

# Ableism and Violence

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## A Plain Language Guide



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This booklet is a project of the Uniting for Change Coalition. Members work toward disability justice and ending violence. We bring together survivors with disabilities, allies and stakeholders to end violence. We promote the inclusion of people of color as leaders. We want disability and Deaf justice to be part of the broader anti-violence movements. We are supported by the Vera Institute of Justice's Center on Victimization and Safety.



# INTRODUCTION

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This booklet is about ableism and violence. It is written in plain language. We wrote it for people with disabilities to understand ableism. Ableism may be a new word to many people. We often hear people use academic words to describe ableism. It is important for people with disabilities to be able to explain ableism.

For too long, society has had negative ideas about people with disabilities. These beliefs breed harmful attitudes. They are used to justify violence. This booklet describes how ableism plays a role in violence against people with disabilities. We must understand the connection between ableism and violence. This opens the door towards achieving disability justice.

We hope advocacy groups will read and discuss this booklet. Let us know what you think. If you are an ally, please share this information with people with and without disabilities. We want to lift up the voices of people with disabilities.

## Note

All words in **bold** are defined in a list of words at the end of this document.

# TO START

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People with disabilities are people.

Everyone has rights.

Everyone has the right to be safe.

Everyone has the right to control their own lives. This is called **self-determination**.

Everyone has human rights like:

- choosing where to live
- going to school and choosing where to go to school
- working and choosing what work to do
- marrying and having children
- voting

Human rights are what everyone needs to be free.



People with disabilities have all these rights. No one should take our rights away. People need to respect our rights and choices.

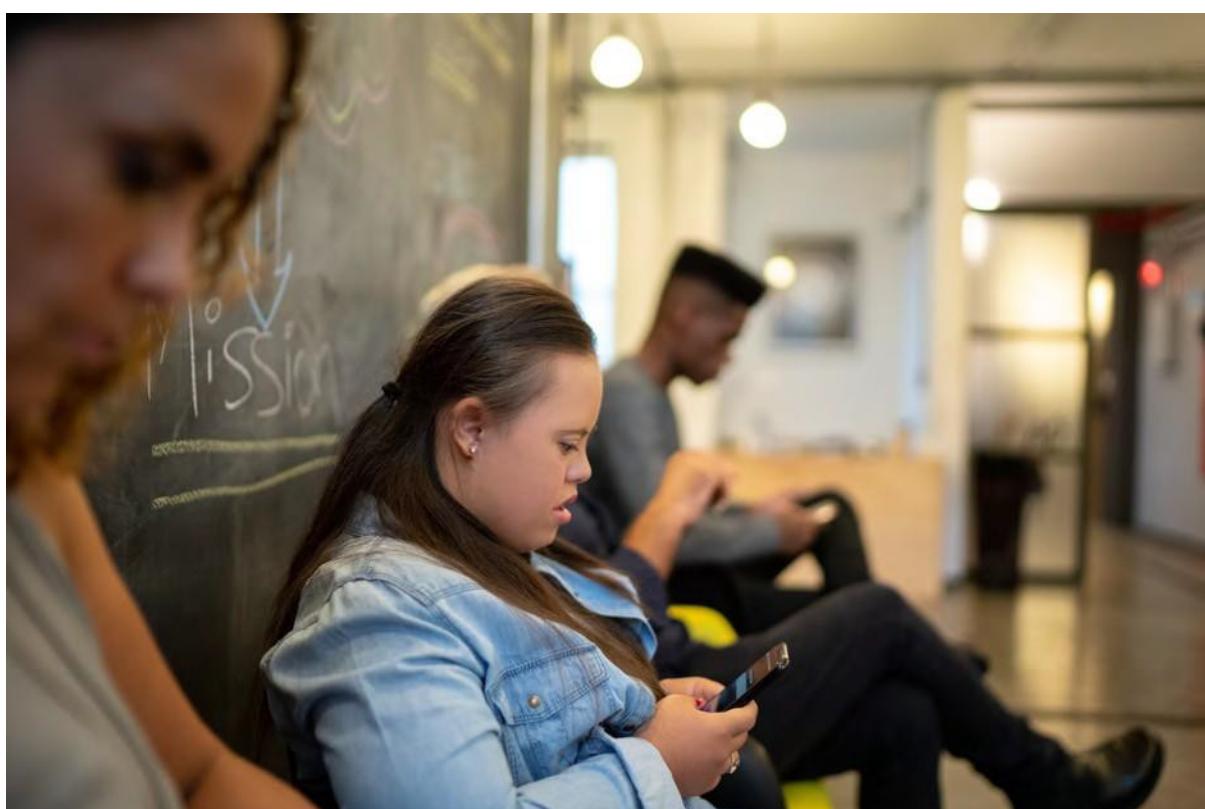
People do not always respect our rights and choices. Our **society** is set up to make it hard for people with disabilities to use their rights. This is called **ableism**.

