



# Responding to Disability

## A Question of Attitude



Minnesota State Council  
on Disability

Your Policy, Training and Technical Resource





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Photo Credit: Doug Knutson

# Introduction

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With the recent changes in laws, opportunities, and attitudes, more people with disabilities are moving into the mainstream, pursuing education, employment and leisure activities. Yet few of us have had the opportunity to get to know people with disabilities. Despite our desires to respond appropriately when we interact with a person who has a disability, sometimes there is confusion, hesitancy or miscommunication.

This booklet is designed to stimulate thinking and dialogue. It is not intended to test your knowledge of disability or your attitudes toward people with disabilities. Increasingly we find ourselves in situations involving people who have disabilities and we need to make quick decisions on how to respond. We're not always sure what response is best. This booklet will give you an opportunity to think about situations involving people with disabilities, to respond, and then to consider the various responses more carefully. For each question pick the answer that you feel is best. When you have answered all 13 questions, turn to the answer section that follows. In the answer section you will find discussion regarding each of the various responses. When you are done, discuss this information with others.



# QUESTION Section

## Question 1. \_\_\_\_\_

**You are in a grocery store with your children when a person in a wheelchair enters. Your children ask in loud voices: “Why is that man sitting down?” Your response should be:**

- a) to try as discreetly as possible to get your children away from the person and tell them it’s not polite to talk like that.
- b) to explain to your children that the person has a disability and, if they want to know more, ask him if he would mind briefly telling your children what that means.
- c) to go to the person and apologize for your children’s behavior while encouraging the children to come with you and to leave the man alone.

## Question 2. \_\_\_\_\_

You see a person with a disability who appears to be having difficulty picking up a package off the floor. You approach her and ask if she would like some assistance and proceed to help. She snaps angrily at you, saying that she can get it herself without your help. You conclude:

- a) you should not have helped her.
- b) people who have a disability do not want help unless they ask for it.
- c) you have just met a person with a disability who is in a bad mood.
- d) all of the above.



George Covington, Photographer  
Courtesy of The Alcalde  
Photo by Anna Donlan

## Question 3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Which of the following positions has not been filled by a person who is legally blind?**

- a) photographer
- b) airplane pilot
- c) chemistry professor
- d) all of the above

# Question 4.

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**You are talking to a person with a severe speech disability. You often have asked the person to repeat herself in order to understand what she is saying. However, the person has now repeated one phrase 4 or 5 times and you still don't understand. You should:**

- a) give up and go on, assuming you will get the meaning from the context of the rest of the conversation.
- b) ask again and again to have the sentence repeated, until you do understand.
- c) ask the person to spell out the word, or use an alternate word or phrase.
- d) get someone else who understands the person better to come over and serve as an interpreter.
- e) make a joke about the situation and laugh at your inability to understand the person.



Photo courtesy of Sandy Morgan and Jan Snook

# Question 5.

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**Because of your background with organizing events, you are asked to serve on a committee that will be organizing a local fundraiser. The proceeds of the event will be donated to a local organization for people with cognitive disabilities. After agreeing to serve on the committee, you remember you have a neighbor who has been treated for mental illness who occasionally gives talks about mental illness. You should:**



- a) ask your neighbor if he would be interested in helping with the fundraiser so that you have consumers involved in raising money for an organization that benefits them.
- b) ask your neighbor if he'd be willing to share some of his experiences with mental illness with you so you will be more knowledgeable and sensitive when dealing with the local organization for people who have cognitive disabilities.
- c) neither of the above.
- d) both a and b above.



# Question 6.

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**You are talking to a person who is deaf through a sign language interpreter. At the end of the conversation, you decide to talk to the interpreter. As you begin talking, the interpreter continues to sign. You stop him, saying, “You don’t have to sign this”. However, the interpreter ignores your request and continues to sign everything you say to the person who is deaf. At this point you should:**

- a) tell the person who is deaf you are having a private conversation with the interpreter and that you have asked him not to sign.
- b) politely ask the person who is deaf for permission to ask a question of the interpreter. Don’t be surprised if your request is denied. If permission is given, ask the interpreter if he will have free time to talk later.
- c) continue talking, but position yourself so that you block the view of the person who is deaf.
- d) lightly touch or hold the interpreter’s hand so that he will realize that you don’t want the conversation interpreted.



