

# MEI SCHOOLS ACCESSIBILITY PLAN



## **Territorial Acknowledgement**

MEI Schools is grateful to be on the shared, unceded territory of the Stó:lō people, the Sumas first nations and Matsqui. We respect and commit to deep consideration of their history, culture, stewardship, and voice.

# Table of Contents

<b>SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>3</b>
About Our School Community .....	4
A Message from the Head of MEI Schools .....	4
Definitions.....	5
<b>SECTION 2: FRAMEWORK GUIDING OUR WORK</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Global Context – United Nations .....	6
Canadian Context and Legislation – Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms .....	6
B.C. Context and Legislation - Accessible B.C. Act .....	6
Our Commitment to Accessibility:.....	7
Our Approach: .....	8
<b>SECTION 3: THE ACCESSIBILITY COMMITTEE</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Purpose of the Accessibility Committee .....	8
Recruitment to the Accessibility Committee .....	8
Accessibility Committee Membership .....	9
<b>SECTION 4: CONSULTATION CONDUCTED</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>SECTION 5: ACCESSIBILITY FEEDBACK TOOL</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>SECTION 6: ACCESSIBILITY ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND BARRIERS</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Key Discussion Themes – Accessibility Accomplishments Identified .....	11
Key Discussion Themes – Accessibility Barriers Identified .....	11
<b>SECTION 7: OUR THREE-YEAR PLAN (2023-2026)</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>SECTION 8: MONITORING AND EVALUATION</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>SECTION 9: HOW TO GIVE US FEEDBACK</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>SECTION 10: APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>14</b>
Appendix A: About Disability .....	14
Appendix B: Suggested References/Resources .....	20

## Section 1: Introduction

### About Our School Community

MEI Schools is an independent school in Abbotsford, BC that serves approximately 1600 students. The school operates 4 schools (preschool, elementary, middle, and secondary) that offer education from Preschool to Grade 12.

MEI Schools offer a wide range of academic opportunities for our students. We also provide a variety of options in athletics, arts and in trades. Special education programs are also provided by the school for students with special education needs.

The MEI Schools team includes a Head of Schools, Principals, and Vice Principals, Managers, Teaching Staff, and Support/Non-Teaching Staff for total of 250 staff.

MEI Society membership consists of Mennonite churches. Each member sends one person to the board to work together to further the purposes, basis, and principles of the society. Member churches also send voting delegates to the annual general meeting.

### A Message from the Head of MEI Schools, Vijay Manuel

At MEI Schools, we are committed to providing a learning and working environment that supports all students and staff and provides equitable opportunities to support our diverse community. A key element to supporting our community is the development of a Three-Year Accessibility Plan. This plan identifies system needs, priorities, and action plans, and draws on feedback from our school community and the work of the Accessibility Committee to enhance equity of access to programming and our facilities.

Our Accessibility Committee is a diverse and multi-disciplinary team that meets regularly to affirm our commitment to identify priorities and develop and monitor action plans highlighted in the Three-Year Accessibility Plan. The plan identifies measurable actions across the pillars of the Accessibility Act, supporting equal opportunity for persons with disabilities by identifying, removing, and preventing barriers of access.

We recognize the importance of accessibility not only for those with disabilities, but also for the benefit of the entire community. We are committed to advancing the efforts of the Accessibility Committee to improve equity and ease of access to services, as well as access to our facilities. Through the actions in this Three-Year Accessibility Plan, we commit to continuous improvements in developing an environment that supports all students, staff and the larger school community.

## Definitions

**Accessibility:** The state of having programs, services and environments that allow all individuals to participate fully in society without encountering barriers.

**Accessibility Committee:** An official group formed by one or more organizations in collaboration with people with disabilities, to create an accessibility plan and feedback mechanism.

**Accessibility Plan:** A plan developed by an Accessibility Committee that identifies challenges and solutions for addressing accessibility barriers.

**Barrier:** Anything that hinders the full and equal participation in society of a person navigating needs or disabilities. Types of barriers in the educational setting:

1. **Learning Barrier:** any barrier that limits or prevents learning, whether it is through inadequate engagement, representation of the content, or expression of ideas and communication.
2. **Architectural and Physical Barrier:** A barrier resulting from building design, the area adjacent to the building, shape of rooms, the size of doorways, lack of accessibility features, blocked paths of travel, and so on.
3. **Attitudinal Barrier:** A barrier that arises from the attitudes of staff, students and the school community, including discriminatory behaviours and a lack of disability awareness.
4. **Policy or Practice Barrier:** Rules, regulations and protocols that prevent a person from performing their job satisfactorily or participating in society. Policy, practice, and procedures that prevent a student from accessing the curriculum and fully participating in the school community.
5. **Resource Barrier:** Barriers resulting from inadequate technology, funding, staff, or tools.
6. **Temporal Barrier:** Barriers that occur during a specific time, such as busy times of day or during special events.