We will talk more about ableism in the “what is ableism” section.

Ableism leads to violence against people with disabilities.

We need to talk about violence and support people who have been hurt or **abused**.

It is better for society to talk about violence than to pretend like it does not happen



# WHAT IS DISABILITY?

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Disability is just another way for someone's mind and/or body to be.

A disability can affect how a person:

- sees
- hears thinks learns feels moves
- communicates
- interacts with other people

Some people are born with a disability. Some people become disabled later.

Being sick or getting hurt can cause disability. Some people have their disabilities all their lives.

Example: Sara has Cerebral Palsy (CP). Sara has CP because of something that happened when she was being born. CP affects Sara's brain and muscles. Sara will always have CP.

Some people just have disabilities for a short time.

Example: Tony fell off his bike and broke his leg. Tony will have to use a wheelchair until his leg is better. This is a disability that Tony will only have for a few months. This kind of disability is called a **temporary disability**.

Some people prefer to say “disabled people” or “disabled person.” Other people prefer to say “people with disabilities”

or “person with a disability.” We use both terms in this document.

There are a lot of kinds of disabilities. Some common examples are:

- being blind
- having a hard time walking or moving parts of your body
- **intellectual disability**
- mental health disabilities like depression, anxiety, or bipolar
- illnesses that last a long time, like asthma or diabetes

You can't always tell that someone is disabled by looking at them.

People with disabilities get to choose how we talk about our disabilities. We choose what words we use and how much to tell other people.

Disability is part of who we are.

All kinds of people can have disabilities.

Different societies around the world think about disability in different ways. The places where you grow up can affect what you think about disability.

If we live long enough, most people will have a disability at some point in our lives.

Disabilities affect our daily lives. We might need support. Here are some examples of supports:

- **equipment** like a wheelchair, hearing aid or speech device
- help from other people
- technology
- changing buildings so we can use them

Disabled people have more problems if we don't have enough support.

Our lives are easier if we have good support.



The world is not built for disabled people. The world we live in is built for people who do not have disabilities. We assume that everyone can see, walk, and hear.

Everyone uses **accommodations**. But we might not think about them as accommodations, because they meet most people's needs.

- We put up streetlights, because sighted people cannot see in the dark.

- We have shoe stores, because people who walk need shoes to keep their feet safe.
- We put speakers in cars, so that the radio will be loud enough.

But if we lived in a world where most people were blind, we would not need streetlights.

If more people used wheelchairs, we would have more stores for wheelchairs than shoes.



If most people were Deaf, we might not use radios at all.

Our world is built for a certain set of abilities that most people share. But it does not have to be. The world is built this way because of ableism.

# WHAT IS ABLEISM?

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Ableism is **discrimination** against people with disabilities.

Ableism is like sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination.

Ableism means that people with disabilities as a group are treated unfairly because of our disabilities.



Just like sexism means that women as a group are treated unfairly because they are women.

Ableism is wrong. No one should discriminate against disabled people or anyone else.

Often people with disabilities are left out. We are left out because the world is not built with us in mind. This is ableism.

A lot of buildings are built so wheelchair users can't get in.

Newspapers are printed too small for people with low vision to read.

When people make videos without captions, Deaf people cannot understand them.

It is so common for us to be left out that you might not even notice it is happening.



People without disabilities might think badly about people with disabilities. They might treat us unfairly because of our disabilities. This is ableism.

- A boss might not hire someone for a job because of a disability.
- Schools might not teach disabled students. Schools might keep disabled students away from other students.

- Some people make fun of people with disabilities or call us names.
- People are more likely to hurt or abuse people with disabilities. Some people think our disabilities make it okay to hurt us.

If someone hurts us, people might not do anything about it.

People might think we cannot make our own choices.

They might treat us like kids even when we are adults.

They might try to control our lives.