Photo Credit: Doug Knutson

## Question 7. \_\_\_\_\_

**A person with a hearing loss who is a good lip reader will be able to see the following percentage of spoken sounds by watching the lips of a speaker:**

- a) 80-90%
- b) 40-50%
- c) 35% or less



## Question 8. \_\_\_\_\_

**Which of the following has not been heard of?**

- a) a clinical psychologist who is totally deaf.
- b) a medical doctor who has quadriplegia.
- c) a person with no arms who is a barber.
- d) a bio-medical engineer who can barely read or write due to severe dyslexia.
- e) all of the above.
- f) none of the above.

# Question 9.

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**You are teaching a freshman class in which there is one student who has a disability. The student is eager to do well, is working very hard and doing the best she can, however, even her best work is only “D” quality. You are afraid that if you give her a “D” she will get discouraged and give up. It is time for mid-term grades. You should:**

- a) give her a “D” and ask her if she would like to make an appointment to discuss ways of improving.
- b) give her a “C” because she is doing well if you take into account the educational barriers she is facing.
- c) talk to her and encourage her to drop the class and enroll in an easier program of study.



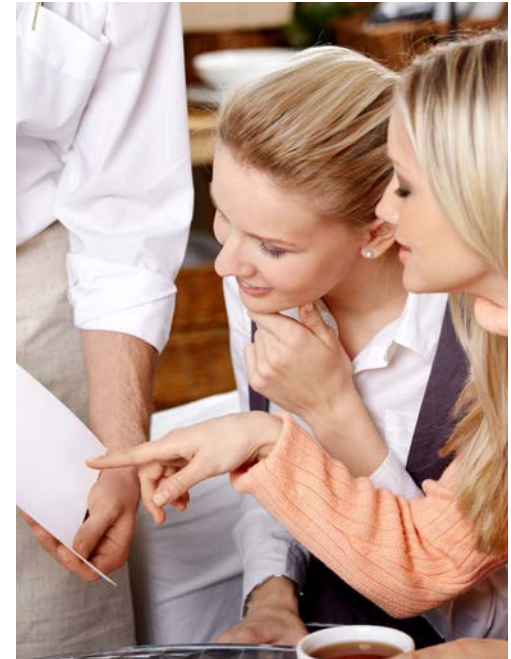
Photo Credit: Doug Knutson

# Question 10.

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**You are in a restaurant and you notice two people who are deaf sitting nearby communicating silently in sign language. When a server goes to the table, one person gives her order out loud, but her voice is hard to understand, and too loud for the quiet restaurant. The second person does not speak, but points to items on the menu. You conclude that:**

- a) the first person is only deaf while the second person is deaf and without speech.
- b) the first person has a developmental disability and is deaf as well.
- c) the first person has better speech than the second and speaks for both of them.
- d) some people who are deaf like to use their voices; other deaf people can speak but may prefer to communicate silently.



# Question 11.

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**Your child watches an old movie. At the end of the movie a couple who are in love and have been engaged to be married tearfully break their engagement because the man has had an accident and now has quadriplegia. Your child doesn't fully understand why the couple had to break the engagement. You explain that:**

- a) because of the accident the man would not be able to be a father and would not really be able to be a husband to the woman.
- b) because of the accident the man won't be able to lead a normal life and will need to live in an institution that can care for him.
- c) you're not sure why the movie ended that way; as far as you are concerned they could have gotten married and had a fine life.
- d) some movies are old and reflect inaccurate information and assumptions, i.e. that a man with a disability couldn't support a wife; that a wife needs to be supported; and that people with disabilities don't have sexual needs.
- e) both a and b above.
- f) both c and d above.

