

- 5 Great Ways -



You Can Have a Conversation with a Person with a Developmental Disability

It is important for many reasons to include people with developmental disabilities in all areas of life in our community. One of the first things you can do is to simply have a conversation and get to know the people around you who have different abilities.

1) Introductions are important

When meeting a person with a disability, it is important to share your name, ask them theirs and offer to shake hands. Most people with disabilities prefer to be addressed directly, and may be insulted if you talk about them like they are not in the room. Treat them like their real age and speak to them the same way you would speak to their same-age peers. Treat adults as adults; do not call them kids. And remember, most people with disabilities have typical vocabularies, just speak normally.

2) Treat them the same way you would treat any other friend or acquaintance.

People with disabilities are ordinary people with hobbies, interests, opinions, and relationships. You do not need to treat them differently than anyone else. They love a good joke, tease, or challenge just like you do. Just be yourself and give them time to express themselves. Ask them their thoughts and allow them to answer at their own pace. Do not put words in their mouths. When you are talking with a person who has difficulty speaking, be patient and wait for the person to finish. If the conversation is struggling or they seem uninterested, find a topic they feel passionate about and let them tell you all about it.

3) Expect to get a lot of questions.

People with disabilities are very curious about what you may be doing and also just about you, but it is okay to draw boundaries too. Do not allow them to get away with bad behavior—just as you would not allow someone without a disability to behave badly. If the questions get too invasive, it's okay to say, "I'm not comfortable answering that." Otherwise, have fun and enjoy their candor but also be prepared for their bluntness. Sometimes people with developmental disabilities can be very honest.

4) If they don't want to talk, don't pressure them.

They may feel uncomfortable or scared simply communicating with new people. Respect their wishes. Depending on the disability, the person you are talking with could get frustrated, impatient, distracted, or even angry. Do not take these things personally. People with disabilities are still people who experience a full range of emotions. Just like everyone else, they know when you are tense and it stresses them. Just relax and enjoy your conversation.

5) Some people with disabilities have different body language

Remember that a person has no control over their disability. It is not uncommon for a person with autism to fidget and appear "zoned out" as they listen closely to someone speaking. Do not assume that someone is not listening just because of their body language.