

# **How to Communicate with Children with Disabilities?**



**Manual for Schoolchildren**

**Yerevan**

**2015**



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**Editor Iren Sargsyan**

Head of Project Implementation, Armenian representative office of “Save the Children” organization

**Designer Nune Sargsyan**

IT Coordinator, Armenian representative office of “Save the Children” organization

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This manual is designed for school-age children and adolescents to introduce communication peculiarities of children with disabilities.

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This manual has been developed by “Save the Children” in the framework of “Initiative for Child’s Health and Education - 2” project. It is designed for school-age children and adolescents to introduce peculiarities of communication with disabled children.

The manual includes peculiarities of communication with people with disabilities and proper terminology of disability. Moreover, it introduces the concept of tolerance, and the definition and basic principles of inclusive education.

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## INTRODUCTION

You should never assume that a person with a disability requires special treatment all the time. You should treat them in a manner you are used to with others.

More than 1 billion people in the world live with some form of disability, and there are 199.721 people with disabilities counted in the Republic of Armenia, including a number of 8020 children with disabilities<sup>1</sup>.

It is an accepted fact that people with disabilities are poorer compared to others, and are less involved in health care, education and economic sectors, due to the low accessibility for them. For example, many educational institutions, workplaces and transportation means lack proper access and exit facilities for people with disabilities. In addition, many people not only show a negative attitude towards people and children with disabilities, but sometimes have a wrong idea about the essence of disability, as well. Finally, many important decisions are made on behalf of people with disabilities, without their due participation and involvement in the decision-making processes.

You may meet children and young people with mobility, hearing, visual or speech impairments in kindergarten, at home, at school or on the street. You may also meet children who have learning disabilities and special behaviour. Some types of non-contagious diseases may be intimidating by their external features, such as asthma, epilepsy or mobility impairments.

Have you ever met children or young people with similar difficulties in your everyday environment? If you look carefully, you will notice

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<sup>1</sup> The RA Agency of Medical and Social Expertise, <http://hhbsp.am/>

that they rarely go out and generally prefer staying at home. They go to school quite rarely, and when they do go, they are unable to attend all classes due to the lack of school facilities adapted to their needs. Thus, they are forced to fall behind their peers.

You have to realize that those children and young people share equal rights with others, and they should be enabled to receive education at school, continue learning in other educational institutions, acquire a profession and find a job.



## WHAT IS TOLERANCE?

All people are unique and have different preferences, abilities and dreams. We all differ from each other.

Being tolerant means accepting and appreciating those differences, and understanding that by helping and respecting each other we will live a more peaceful and happier life in our planet. Being tolerant towards each other, means to understand and remember that we are in many ways similar to each other, too. Therefore, it turns out that we are all connected to each other and by respecting each other's characteristic features, we further reinforce and strengthen our relationship.

Thus, being tolerant has the following meanings:

- Respect, accept and understand personal peculiarities of other people
- Realize that all people are equal
- Accept others the way they are
- Reject all kinds of violence (for example, pushing, beating, hitting, insulting, bullying each other, etc.)

Do not exercise extra effort to help a child with a disability trying to do everything instead of them. Simply try to create conditions under which a person is able to perform independently the required task.

**If you notice that a child with a disability needs your help, you should ask them the best method they want you to provide such assistance.**

Let us think about our differences. For example, some people are more skilled in painting, singing or creating, while others do not

master such skills. Some people are dark-haired, while others are blond and so on.

There are children who have poor eyesight and wear glasses, while others do not have to. However, you may meet children who have more serious visual impairments, that is to say, a certain degree of disability. Visual impairment may be considered a feature that can differentiate people.

Very often, we may meet people with mobility impairments in our everyday environment; for those people it is difficult or completely impossible to walk and they need some devices, such as a wheelchair or a walking stick to move from place to place. There are people with mental or psychological disorders, and we should be careful and respectful towards them. We must respect the rights of people with any kind of disability and cherish their best sides.

We all, including people with disabilities, want and have the right to live a full life, to get an education, to work, to participate in cultural and political life, to use all kinds of services, and to ensure this, we need to be tolerant towards each other. It is also important that there are appropriate conditions to facilitate the lives of people with certain disabilities. For example, if schools were equipped with flat entrances or ramps, elevators, convenient doors and restrooms, and the children were provided with comfortable wheelchairs, it would be easier for them to access and exit the school building, and attend classes.

## **WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?**

Inclusive education unites all schoolchildren, no matter what physical or mental challenges they are faced with. It helps them better know each other, learn from each other and participate in cultural life. As already mentioned, schoolchildren differ from each other and have various needs. These differences are considered in inclusive education; an attempt is made to create an environment where everyone is equal and work together, learn from each other and respect one another.

So what does it mean to include children into the educational process? It means to enable all children to attend school and continue their education in vocational institutions or universities. All people have the right for education. The best practice examples of inclusive education show that young people, including those with disabilities or special needs, learn better and more efficiently when they work together, assist each other and exchange their knowledge. Keep in mind that in an environment of mutual respect and understanding, it is possible to find a solution even in the most challenging situations.

## HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES?

Due to the lack of knowledge on the essence of disability, we do not know how to talk to people with disabilities. This is natural, but it is never too late to learn. As in all other cases, above all, we should respect each other, be polite and considerate towards one



another. When you want to say something or ask a question to a disabled child or young person, you should speak directly to them rather than their facilitator or caregiver.

Even if a child or a young person has a speech or hearing impairment, you should give them an opportunity to decide on the manner to speak or respond to you that suits them best. It is possible that a disabled person prefers their parent, sister, brother or relative help them understand our message, and then try to reply themselves or again ask someone for help.

**Most importantly, you should bear in mind, that a child with a disability is first and foremost a HUMAN BEING like you, and you should treat them in a way you would like to be treated yourself.**

**When talking to a child or young person with a disability, please contact him directly rather than their facilitator or guide, or their sign language interpreter.**

## WHAT WORDS COULD BE USED TO SPEAK TO OR WRITE ABOUT CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES?

<u>Acceptable words and expressions</u>	<u>Unacceptable words and expressions</u>
A person with a disability/ an impairment	Sick, lame, incomplete, deformed, abnormal
Non-disabled person, a person with no disability	Normal, healthy (as opposed to the disabled)
Wheelchair user, a person with spinal cord injury, a mobility-impaired person	A wheelchair confined, a person with a wheelchair
A child with cerebral palsy (or something similar)	A child who suffers from cerebral palsy
Affected by/ disabled as a result of infantile paralysis or another cause	A child who suffers from infantile paralysis or of its consequences/ a victim of infantile paralysis
A person with a mental disorder (only for adults)	A mentally deficient person
A child with developmental delay, mentally retarded children, children with mental impairments, people/ children with special educational needs	“Stalled”, backward, moron
A person/ child with Down syndrome	Down, mongoloid, “downie”

A person/ child with Epilepsy	Epileptic, sleepwalker
A person/ child with inborn disability	Birth defect, misery, not normal
A person/ child with mental health problems	Crazy, insane
Blind, a visually impaired person/ child, a person/ child with poor eyesight	Totally blind
A person/ child with hearing impairment, a deaf person/ child, person/ child with impaired hearing	Deaf mute

## CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

Visual impairment has varying degrees. A child can be completely or partially deprived of an eyesight. People with a complete loss of an eyesight comprise about 10%, while others have residual vision and are able to distinguish between light and darkness, and sometimes the colours and contours of objects. This should be clarified during and interaction with a person or a child with a visual impairment (you should never assume that if they have a visual difficulty, they see nothing).

### **Tips on proper communication with children with visual impairments**

- Speak directly to the visually impaired child, rather than their guide or facilitator.
- In a group chat, mention the name of the person you address to, so as a visually impaired person understands who is the addressee.
- Be more careful when accompanying or guiding a visually impaired child. Avoid statements such as “here”, “this way”, and the like. Instead, use words such as “right”, “left” or “straight”, in a manner that they relate directly to the visually impaired person.
- When accompanying a visually impaired person, keep walking along them, keeping a slight distance ahead. Do not grasp their hand, but allow them to hold yours if they need help. Keep walking a half step ahead of them, in order to avoid pushing a visually impaired child and causing a dangerous situation.
- Open and close the doors fully, because if you leave the door ajar, a visually impaired person may be unaware of it and hurt himself at the access or exit.

- When you help a visually impaired child to take a seat, ensure that they touch the back of the seat to be able to sit up independently.
- Feel free to use words such as “see”, “look” and the like, when communicating with visually impaired children. They also use these words in their everyday life, when talking to people with visual disabilities, as well.
- It is challengeable for visually impaired children to read small letters on the blackboard or in the book. Read aloud the text they are not able to read themselves. Be careful not to break their glasses.

**Information provided in Braille fonts for visually impaired people allows them to use various services independently and to orient themselves in unfamiliar environments.**



## CHILDREN WITH IMPAIRED HEARING

There are several types and degrees of hearing impairment; therefore, there are different ways of speaking to children with impaired hearing. If you do not know how to talk to them, it would be more appropriate and precise to ask.

### **Tips on proper communication with children with hearing impairments**

- When talking to a child with a hearing impairment, you should sit with your face towards the light. Look straight into their eyes and speak clearly to identify whether your interlocutor is able to read your lips. Do not close your mouth with your hands or any other object, and avoid chewing.
- If a child does not understand what you say, because they do not hear this or that word, try to convey your message in another way.
- If needed, you can simply write down what you want to say.
- You do not have to speak very loudly. Be sure to ask whether your interlocutor hears you and adjust your voice, accordingly.
- When a child has a hearing impairment, although possible, it does not necessarily mean they have a speech impairment, as well. You had better clarify it at the beginning of your conversation.
- When you change the topic of conversation, you should warn them about it. You may use phrases such as “Well, now we need to discuss ...” or “Let us now talk about ...” and the like.
- Talk with simple, short sentences and slowly, especially if they try to read your lips. Be sure not to overemphasize your lip movements and ever keep your hand at your mouth. You should avoid chewing a gum while talking, because it creates additional difficulty to lip-reading. You should also keep in mind

that not all children with impaired hearing are able to read lips. However, if the person has that skill, you should remember that they understand only three words out of ten. Your gestures and facial expression could also help them understand what you say.