Blind workers in Dearborn, Michigan, picket a Goodwill Industries thrift store, protesting the organization's use of subminimum wages  
(Jim West / Alamy Stock Photo)

Ableism is not just about how one person treats another person being polite to people with disabilities will not fix ableism.

Ableism affects decisions people make about our lives. These decisions add up. Sometimes they turn into laws or programs that treat disabled people unfairly, like institutions and sheltered workshops.

Ableism is built into our society. Disabled people don't have the same chances in life. They might be kept apart from other people.

Ableism can make disabled people feel bad about ourselves. This is called **internalized ableism**.

Example: People might start calling themselves the names other people call them.

Ableism can make us think we deserve to be treated badly.

Example: A boss decides not to hire someone because of their disability.

That person might think, "I did not get the job because I am not good enough." They might decide there is no point to trying to have a job.

People with disabilities can also discriminate against each other.

Example: Aaron is trying to explain why disabled people should not have to live in institutions.

He says, “Just because I need help with some things does not mean I am crazy. I don’t need to be locked up.”

But people with mental health disabilities should not be locked up either. Aaron is saying it is okay to keep people in institutions if they have different disabilities than him.



# ABLEISM, VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

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## What is Abuse?

Abuse is when someone has power over someone else and hurts that person. Abuse happens in many ways. Someone could abuse someone else by:

- saying mean things to try to make them feel bad about themselves
- hitting, kicking, or hurting them
- touching them in sexual ways that the person does not want
- Stealing their money or things
- keeping the person from seeing friends or family members



- trying to control where they do or what they do
- keeping them from getting medical care they need
- threatening or hurting their pet or service animal
- breaking, hiding or throwing things away that they need, like a wheelchair or other disability equipment

These are not all the kinds of abuse.

People do not always take all the kinds of abuse seriously. But they should. All kinds of abuse hurt people. And, abuse often gets worse over time. It is important to recognize abuse whenever it happens. Then, we can help the person who is being abused.

Someone who abuses someone else is called an **abuser**. Someone who has lived through abuse is called a **survivor**.

Abuse is a kind of violence. Abuse hurts people. Even if the abuse does not injure the person, it still hurts.

No one deserves to be hurt or abused! If you have been abused it is not your fault.

It is the abuser's fault.

Many people with disabilities have been abused. You are not alone. It is never our fault if we are abused! This is important to remember.

If you are being abused and need help, there are resources for you! At the end of this guide, we link to some resources about ways to get help.

## Abuse and Disabilities

People with disabilities are treated like we are worth less than people without disabilities. We are treated like we are less important.

People with disabilities are more likely to be hurt or abused.

Ableism can make people forget that violence and abuse against people with disabilities is bad.

Here are two examples of bad and hurtful things some people say about people with disabilities:

Sometimes disabled people need to be treated that way.

Taking care of people with disabilities is stressful.



Neither of these statements is true but, because of ableism, a lot of people believe these things.

If a disabled person is hurt and tries to get help, people might not believe them.

Example: Beth has a **mental health disability**. She tries to tell the police that her boyfriend is hurting her. Beth's boyfriend says, "She is crazy. She made this up." The police decide to believe him and not Beth. They do not do anything.

Someone might get away with hurting or killing a disabled person, even if everyone knows they did it.

Often when the person being hurt has a disability, people might not try to stop it.

Example: Seth says to his buddy, "I wish my kid would die." Seth's kid has a disability. Seth's friend thinks, "It is normal for parents to have bad thoughts about disabled kids."

He does not try to get help for Seth's kid.

Example: Joan lives next to a group home. She knows staff are locking people in their rooms. She thinks, "Those people are not like me. It is better if they can't decide where to go."

She doesn't tell anyone that staff are locking people in.

## WAYS TO RESPOND

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People with disabilities decide:

- what ableism is
- what violence is
- how much we want to talk about it
- who we want to talk to



Believe people with disabilities when we say we have been hurt and abused.

People with disabilities need to be able to get supports and services when we have been hurt or abused.

We should be able to get services for people who have been abused.

## Services

What kind of services are there for people who have been abused?

There are many kinds of services for people who have been abused.



Some of these services are for people who have lived through a specific kind of abuse. For example, there are services for:

- kids who are abused
- people who are abused by the person they are dating or married to
- people who were **raped** (forced to have sex) or sexually abused

Some kinds of services are:

- a safe place to live for a short time (sometimes this is called a **shelter**)
- help with money
- help with legal things like **restraining orders** (when a judge decides your abuser must stay away from you) or **custody** (when a judge decides which parent kids live with)
- therapy or other services where you can talk about your feelings and how to feel better
- someone to go with you to the hospital, to the doctor, or to a court if you need to go
- information about how to get other services



## Working with Disabled People

How should services for abuse survivors help people with disabilities?

