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The Arc – Jefferson, Clear
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Tools for interacting with people with disabilities



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1 in 25
people have an
intellectual or
developmental
disability



1 in 3
will also have
co-occurring
mental health
concerns

DEFINING DISABILITY

Intellectual disability (ID) describes someone with cognitive limitations that are apparent prior to the age of 18. A **developmental disability** (DD) refers to conditions that are present before a person's 22nd birthday and affect typical development in some way.

Intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD) is an umbrella term used to describe people who have ID or DD, whether separately or in combination. The most commonly known diagnoses are **autism, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome**, although there are countless others that fall under the I/DD umbrella.

People with I/DD often have difficulty with:

- »» comprehension
- »» thought processes
- »» communication
- »» behavior

I/DD diagnoses can cause wide-ranging concerns for the affected individual, especially when someone also has a co-occurring mental health diagnosis, which is known as **dual diagnosis**.

Dual diagnosis can further affect a person's ability to find and maintain employment or appropriate housing, and makes them more vulnerable to unhealthy relationships.

The ways I/DD on an affect an individual may range from subtle to significant. When a disability is not noticeable to others, it's called a **hidden disability**.

Many people with I/DD – *especially those with hidden disabilities* – don't want to be perceived as having a disability or they don't identify themselves as having a disability. The stigma around disability has led some people with I/DD to develop ways to conceal their differences from others. This can include:

- »» Saying what they think you want to hear, regardless of whether it's true or any potential consequences.
- »» Faking a greater level of understanding.
- »» Being overly eager to please.

MANDATORY REPORTING IN COLORADO

In 2016, Colorado's mandatory reporting law was revised to extend protections to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities when **mistreatment, abuse, neglect and exploitation** (MANE) is suspected. This is a momentous step toward decreasing the rate of victimization of Coloradans with I/DD.

In addition to law enforcement and first responders, many other professionals are considered mandatory reporters under Colorado law. **To determine if you are a Mandatory Reporter, visit www.arcjc.org/whoaremandatoryreporters.**

According to the law, any Mandatory Reporter must report their concerns to a law enforcement agency within 24 hours of the incident. The person who makes the report must be the person with first-hand knowledge of the concerning incident. Situations that lead to a mandatory report can include directly observing the mistreatment of an at-risk senior or adult with I/DD, or just the suspicion that a person is being mistreated or is at-risk of mistreatment.

Even if you are not considered a Mandatory Reporter, we ask that you help us keep vulnerable adults safe by always reporting your suspicions to appropriate agencies.





BEST PRACTICES FOR BETTER INTERACTIONS

Imagine you are talking to someone who doesn't appear to have a disability, doesn't want you to suspect they have a disability, and they aren't interacting or behaving in a socially appropriate manner.

In order to avoid escalating these potentially stressful situations, we've compiled the following tips to help you interact more effectively.

REMEMBER

- ››› Disability is not always perceptible or visible.
- ››› Many people with I/DD drive cars, live on their own, and hold jobs.
- ››› Disability is unique to each individual, even those with similar diagnoses.

When the individual is under duress

- ››› Never touch someone with I/DD unexpectedly or without permission, which can cause behaviors to escalate.
- ››› Some people with I/DD may not recall even simple personal information.
- ››› Acting inappropriately could be a sign of stress. Self-regulation of emotions and behavior is often difficult for people with disabilities.

Recognize behaviors related to disability

- ››› People with I/DD may make uncontrollable noises, movements, and gestures that may intensify in stressful situations. This can include verbal tics like mimicking and repeating.
- ››› When under stress, people may use self-calming behaviors such as rocking back and forth, flicking fingers, humming or buzzing.
- ››› Avoid interfering with disability-related behaviors as doing so can cause the situation to escalate.

Be mindful of what and how you are communicating

- ››› Use respectful, age-appropriate language (i.e. don't talk to adults like children).
- ››› Pay attention to the tone, pitch, and volume of your voice.
- ››› Speak slowly and clearly using simple words.
- ››› Identify yourself clearly and make sure the person knows your role.
- ››› Keep instructions simple with no more than two steps at a time.
- ››› Avoid complex open-ended or leading questions that require abstract reasoning abilities.
- ››› Allow extra time to respond—be patient and don't interrupt.
- ››› Gauge comprehension by repeating questions and rephrasing them.
- ››› Some people may need to communicate using pictures, symbols, and actions, or with facilitation from their caregiver or friend.
- ››› Avoid gestures and postures that might be perceived as threatening or intimidating.

Minimize sensory stimuli around you

- ››› Whenever possible, try to move to a calm, quiet, and dim environment.
- ››› Be aware of sensory things that can increase stress: bright or fluorescent lights; loud voices, sounds, or background noises; strong smells; busy or chaotic environments; and other physical sensations.
- ››› Be aware that sensory-based stressors can be overwhelming for people with I/DD and make them try to escape or run away.





Adults with I/DD face the **highest rate of victimization** of any group



10x
more likely
to be victimized



3x
more likely
to experience
serious violent crime



4x
as likely to
experience
sexual
violence



50%
of people
with I/DD
don't report
their abuse



KEEPING PEOPLE SAFE

Adults with I/DD are particularly vulnerable to mistreatment, abuse, neglect, and exploitation (MANE). This can include, but is not limited to:

- » unnecessary confinement or restraint
- » emotional, physical and sexual abuse
- » exploitation of property, assets, and finances
- » caretaker neglect

If you suspect an adult with a disability is potentially unsafe, ***you should always report your concerns to law enforcement*** and the appropriate agencies will complete an investigation.

HOW CAN I KNOW?

If you suspect someone has an I/DD, look for clues in the person's communication style, behavior, and their interactions with others. Identifying the effects of disability is the first step to establishing appropriate communication.

Things you can observe:

- » Does the person seem to have difficulty with telling time, using a phone, or handling money?
- » Is the person able to read and write?
- » Are they able to follow directions?
- » Does it seem to take longer than usual to answer simple questions?
- » Are they moving their body in an unexpected way or making unusual sounds?
- » Are their social interactions unusual or inappropriate?
- » Do they seem to have a short attention span or be unusually distractible?
- » Does the individual get frustrated easily?
- » Do they communicate indirectly through their caregiver or others?
- » Does the person appear to be easily influenced or manipulated with decision-making?

Questions you can ask:

- » Did you go through special education or have an IEP in school?
- » Do you have a guardian or a rep payee?
- » Do you have family or staff who help you at home or in the community?
- » Do you have a case manager?

Disability is a continuum with varying combinations and degrees of physical and cognitive effects.