## CHILDREN WITH IMPAIRED MOBILITY

If you plan a long conversation with a person using a wheelchair, you should take a chair, too, or kneel down to ensure eye contact with the disabled person.

Respect personal space. Avoid leaning on their wheelchair, walker or walking stick.

### **Tips on proper communication with children with mobility impairments**

- If you see that it is difficult for a child to go up or down the stairs, you may suggest that they lean on you or help them carry their bag.
- Children who drop off from some games because they cannot walk or have mobility impairments, you should offer a game that all children are capable of participating in.
- If your class or schoolmates go to the theatre, which is not furnished with access ramps for children with wheelchairs, ask your friends to help them enter the building. Learn the right ways of helping people with wheelchairs in advance; otherwise, you may hurt them.
- When you speak to a person using a wheelchair, it would be better if you also take a seat, so as they do not have to look up when speaking to you.
- Address directly the child, not their guide.



- Push the wheelchair only if the disabled person asks you to do so.
- When helping a child with a wheelchair to move up or down, you should listen carefully to their instructions. Never lean or hang on a wheelchair, because it is the same as leaning or hanging on its owner.

## CHILDREN WITH IMPAIRED SPEECH

Some children with speech impairments may face difficulties in understanding the speech of others, as well. However, remember that not everyone has that issue, and do not make quick assumptions.

### **Tips on proper communication with children with speech impairments**

- Be diligent!
- Talk in a silent environment, if possible.
- Do not urge the speaker; allow them formulate and express their thoughts. Be prepared! The conversation may take long.
- Never make quick assumptions, that a child with speech impairments cannot hear and understand you.
- Do not interrupt or correct a child who has a speech impairment. Start speaking only when you are sure they have finished their speech.
- Try to understand children who stutter or speak unclearly. If you do not understand what they are saying, ask them to repeat it; never pretend you understood if you did not.
- Do not hesitate to ask them repeat what they said, because they know that their words are difficult to understand.
- If a child uses an electronic assistive device for speaking, stand in front of them before you start speaking. Remember, it is highly important for them to see you during the conversation.
- If there is no way you can grasp what they say, simply accept it and ask whether it is very important for that moment or not.

## CHILDREN WITH HYPERKINETIC DISORDER

Hyperkinetic disorder manifests in involuntarily movements of a body or extremities (that means, independent of human will), which are usually characteristic of people with cerebral palsy (spastic infantile paralysis).

### **Tips on proper communication with children with hyperkinetic disorder**

- When you meet a child or an adult with a hyperkinetic disorder, you should never gaze at them openly.
- During the conversation, do not pay attention to the involuntary movements of your interlocutor.
- If you want to help a person with a hyperkinetic disorder, try to do it without irritating them and without attracting the attention of other children.
- Do not hesitate to oppose a child with a hyperkinetic disorder with a fear of causing anxiety; expressions such as “just don’t worry” or “well...” are a waste of time and may make the child even more nervous. You should keep calm and continue expressing your thoughts, even if you notice that your interlocutor is nervous.
- In the case of hyperkinetic disorder, people may also have speech impairments. In this event, use the tips provided in the section on “Children with Speech Impairments”.

## CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

These tips will help you communicate more efficiently with people with disabilities or various impairments.

It is important to keep in mind that people appreciate sincerity, and if you are concerned or worried about anything, you should simply clarify your concerns directly with the disabled person. Moreover, remember, that people are different, regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, and disability type. The fact that a person is good or bad, more sociable or more withdrawn does not necessarily mean it depends on their disability.

It is much more important to decide for yourself how much you are willing to accept the person as they are, and how much you are willing to communicate as equals.

Creation of a friendly atmosphere and an accessible environment depends largely on you, and very often, it does not require much effort. Not that anyone is guaranteed against becoming disabled or a parent of a child with impairments. By means of creating an accessible environment, we provide equal opportunities for all, because the environment comfortable for people with disabilities suits everyone.

Finally, our attitude and respect towards various groups of people talks much about our personality and values, and our internal culture.

Provision of appropriate conditions and dignified treatment to people with disabilities enables them achieving success in their field of employment and using their creative potential efficiently.

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**“Save the Children”** is the world’s leading organization for protection of child’s rights. It comprises 29 national organizations in around 120 countries.

**Our Mission** is to achieve immediate and lasting change in children’s lives.

Save the Children established its presence in Armenia in 1993.

Since then Save the Children has delivered a number of relief and development programs to the most vulnerable children and their families. The child’s protection, vital health, education and social initiatives have helped improve basic conditions of the poorest populations through community-based projects and capacity building of local partners and institutions.



**“Save the Children” Armenia Country Office**

27, Azatutyan ave., 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Yerevan 0014, Armenia

Tel.: (+37410) 201014, 201025, 201229

Web-site: <http://armenia.savethechildren.net>