Shelters and programs for abuse survivors need to be accessible to us. **Accessible** means that the services work as well for people with disabilities as for everyone else.

For example:

- Can we get in the building?
- Do they know how to find resources that help people with disabilities?
- Do they include survivor stories about people with disabilities?
- Do they tell us everything they would tell a survivor without a disability?
- Do they make sure we understand everything they need to tell us?
- Are they willing to change the way they do things to make their services help us?

Programs for people with disabilities should be safe places for us to talk about violence.

You can support people to talk about abuse in their lives.

Violence can be hard to talk about, but it can be painful to stay quiet about it.

When someone tells you what happened to them, ask who else they want to know about it.

Everyone has the right to self-determination.



That means if someone is being hurt, they should be in control of:

- whether they get help
- when they get help
- what kind of help they get
- who gets told that they are being hurt
- what kind of changes to make in their life

A **mandated reporter** is someone who is required by law to tell the people in charge if someone is being abused. For example, therapists and support workers are mandated reporters. If you are a mandated reporter, you need to say that before someone talks to you.

Say you are a mandated reporter. Say what will happen if the person tells you they are being hurt. Say that you can help them find someone to talk to who is not a mandated reporter.

People need to know what will happen if they talk to a mandated reporter. We should also work to change things so that abuse survivors have more control over who reports their abuse.

Everyone should be able to get services that work for them.

Services for survivors shouldn't leave anyone out because of:

- their disability
- their race
- their culture
- their sexual orientation
- their gender (including being transgender)
- what language they speak

Know how to help all kinds of people.

Example: Sue is Muslim and can't eat some foods because of her religion. No domestic violence shelters in her area have food she can eat. So, she cannot use any of them.



Example: Joe is gay. His boyfriend is hurting him and he wants to leave. He is trying to find someone to help him make a safety plan. People are confused because they are only used to working with people in straight relationships. They don't know what resources they can use.

Example: George is Deaf and uses ASL. He wants to meet with a counselor about abuse. They need to get an interpreter for him.

Remember that people have lots of different parts of them.

Race, gender, religion, and more are all a part of people.

These things make us who we are. We are all these things at the same time.

They also change how other people treat us.

Example: Jacob has an intellectual disability. He is also a black gay man. All of these things affect how Jacob gets treated.

When we need services, we should be able to get them. Services respect all the parts of us. They should be able to give us what we need.

We should get services in the language we speak. We should get accommodations when we need them.

We should be able to celebrate our holidays and religion.

We should feel welcome in the places we need to get services.

No one should say they can't help us because we are too complicated.

People with disabilities communicate in many different ways.

We may:

- speak
- point to pictures use gestures
- use a device to type

Respect all the different ways people communicate. Make sure everyone has access to the things they need to communicate.

Always check in with the person to make sure they understand. If the way you are trying to communicate with someone isn't working, try a different way.

Example: If you are talking too fast for someone to understand, talk slower. Ask people what is the best way to help them. Ask if they have the supports, they need.



There are a lot of different supports people with disabilities might need.

For example, we might need:

- a ride to the store
- an interpreter
- help filling out forms
- to be told things in plain language

- help getting ready in the morning
- support at work



People who hurt people with disabilities often take away the supports we need. For example: taking away medicine, breaking a wheelchair or not letting us be with a support person. This makes it hard for us to get help.

Supporting us to be in charge of hiring and firing our staff can make us safer.

## WAYS ANYONE CAN TAKE ACTION

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People with disabilities are a part of our community, and we should keep our entire community safe.

Become an **ally** for people with disabilities. Allies do not tell us what to do. They listen to us and support us to be in charge of our lives.

If you are worried that someone is being hurt, ask if they need help.

Ask them privately.

Make sure they know about ways they can get help. Don't tell anyone they do not want you to tell.

Sometimes when a disabled person is being abused, the people around them do not know what to do.

They do not say or do anything because they are afraid of making a mistake.

It is okay if you don't know what to do, but you should still offer to help.

Don't assume someone else will help if you don't.

Listening is a good place to start.

Listen to the person tell you what happened.

Make sure they know it is not their fault. Ask them what they want to do.

