do not move objects without telling the person.

## 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 learning disability, 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.