**Disability:** The state of being unable to participate fully and equally in society as a result of the interaction between an impairment and a barrier. ([For more information about disability and types of disability and support, refer to Appendix A: Disabilities.](#))

**Impairment:** A physical, sensory, mental, intellectual, cognitive limitation, whether permanent, temporary, or episodic.

## Section 2: Framework Guiding Our Work

The MEI Schools accessibility plan builds on global, national, provincial and MEI Schools specific actions to promote and support accessibility.

### **Global Context – United Nations**

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion within the workplace and within the larger community. The United Nations has been instrumental in leading the importance of disability as a global health issue. In 2006, the United Nations led efforts to adopt the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In 2010, Canada ratified the CRPD and described the CRPD as follows:

“The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is an international human right treaty aimed at protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. Parties to the Convention of the rights of Persons with Disabilities are required to promote and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights of persons with disabilities including full equality under the law.”

### **Canadian Context and Legislation – Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**

Canada-wide, around one in five people had some form of disability in 2017. Nationally, Canadian accessibility legislation started in 1985 where disability was included in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in 1986, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) were included in the new federal Employment Equity Act. The Accessible Canada Act (ACA) came into force in 2019, with the overarching goal to realize a barrier-free Canada by 2040. This act applies to federally regulated entities. The ACA has seven focus areas, and was developed based on the following guiding principles:

1. All persons must be treated with dignity regardless of their disabilities.
2. All persons must have the same opportunity to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have regardless of their disabilities.
3. All persons must have barrier-free access to full and equal participation in society, regardless of their disabilities.
4. All persons must have meaningful options and be free to make their own choices, with support if they desire, regardless of their disabilities.
5. Laws, policies, programs, services and structures must take into account the disabilities of persons, the different ways that persons interact with their environments and the multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization and discrimination faced by persons.
6. PWDs must be involved in the development and design of laws, policies, programs, services and structures.
7. The development and revision of accessibility standards and the making of regulations must be done with the objective of achieving the highest level of accessibility for PWDs.

### **B.C. Context and Legislation - Accessible B.C. Act**

The Accessible British Columbia Act, enacted in June 2021, and initially the accessibility planning requirements only applied to provincial government organizations.

The Accessible British Columbia Regulation, under the Accessible British Columbia Act, came into force on September 1, 2022. These regulations identify schools as accessible organizations, and school districts and independent schools will be required to have an Accessibility Committee, an

Accessibility Plan, and a tool to receive feedback on accessibility by September 1, 2023:  
The goal of the act is to improve opportunities for people with disabilities and involve them in identifying, removing, and preventing barriers to their full participation in the life of the province.

### **Principles in the Accessible B.C. Act:**

The Accessible B.C. Act includes a list of principles that must be considered as organizations develop an accessibility plan. The Definitions are adapted from the foundational document [BC Framework for Accessibility Legislation](#).

1. **Adaptability:** Accessibility plans should reflect that disability and accessibility are evolving concepts that change as services, technology, and attitudes change.
2. **Collaboration:** Promoting accessible communities is a shared responsibility and everyone has a role to play. Accessibility plans should create opportunities for Organizations and communities to work together to promote access and inclusion.
3. **Diversity:** Every person is unique. People with disabilities are individuals with varied backgrounds. Individual characteristics including race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and lived experience greatly inform the experiences of individuals. Accessibility plans should acknowledge the principle of intersectionality and the diversity within the disability community.
4. **Inclusion:** All British Columbians, including persons with disabilities, should be able to participate fully and equally in their communities.
5. **Self-Determination:** Accessibility plans should seek to empower people with disabilities to make their own choices and pursue the lives they wish to live.
6. **Universal Design:** The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design defines Universal Design as “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.” An accessibility plan should be designed to meet the needs of all people who interact with the Organization.

### **Our Commitment to Accessibility:**

Accessibility refers to the degree of ease with which people with disabilities can use and enjoy something such as a device, service, or place. At MEI Schools, we are committed to providing an environment that is accessible and practical for all members of our diverse community. We recognize the importance of conscious planning, design, and effort in ensuring that barriers are removed and accessibility is increased.

