



## ***Characteristics of People with Developmental Disabilities***

### Fact Sheet

- 1) There are 5 types of developmental disabilities:
  - 1 - Autism
  - 2 - Cerebral Palsy
  - 3 - Epilepsy
  - 4 - Neurological Impairments
  - 5 - Mental Retardation
  
- 2) In order to be diagnosed with a developmental disability, it must be likely to continue indefinitely, it must be attributable to a mental or physical impairment or a combination of both, and it must result in substantial functional limitations in three or more of the following areas of their lives:
  - 1 - self care
  - 2 - receptive and expressive language
  - 3 - learning
  - 4 - mobility
  - 5 - self direction
  - 6 - capacity for independent living
  - 7 - economic self sufficiency
  
- 3) All people with developmental disabilities have significant abilities as well as disabilities and they should be treated as able people.
  
- 4) It is important to assess a person's functional skills and try to improve the skills that they need in order to live a more independent life.



COMMUNICATION WITH PERSONS WHO HAVE  
INTELLECTUAL / DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES  
**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

**DO**

Look directly at the person so that they know you are speaking to and listening to them.

Be aware that it is possible that this person has not had appropriate sex education or social skills training.

Allow time to get acquainted, if possible. Use your natural manner to convey support, warmth, safety and trust.

Use short, simple, direct and concrete sentences and questions (but avoid patronization). Under pressure the person may regress to a lower level of understanding.

Ask the person to repeat words or gestures if you do not understand. Let the person finish what he is saying. If possible, do not supply the ending.

If necessary, use gestures or pictures that may help to express an idea or help the person to understand spoken words or gestures.

Do not confuse a slow response with inability to think (i.e. many people who have cerebral palsy do not have any intellectual limitations).

Observe for facial and non-verbal cues that the person may not understand a request or question. Restate it using different words (speaking louder does not help if the person is not understanding the meaning of your words), and be sure you are only asking about one thing at a time in each question.

Ask "open ended" questions or "fill in the blank" questions before moving on to multiple choice questions.

Present limited choices.

Use examples to explain more complex or specific questions, if necessary.

Gently guide the person back to the question or topic if they become tangential.

Go Slow! Check for understanding by asking "What is one thing you heard me say?" or "What is one thing you can remember that we talked about." Try re-asking the question in a different way later on in your discussion.

Encourage the person to ask questions.

Be aware of something called "the echo effect". The person may repeat the last thing they heard. Re-ask your question reversing the choices. For example, if you are speaking with a female you would ask, "are you a woman or a man?"

Avoid asking "why" questions. Instead ask questions such as "who told you to do this?" or "Have you ever done this before?" or "Who was the person you did that with?"

When using pictures, have the person progressively show you what they know. Ask, "Can you point to the man's hand. Where is his hand? What is he doing?" before moving to more complex, emotionally laden images.

Be aware that the person may have a history of past abuse which they may not be able to speak about.

Try to speak with the person in a quiet location with minimal interruptions/busy-ness.

Be aware that some people with disabilities have more pronounced responses to people they perceive as authority figures; especially police, physicians and medical people (wanting to please is sometimes a common personality characteristic).

Be yourself and be respectful.

### **DON'T**

Do not pretend to understand what a person is saying. This will only frustrate you and the person. If you are unsure of what someone says, ask for clarification.

Don't guide the person towards the answer.

Don't make assumptions that the person has understood you or previously understood what they were told. Always double and triple-check.

## TIPS ON WORKING WITH SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS WITH IDD

- 1) If you are investigating sexual abuse, remember that individuals with disabilities may not have been allowed to participate in sex education. They may be able to tell their story accurately, but may use street or idiosyncratic names for their body parts. This does not mean that the individual is not competent; all it means is that they are uneducated.
- 2) Avoid using the words 'retardation' or 'retarded' in front of the victims. If you need to refer to a victim's impairment and the victim is nearby, say 'person with a disability'.
- 3) Do not assume that victims are incapable of understanding or communicating with you. Most people who have an intellectual disability live independently or semi-independently in the community, so a fairly normal conversation is possible.
- 4) Create a safe atmosphere, limit distractions and establish a trusting rapport with victims before interviewing them.
- 5) Be mindful of the issue of a victim's competency to give or withhold consent to medical treatment and forensic exams, notification of next of kin and other services, but do not assume victims are incompetent.
- 6) Explain written information to victims and offer to help them fill out paperwork.
- 7) Ask victims if there is anyone they would like you to call to be with them during your interview. But, remember family members, service providers and others can have a vested interest in the interview. They could be the offenders or trying to protect the offenders.
- 8) Be in control of the interview and the environment. Many people with disabilities are enmeshed in a power-based relationship with their abusers and victimizers. If you have requested help in an interview from someone who knows the individual, watch your assistant's body language and approach. If you feel that they are at all intimidating or even vaguely threatening, ask them to leave and seek an assistant that is familiar with people with disabilities but who has no contact with the individual.
- 9) Allow adequate time for your interview, do not appear rushed or frustrated during the interview and take a break every 15 minutes.
- 10) Treat adult victims as adults, not children. Be aware that the concept of Mental Age is dated and not very helpful. A thirty-five year old woman is a thirty-five year old woman and should be spoken to with the same respect as a non-disabled peer.

- 11) Speak directly and slowly to victims, keeping your sentences short and words simple. Listen to how victims talk and match your speech to their vocabulary, tempo and sentence structure. If someone who knows the individual well is assisting with the interview, ask a question to the individual first and if necessary, have the assistant try the question in a different way. Be sure that the assistant is aware of avoiding inappropriate questions.
- 12) Separate complex information into smaller parts and use gestures and other visual props to get your meaning across. Do not overload victims with too much information.
- 13) Recognize that victims may be eager to please or be easily influenced by you. They may say what they think you want to hear, so be careful not to ask leading questions.
- 14) Use open-ended questions or statements that cannot be answered with a 'yes' or 'no', such as 'Tell me what happened'. Let victims lead the interview as they disclose information.
- 15) Help victims understand your questions by giving them points of reference. For example, ask 'What color was the man's hair?' rather than 'What did the man look like?' and 'Did the fight start before or after lunch?' instead of 'When did the fight start?'
- 16) Wait patiently at least 30 seconds for victims to respond to an instruction or question. If victims do not respond or reply inappropriately, calmly repeat yourself, using different words. Also, have victims state in their words what they understood you to say.
- 17) Repeat the last phrase of victims' responses in question form to help them stay focused during your interview and to transition victims through a sequence of events. For example, ask 'He hit you?', 'You fell down?' and 'You tried to run?'
- 18) Keep questions that require victims to do much reasoning or that can confuse victims to a minimum. Examples of types of questions to avoid include the following: 'Why do you think she did this to you?', 'Do you have any idea what was going on?' or 'What made you do that?'
- 19) Realize that you are not alone when you respond to crime victims with disabilities.