

For so many of us, disability awareness education was not a part of our upbringing or school experience. Because of that, introducing a toy or book that is representative of ability diversity or meeting a new person with a disability might feel intimidating, especially if your child has questions that you're not sure how to answer. The information in this document is designed to make you feel more confident and comfortable guiding your child's play and answering their questions about disability.

Familiarize yourself with the information below before beginning a conversation with your child.

Key Information about Disability

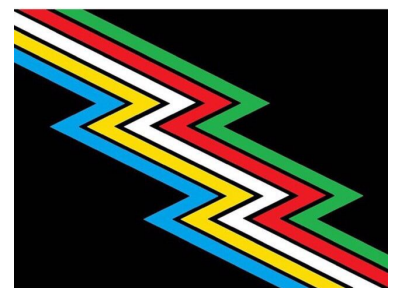
- ★ Disability, like race, gender identity, religion, age, and sexual orientation is a natural and expected part of human diversity. In fact, disability is an identity marker that intersects all other aspects of diversity in society. One in five people have a disability, making it one of the largest marginalized groups.
- ★ Disability is neither tragic, nor shameful, nor a topic that should be avoided. On the contrary, disability is an aspect of human diversity that needs more representation in schools, books, media, and society in general. We encourage you to talk about disability openly, to notice and acknowledge it respectfully and without intrusive questions, and to educate yourself and your children about disability.
- ★ The words “disability” and “disabled” are the terms preferred by the majority of folx in the disability community over euphemisms such as “special needs,” “differently abled,” and “diverse abilities.” The word “disability” is a word associated with rights and protections under laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The adults fighting for justice in the disability community have identified disability as the preferred term over euphemisms which stigmatize that which is different. Bear in mind that there is nothing particularly “special” about needing health care, education, safety, and access to public accommodation.
- ★ Models of disability are tools that shape how people understand disability in society. They help define disability and ultimately, provide a basis upon which the government and society can devise strategies for meeting the needs of disabled people. There are many different models that describe the ways in which people understand disability in society. However, there are three in particular that are helpful in broadening our perspective about disability.

- **Medical Model:** This paints disability as something that is purely biological and something that should be treated, healed, or “fixed.” The Medical Model generally subscribes to the idea that a disability strays from the norm and needs to be addressed by the person with the disability through therapies and other treatments so that they can participate in “normal” society.
- **Social Model:** This takes the viewpoint that disability is not a biological affliction, but rather something that society inflicts upon a person. A person is not disabled by a difference in their biology. Instead, they are disabled by society’s lack of accessibility and acceptance. From this perspective, it’s society that should change to accommodate a diverse range of needs, rather than the responsibility falling to the individual with a disability.
- **Biopsychosocial Model:** This takes a more holistic view of disability where an individual can identify strongly with their disability as an aspect of their biology while acknowledging that social and environmental factors can be disabling, as well. It reflects the complexity of the disabled experience and it is the model that best represents The Nora Project’s understanding of disability.

★ There are two broadly accepted ways of speaking about disability: identity-first and person-first language. To pay respect to all preferences, it is appropriate to use a mix of both approaches in everyday speech. However, when speaking to a disabled person, it is critical to learn their preferences and defer to those preferences. In the disability community, many people prefer Identity-First language (i.e. she is a disabled woman, he is autistic), while others prefer Person-First language (i.e. she is a woman with a disability, he has autism).

★ There are several categories of disabilities, each represented in the Disability Pride Flag, shown at the right. They include:

- Mental Illness
- Intellectual and Developmental Disability
- Invisible and Undiagnosed disabilities
- Physical Disability
- Sensory Disabilities



★ Emphasize that all people are different from each other, but a person isn’t *more* different because they are disabled. As you answer your child’s questions or share information about disability, it may be tempting to use the non-disabled experience as the norm against which we measure difference. We recommend that as you talk about disability, you help your child understand that every person is different from every other person, but “different” isn’t a category. Disabled people aren’t inherently “different” from everyone else. Instead, Joey is different from Sally because he uses a wheelchair to get around and she uses her legs.