## Question 12.

**Which of the following disabilities preclude a person from getting a driver's license?**

- a) deafness
- b) learning disability
- c) quadriplegia
- d) blindness
- e) epilepsy
- f) a and d above
- g) all of the above

## Question 13.

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**After explaining a complex point, you turn to your coworkers and say, "See what I mean"? As soon as the words are out of your mouth, you wonder if it was inappropriate to use that phrase since one of the people you are talking to is blind. You should:**

- a) apologize for choosing an inappropriate phrase and continue with the conversation, avoiding all future use of such phrases.
- b) continue with the conversation without commenting on having used the word "see" so as not to embarrass your blind coworker, but make a note to yourself to avoid using the word "see" around a blind person again.
- c) continue talking as you always do, not worrying about whether or not you use words like "see", "walk", or "hear" around people with disabilities.
- d) ask your co-worker who is blind if you should avoid using the word "see" when you are in conversations with him in the future.

# Answer 1. B

**You should explain to your children that the person has a disability and, if they want to know more, ask him if he would mind briefly telling your children what that means.**

The curiosity of children about disability is natural and should not be apologized for or discouraged. Much of our discomfort with people with disabilities as adults is a result of having been trained as children to avoid people with disabilities, not to look at them and not to talk to them. This attitude may lead children to think there is something “bad” about having a disability. The only way for children to learn to act naturally and comfortably with people who have disabilities is for them to ask honest questions and receive honest answers.



# ANSWER Section



However, you should also be sensitive to the desires of the person who has a disability, many would be quite willing to talk with your children briefly. In fact, they would be especially pleased to see a parent who allows his or her children to interact with them naturally. However, not all people with disabilities would be willing to talk with your children and even those who are willing will not always have the time or inclination. Therefore, you should not be surprised if you are rebuffed upon occasion when choosing this response.

You may consider contacting local organizations of and for people with disabilities to ask if there are awareness programs that you/your children could attend in order to increase your interaction with and knowledge of people with disabilities. This would decrease the likelihood that your children would be surprised and curious when they encounter a person with a disability in public. Don't be surprised to learn from your children; Minnesota schools are now mandated to develop disability awareness curricula.



## Answer 2. C

**You have just met a person with a disability who is in a bad mood.**

People with disabilities are as varied in personality, mood and temperament as people without disabilities. You cannot learn a set of rules “for dealing with people with disabilities,” follow them faithfully, and expect never to offend. In this case, you just met someone who either does not like to be offered assistance or someone who happens to be in a bad mood for receiving assistance at that particular moment. Some people with disabilities want to take the responsibility for asking for help when they need it. When a person is repeatedly offered unneeded assistance it can become embarrassing or frustrating. However, that does

not mean that you were in error by offering assistance. Do not assume from this one experience that all people with disabilities prefer that you not offer the assistance, many would be grateful for the offer. Some would think that you are rude or insensitive if you don’t offer to help. You won’t know until you ask.

Although there are no rules to follow to ensure that you won’t offend, there are some guidelines that will decrease the chances of offending. First, when you see a person who looks like they could use assistance, ask them if they would like assistance, don’t assume they want it. Some people with disabilities will only accept help if they’ve asked for it themselves. If they do indicate that they would like assistance, ask them what you can do for them and how they would like it done. Again, don’t assume you know what they want done, or the best way of doing it.



Secondly, don't assume that a person needs assistance just because they happen to have a disability. Survey the situation as you would with a person who does not have a disability and proceed accordingly. There is no need to be overly helpful, cautious, patronizing, or sympathetic simply because the person has a disability. Sometimes your offer will be received with gratitude, sometimes your offer will be turned down politely, and sometimes it will be perceived as an insult.

# Answer 3. B

## Airplane pilot

We have never found a reference to an airplane pilot who is legally blind. This does not mean that a person who is blind absolutely couldn't fly a plane, nor that it has never happened. But to the best of our knowledge it hasn't happened yet.

