



International Day of
People with Disability

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Community Conversation Guide



Be part of creating an
inclusive and diverse community

About this Guide

We made this Community Conversation Guide to help you discuss International Day of People with disability (IDPwD) and disability more broadly.

This guide can help you to build a more inclusive, respectful and understanding community by talking about disability in your:

- workplace
- school/university
- community groups, including local sports clubs and volunteer associations.

You can have conversations about disability all year round, not only on IDPwD on 3 December.

What is IDPwD?

IDPwD is a United Nations day recognised around the world on 3 December each year. The day aims to promote community awareness, understanding and acceptance of people with disability.

In Australia, IDPwD is a joint effort between government, schools, organisations, businesses and individuals.

We encourage conversations around IDPwD to:

- challenge stereotypes and negative attitudes
- recognise the contributions of people with disability
- build a more inclusive community.

Learn more >

- [IDPwD factsheets and resources](#)
- [International Day of Persons with Disabilities — United Nations](#)





Why should we talk about disability?

There are 5.5 million people with disability in Australia. That's 1 in 5 people.

Chances are you or someone you know has disability. This could be a family member, friend, colleague or teammate.

Talking openly in your community about experiences of disability can lead to a more accepting society where everyone can thrive.

When we talk about disability, it impacts on how people with disability feel about themselves. It can also shape community attitudes and behaviour towards people with disability.

Through our conversations, we can:

- remind each other that people with disability deserve to be respected and valued
- reduce stigma around disability by encouraging respectful language and advocating for inclusive practices
- deepen our understanding, knowledge and perspectives of disability.



Defining disability

Disability can be physical, mental, intellectual or sensory. It can be visible or invisible. It can be permanent or temporary. People's support needs can also change.

There are many ways to define disability depending on the context and situation. To guide your conversations about disability, it is important to understand the 'social model of disability'.

The social model seeks to change society in a way that is more accessible for people with disability. This is opposite to the medical model, where society sees disability as something to fix or cure.

Under a social model, people with disability can be equal members of society. We can achieve this by removing barriers such as:

- systems, policies, structures or practices in an organisation or society that limit opportunities for people with disability
- attitudes, like assuming someone can't do something because of their disability
- lack of knowledge and understanding about disability
- physical obstacles, like buildings without ramps or lifts.



Learn more >

- [What is disability — Australian Disability Network](#)
- [Social model of disability — People with Disability Australia](#)
- [Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–2031](#)
- [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)
- [Disability, Ageing and Carers — Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)
- [The human rights model of disability — Disability Advocacy Resource Unit](#)





Start the conversation

It's okay to feel unsure about what to say. It's also normal to worry about saying the wrong thing or offending someone. It's not about being perfect — it's about being respectful and open to learning.

Include disability voices

It's important for people with disability to be part of your conversations about disability. You can include the voices of people with disability in your conversations by:

- inviting people with disability to speak, write or lead an activity
- paying people for their time, effort and expertise
- creating spaces that are safe and accessible
- recognising that people can contribute without speaking.

There are also many organisations that represent the interests of people with disability, who you can contact for advice.



People with disability must be at the table — not just as a token voice, but as equitable partners in shaping policies and decisions that affect our lives. Inclusion isn't optional, it's essential for a fair and just society. Nothing about us, without us all.

Megan Spindler-Smith,
Acting CEO, People with Disability Australia

Learn more >

- [Disability Representative Organisations Program](#)
- [Good Practice Guidelines for Engaging with People with Disability](#)
- [The Disability Dialogue](#)

Incorporate themes and topics

You may wish to include a theme as part of your activity or event. This can encourage conversations about disability in your workplace, school or community group.

The United Nations usually announces the official theme for IDPwD in late October or early November. The theme usually focuses on how society can strive for inclusion by removing barriers for people with disability.

Alternatively, you may wish to develop your own theme of disability, diversity and inclusion. Here are some examples.

- **Ableism** — discrimination of people with disability based on the belief they are inferior.
- **Unconscious bias** — forming attitudes about people with disability without even realising it.
- **Being a disability ally** — how to support the rights of people with disability without having disability.
- **Disability rights** — the right to be safe and free from discrimination, regardless of disability.
- **Intersectionality** — how overlapping aspects of a person's identity can lead to more discrimination.
- **Equality vs equity** — the idea that treating everyone the same may not result in fairness.



