YASA
Youth as Self Advocates
a project of FAMILY VOICES

FAMILY VOICES®
Youth Leadership Development Program

Building Disability Awareness

This tip sheet will help you learn how to connect with new people so you can teach them about disability in a friendly and respectful way. When more people understand what disability really means, they're more likely to treat others with respect and avoid using hurtful or offensive language.

By spreading awareness, you're helping to create a more inclusive and welcoming world for everyone.

1 Make friends and spread awareness.

Meeting new people and making friends is a great way to help others learn about disability. It might feel a little intimidating at first, but it's easier than you think! All it takes is a bit of courage and a willingness to step outside your comfort zone.

Start small—try saying "hi" to someone new each day. By the end of the week, seven more people will know who you are, and you might even make a few new friends. If you keep talking to them a little more each day, there's a good chance you'll build a real connection with at least one of them.

Remember, this is just one way to meet people. You can also join clubs, participate in after-school activities, or volunteer in your community. Every new connection is a chance to share your perspective and help others feel more comfortable talking about disability.

2 Be aware that people might not say the right thing.

One day at school, I was at my locker when a group of girls walked by. As they passed, I overheard one of them say, "Oh look, there goes the cripple." At first, I couldn't believe what I had just heard. It took me a moment to process it, and when I did, I felt shocked and deeply hurt.

I wanted to say something, but I was too shy and scared to speak up in the moment. For days afterward, I felt frustrated—not just because of what was said, but because I hadn't stood up for myself. I kept replaying the moment in my head and venting to my friends about how upset I was.

My friends offered to talk to the girl for me, but I kept saying no. I knew this was something I needed to handle myself. It wasn't their battle—it was mine. Once I realized that, I knew I had to do something about it. I couldn't let that moment define me or stay silent any longer.

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3 Speak up and educate others.

The hardest part was figuring out how to handle the situation. I didn't know what to say or how to say it—until one of my friends gave me a simple but powerful idea: tell her that using hurtful language about someone's disability isn't okay.

That advice really stuck with me. I realized that instead of staying silent, I could use this moment to teach her—and others—about my disability and why awareness matters. The next day, I went up to her and her friends. I told them that I found the word "cripple" offensive and asked them not to use it. They apologized right away and started asking questions about my disability. I was happy to answer them. It felt good to turn a negative experience into a chance to educate and connect.

Even today, I consider those people part of my support system. After our conversation, they gained a better understanding of how to talk about disability respectfully—and they've passed that knowledge on to others.

As for me, I try to connect with as many people as I can. I make sure they know what kind of language I find respectful and appropriate. I also remind them that a person with a disability is just that—*a person*.

It's amazing to think that by speaking up to just one person, you could help a hundred others learn something new. That's the power of awareness and kindness—it spreads.

4 Talk about your disability—when you're ready.

You don't have to talk about your disability right away, and that's totally okay. In fact, waiting can be a good thing—it gives people time to get to know you as a person first, without feeling overwhelmed by too much information.

People are naturally curious, and once you start building friendships, they might ask questions about your disability. If they don't, that's fine too. Based on experience, it'll probably come up in conversation eventually, and that's a great chance to share your story in a way that feels comfortable for you.

Just remember: you're in control of what you share and when you share it.

5 Talk about your disability—when you're ready.

No matter how you choose to connect with others, it's important to let people know what you're comfortable with—and what you're not. For example, I don't like when people touch or push my wheelchair without asking first. It's okay to speak up about things like that.

You can also let people know which words or phrases you find disrespectful or inappropriate. When you do this, you're helping others learn and become more aware of how to talk about disability in a respectful way.

Just by sharing your experiences and setting boundaries, you're making a difference and helping spread disability awareness!