George Covington, a professional photographer who is blind, has written a photography manual for individuals with low vision called *Let the Camera Do the Seeing*. People with low vision can use photography as a vision tool by studying greatly enlarged copies of their pictures.

People who are legally blind or have low vision have pursued chemistry, biology, engineering and a vast array of other sciences. You will find references to such scientists, including chemistry professors, in the Resource Directory

of Scientists and Engineers With Disabilities, available from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005  
[www.aaas.org](http://www.aaas.org)



George Covington, Photographer  
Courtesy of The Alcalde  
Photo by Anna Donlan

## Answer 4. C

**You should ask the person to spell out the word, or use an alternate word or phrase.**

The only option that really is not good is to go on with the conversation without having understood what was being said. Most (not all) people with speech disabilities are used to having to repeat themselves and would rather try to help you understand than have you pretend you understood when you didn't. It may help you relax if you remember that you are probably more frustrated and embarrassed by the process than the person with the speech disability. You will look more foolish if you give an inappropriate answer because you pretended to understand than if you ask the person to repeat over and over, to use an alternate phrase, to spell, or to do whatever is necessary so that the two of you can continue genuinely sharing in dialogue.

If neither of the above options work, you may want to resort to option d) asking someone else to interpret or option e) making a joke. Asking someone else to interpret can be useful if there is someone available who can understand the person better than you can. However, it is not good to rely consistently on an interpreter rather than learning to relax and understand the person yourself.

Making a joke is useful if you are talking with someone with whom you have a good rapport. A joke might ease the communication. However, a joke may also offend. It depends both on your ability to make appropriate jokes and the other person's ability to laugh at jokes. The key here is that communication is as much on your inability to understand as it is on the other person's inability to convey the message clearly. Communication is always a two-way street.

# Answer 5. C

## Neither of the above

The idea of having consumers involved in organizing a fundraiser that will benefit their organization is a good one, as is the idea of talking to a consumer so that you will be more informed. However, your neighbor in this scenario has a mental illness and the fundraiser is designed to benefit persons with cognitive disabilities. Mental illness is frequently and inappropriately confused with cognitive disabilities.

People who have a mental illness may experience the inability to cope with the problems and stresses of life. This is not caused by lack of intelligence or capacity to learn. People with a variety of intellectual capacities can experience mental illness. On the other hand, people who have cognitive disabilities develop

and learn more slowly than average, and might experience unusual difficulty learning social adjustment. Although a person with a cognitive disability is not necessarily mentally ill, he or she may, like anyone else, develop a mental illness.

To involve consumers with disabilities in the development of services, programs and fundraisers that affect them is advantageous. Too often programs are developed in a patronizing manner for people with disabilities and end up perpetuating dependency and stereotypes. People with disabilities have many capabilities that should be drawn on and enhanced. Although the public may be responsive to donating money for “those poor, helpless people,” society as a whole will benefit more if the theme of fundraisers is one of investing in the capabilities of people with disabilities rather than one of taking care of the so-called “helpless.”

## Answer 6. B

**You should ask the person who is deaf for permission to ask a question of the interpreter; then ask the interpreter if he will have free time to talk to you later.**

When on duty, a sign language interpreter's professional responsibility is to translate communication, without editing or interjecting personal comments. The interpreter in this situation is therefore bound to interpret your comments and cannot engage in personal conversations, particularly those that would exclude the person who is deaf. Even more important, however, is the point that to talk in front of a person who is deaf without translating the conversation is the same as whispering in front of a hearing person; it is rude, whether or not the conversation pertains to them. We all like to know what is going on around us, even if we are not being addressed directly.

On the other hand, occasions do arise when you desire to talk personally with the interpreter. In this case, you should first request permission from the person who is deaf to address the interpreter directly. It is courteous to do this since the interpreter is on duty. You should then proceed just as you would if you wanted to ask one member of a group of hearing people for a convenient opportunity to speak privately. However, don't be surprised if the interpreter still signs your question and his response.



