

DISABLED YOUTH OVERVIEW

Thirty-five million Americans—12% of the population—have physical, mental, or learning disabilities.

There is no good word to describe those who, by birth, development, or accident, are different from their peers. Disadvantages they experience may be from physical, intellectual, emotional limitations, and/or from the social response to their uniqueness.

Major types of disabilities include:

- * Auditory Impairments. Ranging from the 20 million, or 1 out of 10, with some hearing loss to the 200,000 who cannot hear human speech.
- * Autism. A lifelong developmental, non-communicative disability.
- * Epilepsy. Seizures symptomatic of a central nervous system disorder.
- * Mental Illness. Including organic, psychotic, neurotic and other psychological disorders.
- * Mental Retardation. Below average intellectual functioning originating in the developmental period and hindering social adaptation.
- * Physical Disabilities. Impairment of physical functions including:
 - o Limb Paralysis. Mono-, Di-, Para-, Hemi-, Tri-, and Quadriplegia.
 - o Muscular Dystrophy. Noncontagious, progressive wasting of the muscles.
 - o Hemophilia. Hereditary deficiency in the blood-clotting mechanism.
 - o Arthritis. Inflammation of the joints, including Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis.
 - o Multiple Sclerosis. Organic disease of the central nervous system.
 - o Cerebral Palsy. Nonprogressive brain disorder; usually brain damage.
 - o Visual Impairments. 11.4 Million Americans are visually impaired; 1.7 million are legally blind.

The National Focus on Concerns and Rights of the People with Disabilities works to promote the needs of the disabled. Over the past twenty years, the organization has actively served disabled persons. The following highlight their activities:

- * 1974. Coordinated a forum of the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped and the National Recreation & Parks Association.
- * 1976. Organized the National Hearing on Recreation for Handicapped Persons.
- * 1977. Established the White House Conference on Handicapped Individuals. The 700 delegates developed 3500 suggestions and three major goals:

- o To provide national assessment of problems and potentials.
 - o To generate national awareness.
 - o To make recommendations to President and Congress, which...would enable individuals with handicaps to live their lives independently, with dignity and with full participation in community to the greatest extent possible.
- * 1981. Helped to define the year as the International Year of Disabled Persons.

BARRIERS

The main barrier disabled youth face are attitudinal problems. People are generally afraid or uneasy when confronted with a disabled person. Not knowing what to say, do or how to act, many disabled youth are "missed." As youth leaders become educated, gain experience working with disabled persons, and are encouraged to serve disabled persons, fear can be displaced by a greater compassion. One should not bear an attitude of looking "down" on disabled persons, but should be humbled by the opportunity to serve a fellow human being who is disabled.

Architectural or physical barriers also exist for disabled persons. Our culture glorifies and is created for physically able and beautiful people. It is essential to be sensitive to the obstacles a disabled person faces and needs to overcome. The arranging of rides to programs and events, providing "signers," guides, or other special assistance can open doors for disabled people. These barriers, though tremendous, decrease in an atmosphere of love and acceptance.

The number of disabled kids in America will continue to rise as medical advances prolong the lives of persons with birth defects. Now, more than ever, schools "mainstream" disabled students into the general population. Our contact with these kids should be increasing as well. Youth workers should also consider siblings and families of disabled young people; they carry a tremendous weight in overcoming the barriers, disadvantages, and hardships the disabled face.

People who are disabled, as a group, suffer from the highest rates of unemployment and poverty in America. Discrimination against the disabled regularly emerges in employment, housing, communication, public accommodations and transportation.

TEN DOS AND DON'TS WHEN YOU MEET A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

* Offer assistance as you would to anyone else—for example, to push a wheelchair or to guide a person who is blind. The person will indicate whether or not help is needed; "no, thank you" must be respected. Most people who are disabled do not hesitate to ask for needed help and are specific as to how it should be given; for example, a person who is blind usually prefers to take your arm rather than to have you grab his or hers.

* Noticing an obvious disability is not rude; however, asking personal questions about it is inappropriate.

* Always talk directly to a person who is disabled rather than to the person who may be accompanying him or her. Never talk about that person who is disabled to the person he or she is with. This includes an interpreter for a person who is deaf.

* Do not be concerned if you use the words "walking" or "running" when talking to a person who uses a wheelchair or "do you see?" when talking to a person who is blind. People with disabilities use these words themselves and think nothing of it.

* Do not avoid using words like blind or deaf when associating with people with these disabilities. These people are aware of their disabilities do not need to be shielded from the facts.

* When talking with a person who uses a wheelchair for any length of time, it is better to sit down in order to maintain the same eye level. It is very tiring for a person to look up for a long time.

* Be sensitive to architectural barriers in your facility. Be aware of federal and state laws that may apply to eliminate architectural barriers in your establishment. Everyone must be concerned about this very real problem.

* Remember that if a person does not turn around in response to a call, it may be that he or she is deaf. A light tap on the shoulder to get a person's attention makes sense.

* Never gesture about a person who is blind to someone else who is present. This is inevitably picked up; the person who is blind feels that you are "talking behind his or her back."

* Lip reading by persons who are deaf can be aided by being sure that the light is on your face and not behind you, and by taking all obstructions such as pipes, cigarettes or gum out of your mouth, keeping the lips flexible and speaking slowly. Additional communication could include body language, pantomime, gestures of all kinds, and written communication if necessary.

Adapted from "Serving Disabled People" by Ruth Velleman.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What role should the youth leader play in service to disabled youth?
2. At what point should disabled youth be mainstreamed into or separated from an activity with fully able young people?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Inside every disabled youth there is a whole person who would like to love and be loved.
2. Youth leaders need to encourage others to get to know a disabled person and see for themselves that the only difference between them is the disability.
3. Those working with youth need to help young people understand that 'but by the grace of God' it could be them with the disability. Encourage kids to think about how would they like to be treated if they were disabled.

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