You can help them figure out how to make a plan and what to do next.

It can be hard to talk and think about violence. People with disabilities deal with a lot of violence.



Thinking about all this violence can be scary. It can feel like a huge problem that is impossible to solve.

Because it is hard to know what to do, a lot of people do not want to talk or think about violence.

But we can't ignore this problem. Everyone has to help end violence. No one can fix everything all at once. But there is always a way to help.

We hope we have given you some places to start.

Remember to listen to survivors and people with disabilities.

We know what we need to be safe.

## RESOURCES

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**PEER-TO-PEER: Bridging the gap through self-advocacy**  
by Vera Institute of Justice, Center on Victimization and Safety, June 2017.

[A Training Manual To Help Self-Advocates Become Peer Supporters](#)

[A Workbook For Classes To Help Self-Advocates Become Peer Supporters](#)

[A Peer to Peer Guide on Domestic and Sexual Violence](#) by Green Mountain Self-Advocates. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities can be more at risk for abuse for many reasons. These guidelines describe domestic and sexual violence. They give examples of what to say and do when you hear about abusive situations.

# WORDS TO KNOW

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## **Ableism**

Ableism is when disabled people are treated badly because of our disabilities.

## **Abuse**

Abuse is when someone has power over someone else, and hurts that person. Abuse happens in many ways. Someone could abuse someone else by:

- saying mean things to try to make them feel bad about themselves hitting, kicking, or hurting them
- touching them in sexual ways that the person does not want stealing their money or things
- keeping the person from seeing friends or family members trying to control where they go or what they do
- keeping them from getting medical care they need threatening or hurting their pet or service animal
- breaking, hiding or throwing things away that they need, like a wheelchair or other disability equipment

## **Abuser**

An abuser is someone who abuses someone else.

## **Accessible**

When something is accessible, disabled people can use it.

## **Accommodation**

Accommodations are help people might need for their disability.

## **Ally**

An ally is someone who will work to support equal rights for people with disabilities.

## **Custody**

Sometimes, a judge decides who will take care of a child. That is called having custody of the child.

## **Discrimination**

Discrimination is treating people badly because of who they are.

## **Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is violence or abuse that happens in personal relationships. For example, when someone abuses the person they are married to.

## **Equipment**

Equipment includes tools or technology that disabled people use to help us with our disabilities, like wheelchairs or communication devices.

## **Intellectual Disability**

Intellectual disability is a kind of disability that affects how someone thinks, learns, and their everyday life skills. People with intellectual disabilities might learn in a different way. They might say things in a different way. They might need support with things like cooking and house cleaning.

## **Internalized Ableism**

Internalized ableism is when ableism in society makes disabled people feel bad about ourselves.

## **Mandated Reporter**

Mandated reporters are people who must report abuse. If they think you are being hurt they must tell the state.

Mandated reporters need to remind people that they must report abuse.

## **Rape**

Rape is when someone forces someone else to have sex.

## **Restraining Order**

A restraining order is when a judge decides that an abuser must stay away from the person they abused. A survivor may need to go to court to get a restraining order.

## **Self-Determination**

Self-determination is when someone makes their own choices and controls their own life.

## **Sexual Orientation**

Your sexual orientation is about who you have sexual feelings for or fall in love with. There are many different sexual orientations. For example, gay people love people of the same gender as them. Bisexual people love people of multiple genders. Asexual people do not have sexual feelings for anyone.

## **Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence is when someone does anything sexual to another person, that that person does not want to happen.

Sexual violence can be:

- brushing against someone in a sexual way, forced kissing

- removing clothes without asking
- forcing someone to look at pornography
- sexual touching/acts that the person is not comfortable with

## **Shelter**

A shelter is a safe place to live for a short time. There are shelters for survivors of abuse who need somewhere to live.

## **Society**

A society is a big group of communities. A society usually has rules and people in charge.

## **Survivor**

A person who has been abused is called a survivor.

## **Temporary Disability**

A temporary disability is a disability that someone will only have for a short time. For example, if you break your leg, you might need to use a wheelchair for a few months.

## **Transgender**

Someone whose gender is different than people thought when they were born is transgender.

For example: when Billy was born, the doctors said “it’s a girl!” Billy’s parents raised him as a girl. But Billy knew he was really a boy. He came out as transgender and now lives as a man.

People do not have to be men or women. There are lots of different genders. Transgender can also mean someone who doesn’t feel like any gender is right for them.