Photo Credit: Doug Knutson



Essentially, when communicating in situations involving a sign language interpreter, you will do best if you simply talk with the person who is deaf as you would anyone else. You should not address the interpreter, but rather the person who is deaf. If you say to the interpreter, "Would you please tell Sue that...?" chances are that the interpreter will turn to Sue and sign, "Would you please tell Sue that...?" Instead, you should look directly at the deaf person and say, "Sue, I want to tell you that...". The interpreter will sign for you while the person who is deaf watches both you and the interpreter, thus gaining a full understanding of the conversation.

# Answer 7. C

35%

It is estimated that the percentage of English speech that is visible on the lips is 35% at the very highest. Some sounds are not visible on the lips; others are indistinguishable from other sounds (i.e., compare kiss, sis, and hiss, mother and brother, man, pan, and ban). Therefore, even those people with the best skills in lip reading will be unable to distinguish many words. In these instances meaning is often gathered from context, but much of the content of a communication may be missed or misinterpreted. Poor enunciation, moustaches, smoking cigarettes or a tendency to turn one's back to an audience will complicate comprehension further.

For many people who became deaf prior to age six or so, English is their second language. The first language of many people who are deaf is

American Sign Language (ASL), a language with a linguistic structure of its own and separate from that of English. Many people who are deaf have mastered the English language as well as ASL. Others have not. Those that haven't may have limited skills in reading or writing English that are not reflective of their level of intelligence or achievement. The range of English language competency varies among people who are deaf just as it varies among hearing people.

Despite these difficulties, you should not hesitate to attempt to communicate with someone deaf or hard of hearing. You should speak normally. Don't exaggerate your lip movements; people are trained to read normal mouth movements. If you have difficulty with lip reading, you may use gestures, facial expressions, pantomime, pen and paper, interpreters, or all of the above. You may feel strange at first, but your efforts will be appreciated. A sincere attempt to communicate is generally met with success.





Whenever you know that you will be meeting with a person who is deaf, or whenever you are arranging a public meeting or event, you should do as much as possible to arrange for a certified sign language interpreter to be present. A person who is hard of hearing may request CART services or an assistive listening device. Some cities have agencies that facilitate contact and scheduling with interpreters.

For a list of sign language interpreters, referral agencies – including names and contact information of independent contract interpreters in Minnesota – visit [mn.gov/dhs/interpreter-referral](https://mn.gov/dhs/interpreter-referral).

For information on services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing in Minnesota – please contact the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services at 651-431-5940 or 1-800-456-7589.

# Answer 8. C

## A person with no arms who is a barber

Although we have never heard of a barber who has no arms, after seeing the film “A Day in the Life of Bonnie Consolo” we do believe that if a person with no arms wanted to become a barber it would be possible. The attitudes of potential clients would present far more difficulties than the mechanics of using one’s feet to do the job. In the film, Bonnie Consolo trims her son’s hair, bakes homemade bread, slices tomatoes, writes checks and drives her car; all with her feet.

You can find the names and addresses of clinical psychologists who are deaf, medical doctors who have quadriplegia and many other scientists who have disabilities, by consulting the Directory

of Scientists and Engineers With Disabilities, available from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005.

[www.aaas.org](http://www.aaas.org)

A little research can uncover endless examples of people with disabilities who have accomplished extraordinary achievements. While opening ourselves to recognizing the potential of people with disabilities, it is also important to avoid creating new “super cripp” expectations or assumptions that all people with disabilities are courageous, determined or talented. People with disabilities are as varied as people without disabilities: some are exceptional, many are ordinary. Not all talented people with disabilities will choose to pursue professional careers or succeed when they do.