Learn more >

- [Ableism and disablism — People with Disability Australia](#)
- [Unconscious bias — Monash University](#)
- [How to Be a Good Ally to Disabled People — World Institute on Disability](#)
- [Disability rights — Australian Human Rights Commission](#)
- [Intersectionality — Diversity Council Australia](#)
- [Classroom resources on equality and equity — Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

Language matters

Words are powerful — they can shape how society views and treats people with disability. Using the right language can help people feel included, respected and understood.

Focus on the person, not the disability

People with disability are people first. People who lead meaningful lives. People who have families, work and are part of our community.

Avoid using words such as victim, sufferer, handicapped or not normal. This assumes people with disability are objects of pity and can be deeply offensive. It adds to the stereotype that people with disability are not equal members of our society.

First-person language

We generally use person-first terms, such as 'person with disability' or 'people with disability'. This can help us to recognise the individual before the disability.

However, some members of the disability community prefer identify-first language. For example, 'disabled people' or 'Autistic person'. Some individuals may choose not to identify as having a disability at all.

If you're unsure, ask the person with disability about their language preferences.

Avoid inspirational language

It is common for the media to portray people with disability as brave, inspiring or beating the odds.

While it may seem like a compliment, this can reinforce stereotypes and stigma. It focuses on a person's disability, rather than an individual's personal accomplishments.

In the words of the late disability activist Stella Young, 'using images [of people with disability] as feel-good tools ... based on an assumption that the people in them have terrible lives, and that it takes some extra kind of pluck or courage to live them.'

Learn more >

- [People with Disability Australia Language Guide](#)
- [Disability terminology guide — University of Wollongong](#)
- [Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines — United Nations](#)
- [Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines](#)



Communicating with people with disability

People with disability have diverse ways they like to communicate and be treated.

Some people with disability may process information in different ways. They may use alternative communication methods.

However, this does not mean that all people with disability have communication issues.

Remember to treat people with disability as individuals. Respect their right to choose the communication that suits their preferences and needs.



General principles when communicating with a person with disability include:

- Focus on the person first, not their disability.
- Don't patronise or talk down to people with disability.
- Use respectful and inclusive language.
- Speak directly to the person, not to their carer, support worker, family member or interpreter.
- Be aware of unconscious bias.
- Don't make assumptions about what someone can or can't do. Ask before offering help and respect the person's answer.
- Avoid using labels like 'high functioning' that rank a person's ability
- Respect the individual's privacy. Some people may not want to share details about their disability, and that's okay. Don't ask about their disability unless it's necessary and appropriate.



- Consider an individual's communication needs and always ask what works best for them. For example, some people with disability may:
 - use translators or technology, which means it can take more time for them to respond
 - need quiet or low-sensory spaces
 - prefer written over verbal communication.
- Make sure that written communication is in plain language, which is about using clear, concise and simple words. This benefits everyone, including people with intellectual disability.
- Offer information translated into Auslan and languages other than English.
- Consider providing audio or an immersive reader to support written material.
- Be mindful of accessibility. When you're organising a meeting, event or catch-up, think about:
 - physical access, such as ramps and accessible bathrooms
 - visual or auditory needs, such as captions and Auslan interpreters
 - clear communication, such as Easy Read materials that are informed by best practice or tested with people with intellectual disability
 - screen reader compatible PDFs and audio described versions
 - sensory-friendly spaces
 - allowing enough time and flexibility for people with disability to take part meaningfully.
- Be open to feedback. If someone corrects your language or behaviour, take it on board.



People with disability want to take on roles and show what we can achieve. We have the right to be leaders in our organisations and our community. It is important for people with disabilities to have full participation in their lives.

Claire Mitchell,
Director, Down Syndrome Australia

Learn more >

- [Communication with people with disabilities — Australian Federation of Disability Organisations](#)
- [Disability communication and etiquette — Australian National University](#)
- [Hosting accessible and inclusive in-person meetings/events — Australian Human Rights Commission](#)
- [Hosting accessible and inclusive online meetings/events — Australian Human Rights Commission](#)



Next steps

We know that learning to be more inclusive is a journey and this Community Conversation Guide is just the beginning.

Once you start to have conversations about disability, you may feel more confident talking about disability in an inclusive and respectful way. Take your journey further by visiting the [IDPwD website](#) to:

- learn more about how to get involved in IDPwD, including checking out our [event information kits](#) for ideas on planning your own event
- watch and read stories about people with disability's lived experience.

You can also follow us on:

- **Facebook** [@idpwd](#)
- **Instagram** [@idpwd_au](#)



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