



What is Disability Culture?

Disability culture is people with all different kinds of disabilities sharing a lot of things in common. If you're born with a disability, you probably experience special education or working to receive accommodations in the classroom. If you join the disability community later in life, after becoming disabled, you probably experience trying to find accessible housing, a job that will provide accommodations and trying to get access to the healthcare you need. These are a few of the many number of experiences that people with disabilities have in common.

Most people who are disabled do not have parents who are disabled. That means we are different than other cultures that learn their culture from their parents. We have to learn it from each other.

Not all people agree that people with disabilities have a culture. However, there are thousands of disability rights groups, books and materials that explain we do. There is a whole movement (a group of people who try and change laws, stereotypes and attitudes about something) called the Disability Rights movement.

The Disability Rights movement is an important part of our culture. People in the movement try to defend the rights and opportunities of all disabled people. One of the main goals of the Disability Rights movement is called "Self Determination." Self Determination means that people with disabilities have control over their lives (see "**What is Self Determination**" at www.fvkasa.org/resources/history-self.html). Currently people with disabilities don't have a lot of choice about where they work, where they live and things like who assists them with personal care (like getting ready in the morning etc). The Disability Rights movement is trying to change this for all people with disabilities. They are working with the public and politicians (people who make laws), trying to educate others that people with disabilities deserve the same opportunities as everyone else.

Culture starts with a common history, which we have. A lot of our history starts when people started putting laws and social rules in place based on a belief system called "Social Darwinism." Social Darwinism is a belief that there are people who "deserve" to live because they can "survive better" than other people. This became dangerous when Hitler and the Third Reich were in power in Germany. You probably learned about the Holocaust where a lot of people died because Hitler decided that they didn't deserve to live. Disabled people were the first people to be "exterminated" (killed) in Germany because they were seen as imperfect and a burden on society.



Here in the United States, “Social Darwinism” also had an effect. Many people with disabilities from the 1800s until even now live in institutions. In some of these institutions the people who ran them felt that the people who lived there were not meant to have children because the children might also be disabled. So, some of those people who lived in institutions all across the country were forcibly sterilized, which means that, without their permission, they underwent a surgery so they could not have children. Also, if a disabled person lived in one of these institutions and became pregnant, they were forced to abort the baby. This happened in some states until the 1980s, but it doesn’t happen anymore. Some states have offered official apologies for doing this to disabled people.

Another part of our history also includes laws. Laws like Section 504, which declares that any public place or place getting public funding (money from the government) must be accessible. Also, consider the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This law says we have the right to work with reasonable accommodations, among other things. These laws acknowledge that we have been discriminated against as a group, and Congress has passed laws to protect our groups’ rights.

Try and think of people you’ve seen on TV who are disabled. Most times people who are shown on tv and in movies as disabled are often non-disabled people pretending to be disabled. We are often shown as superhuman, able to defeat all the odds, or as someone whom people need to feel sorry for. We are usually never shown as just normal people going to school and work and living our lives. Yet, Disability Culture is very visible in other areas. People with disabilities are often involved in areas like art and poetry and we sometimes focus on the experience of being disabled and being part of disability culture. There are some examples of this on the KASA website (www.fvkasa.org).

If the topic of disability culture interests you, there are a lot of good books that address the issue. You can do a search in your library or your favorite book or magazine website.

If you’re interested in learning more about people with disabilities in the media, Self Determination, and the Medical Model (where society’s attitudes might come from), you can find these articles on the KASA website (www.fvkasa.org).