## Answer 9. A

**You should give her a “D” and ask her if she would like to make an appointment to discuss ways of improving.**

It is both dishonest and patronizing to give a person with a disability a better grade than deserved. In their demand for reasonable accommodations, people with disabilities and their advocates are not requesting special favors or relaxed standards. If a person with a disability is not competing adequately in a given situation, the situation needs to be explored honestly. The person may be doing poorly because of the presence of artificial barriers that can be modified or eliminated. For example, this student may be doing poorly because of a lack of access to critical classroom material (i.e., an inaccessible reserve reading room, a lecture course that is not interpreted in sign language, books that have not

yet been made accessible or testing procedures that have not been modified.) Giving a better grade than deserved or encouraging the student to try an easier course, would remove her from this learning situation before the situation has been explored. In some cases you might never discover that her poor performance may lie not in her disability or in her aptitude, but in artificial but overlooked educational barriers that could be modified. By making modifications that eliminate competitive disadvantages, student performance often can improve without sacrificing standards or granting special or unfair privileges.

On the other hand, this student may be doing poorly because she was not adequately prepared for college level work. Rather than passing the student on, you should give her honest feedback and help prepare her for the reality that she might need to do some remedial work. The sooner this occurs, the easier it will be to remedy.

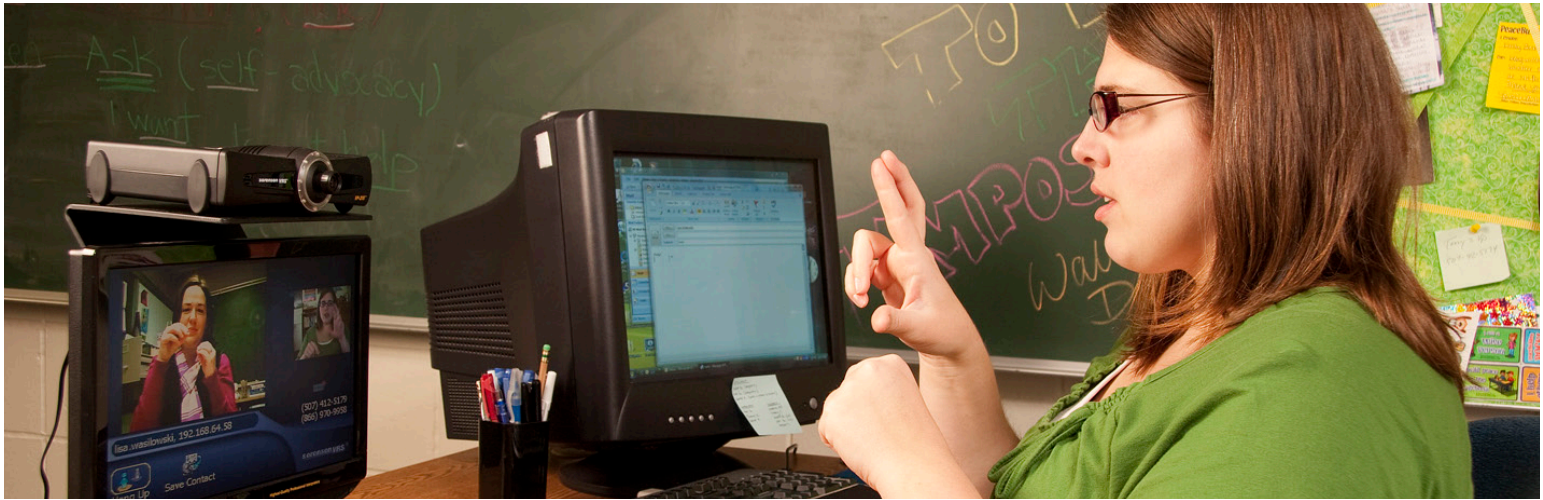


Photo Credit: Doug Knutson

However, if other professors are passing this student on by giving her better grades than she deserves, she may choose not to believe you.

