

ADVISORY NOTE

THE PORTRAYAL OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

This Advisory Note is intended to help and encourage reporters and program producers to produce programs which treat people with disabilities fairly and realistically as individuals, and as an integral part of the general community (bearing in mind that as many as 18% of the population fall within this broad category).

It also suggests ways to change the emphasis from the disability itself to the individual or individuals concerned, from unduly emotional coverage to normal human empathy and interest, and from a focus on personal suffering to include the community's response to the needs of people with disabilities. As such, it will also be of assistance to programmers, program promotion producers and program classifiers.

General Approach

1. Try to depict people with disabilities in ways which do not stereotype them, or stigmatise them as quite different from the community at large. Common stereotypes to avoid include:
 - disability is a monumental tragedy
 - people with a disability are objects of pity or charity
 - if they do things like getting married and having children they are extraordinary
 - they lead boring, uneventful lives
 - families of people with a disability are exceptionally heroic.
2. Choose phrases and words that individuals with disabilities will not find demeaning (see below for more detailed comments on language and disability).
3. Present people with disabilities as individuals, not just as the sum of their disabilities, nor as necessarily representative of all people with disabilities.
4. Recognise that disabilities affect people in different ways, depending on a host of different factors. Having a disability is for many an unavoidable fact of life, not something to be dramatised.
5. Only draw attention to a person's disability when it is relevant.
6. When a person with disabilities is featured in a story, the human-interest angle of the individual overcoming overwhelming odds may sometimes be the appropriate one, but don't automatically choose it.
7. Don't overlook the views of people with disabilities in stories dealing with general interest issues such as public transport, the environment and child care.
8. Introduce people with disabilities by their titles and full names, if this is done for other people in the program or item.
9. Whenever Auslan interpreters are present at a broadcast event, consider whether it is practicable to clearly include them within the frame.

Language and Disability

There is no universal agreement on how people with disabilities should be described but, in general, words which describe a person's disability or medical condition tend to focus attention on the disability or condition rather than the person. The guide attached to these Notes sets out words which may give offence, and suggests alternatives which will be more acceptable. The guide is not intended to be exhaustive, or definitive. It is advisable to check with a disability-specific organisation (and, of course, with the person being interviewed) to gain an understanding of language currently considered appropriate or inappropriate.

Guide to Appropriate Language

<i>Words to watch</i>	<i>Generally Acceptable alternatives (though check with person to be interviewed/ profiled)</i>
Afflicted with (most people with disabilities don't see themselves as afflicted)	"has" (the disability)
Birth defect, congenital defect, deformity	"has had a disability since birth", "has a congenital disability"
Blind (the), visually impaired (the)	"the blind community"; otherwise, "is blind", or "has impaired vision" (for a person with some degree of useful vision)
Confined to a wheelchair; wheelchair-bound (a wheelchair provides mobility not restriction)	"uses a wheelchair"
Cripple, crippled (these terms convey a negative image of a twisted ugly body)	"has a physical disability", "whose physical disabilities restrict (his/her) mobility"
Deaf (The)	Appropriate when referring to the deaf community, or (capitalised) to people who identify as members of the signing Deaf community. Otherwise, someone "who is deaf, hard of hearing or a person with a hearing impairment"

Words to watch	Generally Acceptable alternatives (though check with person to be interviewed/ profiled)
Deaf and dumb	“who is deaf and uses sign language”
Deaf and mute	“who is deaf and uses sign language”
Defective, deformed (degrading terms, avoid)	Specify the disability
Disabled (The)	“people with a disability”; the “disabled sector”; the “disability community”
Dwarf	“short”, “less than . . .cm”, “below average height”
Epileptic	“has epilepsy”
Fit (attack/spell)	“seizure”
Insane (also lunatic, mental patient, mentally diseased, neurotic, psychotic, schizophrenic, unsound mind, mad, demented, etc)	“has a psychiatric disability”, “psychiatric patient” (in the case of people in hospital, or of a doctor/ patient relationship), or else specify the condition
Invalid	“has” (a disability), or specify the name of the medical condition if the person has one
Mentally retarded, mentally defective	“intellectually disabled”, “has an intellectual disability”
Mongol	“has Down Syndrome”
Physically/intellectually challenged	“has” (a physical/intellectual disability)

<i>Words to watch</i>	<i>Generally Acceptable alternatives (though check with person to be interviewed/ profiled)</i>
Spastic: usually refers to a person with cerebral palsy or someone who has uncontrollable spasms	"has cerebral palsy"
Suffers from, sufferer, stricken with:	"has" (the disability)
Vegetative	"in a coma", "comatose" or "unconscious"
Victim	"has" (the disability)