Ideas for Introducing Disability to your Child

- **Read together!** Children's literature is a gateway to rich conversation about a myriad of topics, and these books will provide information about disability in a kid-friendly manner.
 - *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You* by Sonia Sotomayor (read the blog post with suggested talking points here: <https://bit.ly/3q1X7Qo>)
 - *Roxy the Raccoon* by Alice Bell
 - *Hiya Moriah* by Victoria Nelson
 - *Benny Doesn't Like to be Hugged* by Zetta Elliott
 - *The People You May See* by Laura Koehler
 - *Not So Different: What You Really Want to Ask About Having a Disability* by Shane Burcaw
- **Notice and state what you see.** Disability isn't shameful or taboo, and it's perfectly acceptable to notice and acknowledge disability in a respectful way. Take this opportunity to create a safe space for your child to point out what they notice about the adaptive equipment in the puzzle. Use our Disability Resource Guide (<https://bit.ly/TNPDRG>) to help explain the purpose of that equipment. For more information about why we should acknowledge disability, check out this blog post from Nora Project Executive Director, Lauren Schrero: <https://bit.ly/2V2E36g>
- **Lay a foundation for respectful and appropriate interactions with disabled people.** When they encounter something brand new, children tend to linger, stare, or ask pointed and potentially disrespectful questions. Use toys that include ability diversity as an opportunity to help your child understand that many people have a disability - some you can see and some you can't. Help them understand that noticing is fine, but staring will make someone uncomfortable. Teach them about how to phrase questions in such a way that it puts the disabled person in a position where it is safe to decline to answer. For example, "Would it be ok if I asked you a question about your wheelchair?" rather than "What's wrong with you?" or "What happened to you?" And remind your child that intrusive questions about a person's body, medical needs or history, or injuries might make someone uncomfortable. Let your child know that ignoring someone outright is not inclusive behavior, so children should be encouraged to interact with disabled strangers, whether adults or children, just as they would with non-disabled people. For instance, if waving or smiling is typical for their interactions with new people, that behavior should be carried over.
- **Establish that everyone, with and without disabilities, completes the daily tasks of life.** Use the Disability Resource Guide (<https://bit.ly/TNPDRG>) to help your child understand

that there are many ways to complete the daily tasks of life such as going from place to place, eating, breathing, and communicating. Sometimes people with disabilities use equipment, tools, or receive support from others to complete these tasks. While there are most certainly challenges associated with disability, it is important not to paint one way of life as harder or unfortunate. Instead, celebrate that people are adaptable and encourage your child to look for ways to make their community more accessible to all.

- **Download our [free printable](#) to have near you as a reminder of some of this key information while you interact with your child.**

Answering Kids' Frequently Asked Questions

As you play with toys and read books that include ability diversity, the following questions, or ones like them, might come up. Children often ask things in an unfiltered manner that can cause us to bristle in our response. We encourage you to take these questions in stride, responding calmly and modeling for your child more appropriate phrasing and language. Stifling curiosity can contribute to the negative stigma surrounding disability, so do your best to answer your child's questions without making them feel shame.

You may need to modify the complexity of your responses to meet the language needs of your child. If you are unsure of how to answer a question, reach out to Katy at katy@thenoraproject.ngo

Your Child Asks	Ways to respond and continue the conversation
Why is the boy wearing sunglasses?	He might be wearing glasses to protect his eyes, or maybe so other people know he has trouble seeing. Lots of times when we talk to each other we also look each other in the eye, but the boy would have trouble doing that. He can wear the glasses to make it easier when he is talking to his friends.
Why does he carry a stick?	The stick you see in the picture is a special cane that allows the child to sense what's happening in his environment without using his eyes. When he walks, this child will hold the cane in front of him, moving it side to side, to notice things like bumps in the sidewalk, stairs, and other obstacles so he can avoid running into anything or tripping.
What's wrong with his mouth?	Actually, there's nothing wrong! There are all different ways for our bodies to look. This boy's mouth looks different from yours, but that doesn't mean there's anything wrong. Sometimes people are born with faces, limbs, or other parts of their body shaped in unique ways, and that's ok! It does sometimes mean that they have to do certain tasks differently or wear clothes made especially for them.

<p>Why can't she walk?</p>	<p>Not everyone uses their legs to walk around, but everyone is able to move from one place to another. Sometimes a person can't walk because they were born with a disability that affects their legs. Other times, a person gets injured and becomes disabled. People who don't use their legs to get around use many types of equipment to help them get around where they want to go, like wheelchairs.</p>
<p>I thought only old people use.....</p>	<p>You're right that older people use equipment like this. But you know what's interesting? There are a lot of young people that use them too! Adaptive equipment like (wheelchairs, walkers, hearing aids, magnifiers, etc.) make it easier for people to do all of the daily tasks of life independently. People with disabilities can be young or old, and as people get older, they often develop disabilities. It's just a part of life!</p>
<p>What's stuck in his ears?</p>	<p>What you're noticing is called a hearing aid. For people who are deaf or hard of hearing, hearing aids are tools that can help make sounds louder. Think of it like having a speaker in your ear and you can turn up the volume. This makes it easier to hear and understand what's happening in an environment for people with disabilities that affect their hearing.</p>
<p>How did they get that way?</p>	<p>Sometimes people are born with a disability. Other times they become disabled after an injury. And sometimes as people get older, they develop a disability as their body changes. It's important to remember that disability is something a lot of people have - it's something we should expect to see and not unusual at all.</p>
<p>Can that happen to me, too?</p>	<p>Disability can be something that you're born with or something that you develop during your life. Sometimes an injury can cause a disability, and other times disability will develop as we get older and our body changes. So, yes. Disability can happen to</p>

anyone. But there's nothing to be afraid of - people with disabilities learn ways to adapt so they can do all the same things that a non-disabled person can do. They live rich, full lives with jobs and friends and families. Disability isn't good or bad, it's just a part of life!