Finally, this student may be doing poorly because she is not college material. If she really wants to continue with college, despite feedback that she may not succeed, she should be allowed to try. All

of us learn at least as much from our failures as from our successes. People with disabilities have often been sheltered from failure and have thus missed valuable learning opportunities. People with disabilities should not be set up for failure, but they should not be treated as exceptionally fragile either. We all have a right to fail.

## Answer 10. D

**Some people who are deaf like to use their voices; other people who are deaf can speak, but prefer to communicate silently.**

People who are deaf are not necessarily without voices. The loss of vocal production can occur in anyone, but it is a separate disability and is not automatically associated with deafness. Terms such as “deaf-mute” or “deaf and dumb” reflect the inaccurate thinking of an era when few people with hearing loss were given opportunities to learn how to use their voices. People may be hard of hearing which has nothing to do with the quality of a person’s intelligence, their vocal cords or their eyesight.

Learning to use one’s voice to speak effectively requires time, effort, and concentration, especially for people who lost their hearing in

infancy. Some people who are deaf choose to use their voices regularly. Others decide that this is not the best option for them. Not all people who are deaf and choose to use their voices will sound like hearing people when they talk. Hearing people monitor the volume, tone and expression of their speech by listening to their own voice when speaking. People who are deaf cannot do this and thus sometimes have voices that sound strange or unusual to others. Occasionally the speech of a person who is deaf may sound similar to the speech of a person from a foreign country. However, it is not accurate to assume anything about a deaf person’s intelligence or abilities by the sound of that person’s voice or by that person’s decision not to use his or her voice. In this case, the person who is pointing to items on the menu is effectively “speaking” for herself, even though she is not using a voice to do so.

# Answer 11. F

**You're not sure why the movie ended that way; as far as you are concerned they could have gotten married and had a fine life; and some movies are old and reflect inaccurate information and assumptions (i.e., that a man with a disability couldn't support a wife; that a wife needs to be supported; and that people with disabilities don't have sexual needs).**

Two common myths are that people with disabilities don't have sexual desires or abilities and that they can't be parents. First, whether or not a person with a disability can biologically parent a child varies from disability to disability and from person to person. Many can have their own biological children. Even for the others, an inability to have biological children certainly does not preclude one from becoming a successful

parent. More and more frequently people with disabilities are having children, adopting children and winning custody of children. Despite the tendency of society to view people with disabilities as asexual, their sexual needs and desires are not different from those of people who do not have disabilities. The ability to "perform" sexually varies from disability to disability and from person to person. In general, this ability is not as reduced as is often assumed.

Many people with disabilities lead satisfying lives and are equally able to satisfy the sexual needs of their partners. And, of course, people with disabilities certainly do not need to look only toward other people with disabilities in their search for a sexual partner. A popular movie which portrayed these issues accurately and sensitively is "Coming Home" starring Jane Fonda and Jon Voight.

# Answer 12. D

## Blindness

As far as we know, people who are blind cannot get driver's licenses. However, many people who are blind have taken cross country bicycle trips.

Although people who hear can utilize their hearing to help with driving, hearing is certainly not necessary to being a first-rate driver. A hearing person, driving with the windows up, the heat or a/c going and the radio on, hears what is going on outside the vehicle about as well as a deaf person.

Having a learning disability does not generally preclude a person from driving a car. People with learning disabilities can have normal or above normal intelligence, normal eye sight and normal hearing, but they might have

trouble learning in the way others do because of difficulties in understanding, using spoken or written language, or performing mathematical operations. Some people with learning disabilities learn to drive successfully; others don't. The extent to which a learning disability interferes with the ability to drive varies from person to person since there are many types of learning disabilities. Some people with learning disabilities may need to take longer to learn how to drive and to relax while driving. Each person needs to find the compensation techniques and learning style that work best for her or him.

People who have quadriplegia, people with no arms and people who have coordination disabilities are able to drive with the use of adaptive technology. Virtually anyone with the desire (and sufficient funds) can purchase and learn to drive a vehicle with adapted hand or foot controls.



Epilepsy is a condition that can very often be controlled through medication. Laws vary from state to state but in Minnesota after three months without a seizure and with a doctor's signature a person with epilepsy can get a regular driver's license. Some states may require that the license of a person with epilepsy be renewed more frequently than the standard renewal period so as to check to be sure their seizures are still under control.



## Answer 13. C

**You should continue talking as you always do, not worrying about whether or not you use words like “see” “walk” or “hear,” around people with disabilities.**

All languages have idioms, phrases, and expressions with meanings different from the literal translation. Phrases like “do you see what I mean?” or “I hear what you are saying” do not literally refer to seeing or hearing. Because of this, people with disabilities tend to use these phrases as much as others. A person who is blind can certainly “see what you mean” because the phrase really asks if the speaker is being clear and understood.

A person who uses a wheelchair can “take a walk around the park” because that phrase refers to moving around on a stroll more than it refers

to the actual process of placing one foot in front of another. Sometimes a person who uses a wheelchair may prefer to use the phrase “take a wheel around the park.”

It would be inappropriate to carefully monitor your speech to eliminate use of any words or phrases such as these, and would tend to produce an unnatural stiffness and awkwardness in your speech. Relaxing and talking naturally when you are with people who have disabilities is essential to acceptance of disabilities and people who have disabilities. Being overly conscious of a disability can cause discomfort and awkwardness on everyone’s part.

Although it is not necessary to stiffly screen out use of any idioms with physical reference when talking to people with disabilities, it is useful to examine the labels we use when referring to individuals with disabilities to identify potentially inaccurate assumptions underlying such labels.

People who are deaf have been referred to as “deaf-mute” or as “deaf and dumb”; people who use wheelchairs have been referred to as “invalids”; people who have a cognitive disability have been referred to as “poor things” and “vegetables.” These phrases are inaccurate and reflect the stereotypical thinking of a time when little was known about disabilities and the capabilities of people with disabilities. Besides eliminating use of inaccurate labels, it is also appropriate to eliminate use of phrases that undercut a person’s dignity. Referring to a person with a disability as a “wheelchair person” or a “cripple” is neither accurate or respectful.

In short, some changes do need to occur in our use of language. However, it is not necessary to bend over backwards, becoming self conscious and stiffly avoiding use of common idioms. Speak naturally and ask what phrase is most appropriate if you are unsure.



# Disability Vocabulary

Following are suggestions for improving your vocabulary related to disability, published by the PACER Center, Inc. in their newsletter, "Early Childhood Connection." The PACER Center is a parent and family training organization in Minneapolis, MN.

## SAY:

## INSTEAD OF:

child with a disability . . . . .	disabled or handicapped child
person with cerebral palsy . . . . .	palsied, or C.P. or spastic
person who has . . . . .	afflicted, suffers from, victim of
without speech . . . . .	mute, or dumb
developmental delay . . . . .	retarded, slow
emotional disability or mental illness . . . . .	crazy or insane
of short stature . . . . .	dwarf or midget
uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user . . . . .	confined to a wheelchair



**SAY:**

**INSTEAD OF:**

has hemiplegia ..... hemiplegic  
(paralysis on one side of the body)

has quadriplegia ..... quadriplegic  
(paralysis of both arms and legs)

has paraplegia ..... paraplegic  
(loss of function of lower part of body only)

deaf or hard of hearing..... deaf and dumb





Minnesota State Council  
on Disability

## Your Policy, Training and Technical Resource

121 East 7th Place, Suite 107

St. Paul, MN 55101

Phone: 651-361-7800

Toll-free: 800-945-8913

[council.disability@state.mn.us](mailto:council.disability@state.mn.us)

[www.disability.state.mn.us](http://www.disability.state.mn.us)

Contact MSCOD to request this  
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MSCOD is a state agency that advises the governor, the state legislature, state agencies and the general public on public policy issues affecting persons with disabilities. We work to advance the rights of Minnesotans with disabilities.

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