Our school is committed to working collaboratively with the community to provide equitable treatment to people with disabilities in a way that respects their dignity. To achieve this goal, we have outlined the following commitments:

- Engage with staff, community members and people with disabilities in the development and review of its accessibility plan.
  - Ensure that our school board policies and procedures align with the principles of accessibility.
  - Improve access to facilities, policies, programs, practices, and services for students, staff, parents/guardians, volunteers, and community members.
  - Continually improve accessibility for people with disabilities in our school community.
- disabilities.

## **Our Approach:**

At MEI Schools, we believe that all members of our community have the right to be treated with dignity, given an opportunity to participate, and provided with access to learning and community. Our approach is grounded in the core provincial principles of accessibility, including adaptability, collaboration, diversity, inclusion, self-determination, and universal design.

In September 2023, we began the process of establishing an accessibility committee and identifying barriers to accessibility in our school community. This process involved:

- Calling for applications for members of the Accessibility Committee
- Assessing the current physical and architectural accessibility of our school.
- Conducting surveys and interviews to understand the issues, challenges, and priorities of stakeholders within our school community
- Holding key discussions to identify barriers to accessibility
- Developing a school feedback tool
- Prioritization of actions to be taken
- Establishing a monitoring and evaluation process

Our approach is designed to recognize the gaps and opportunities to improve accessibility in our school community. By engaging in thoughtful planning, meaningful engagement, training, and direct action, we aim to deliver lasting accessibility improvements for all members of our community.

## **Section 3: The Accessibility Committee**

### **Purpose of the Accessibility Committee**

Under the Accessible B.C. Act, organizations must establish an Accessibility Committee to assist with identifying and preventing barriers to individuals in or interacting with the organization. The purpose of the accessibility committee is to work collaboratively to assess and improve community accessibility, focusing on the experiences of individuals with disabilities while encompassing the whole community. The Accessibility Committee also advises the school Administrators on strategies to reduce social, physical, sensory and other barriers that prevent people from fully participating in all aspects of school community life.

### **Recruitment to the Accessibility Committee**

Under the Accessible B.C. Act, the selection of accessibility committee members must, to the extent possible, align with the following goals:

- At least half the members are persons with disabilities (PWD), or individuals who support or are from organizations that support PWDs;
- At least one member is an Indigenous person; and
- Members reflect the diversity of persons in B.C.

A callout for applications to the Accessibility Committee was conducted in September 2023 to recruit a diverse representation as outlined above. The Accessibility Committee was formally constituted in November 2023. Current members of the Accessibility Coordinating Committee are listed below.



## Accessibility Committee Membership

Committee Member	Position/Representation
Peter Hay	Committee Chair, MEI Advancement Manager, Supports PWD
Vijay Manuel	Committee Member, Head of MEI Schools
Shawn Burkinshaw	Committee Member, MEI Elementary School Principal, Indigenous
Rick Havinga	Committee Member, MEI IT Manager, PWD & Supports PWD
Tammi Hildebrand	Committee Member, MEI Learning Support Services Teacher, Supports PWD
Lorraine Wind	Committee Member, MEI Schools Human Resources Manager
Leanne Pauls	Committee Member, MEI Schools Executive Assistant

## Section 4: Consultation Conducted

### Barrier-identification Methodologies

The Accessibility Committee used the following barrier-identification methods:

Methodology	Description	Status
Audit of policies and practices	A review of current policies and practices that promote accessibility and inclusion was conducted by key staff members.	In process
Survey to Staff	An accessibility and inclusion survey was developed and distributed to staff.	Completed Feb. 2024
Survey to Parents/Guardians	An accessibility and inclusion survey was developed and distributed to parents/guardians.	Completed Feb. 2024
School Physical Accessibility Audit	The Committee conducted a School Physical Accessibility Audit.	Completed Feb. 2024
Accessibility Feedback Tool	A feedback tool was developed and posted to the school website. Information about the tool was shared with school stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, outside professionals and parents/guardians).	Completed Apr. 2024

Accessibility Committee	The Accessibility Committee reviewed the input and feedback from the survey, assessment, and feedback tool. The Committee collaborated to suggest priority areas to target in the Accessibility Plan. This was shared with administrators who also approve the priority areas for the plan.	Ongoing
-------------------------	---	---------

## Section 5: Accessibility Feedback Tool

MEI Schools developed an online feedback tool that included a series of questions about accessibility experiences that students, staff and members of the school community could complete. The tool was posted to the Resources page of the school website and an information announcement about the tool was provided to students, staff and parents/guardians. Feedback could be anonymous, or people could add their name and contact information if they wished to be contacted. The following are the contents of the online Accessibility Feedback Tool.

### Report an Accessibility Barrier or Support MEI Schools Accessibility Feedback Form

At MEI Schools, we want to learn about specific barriers or helpful supports that people encounter when they are trying to:

- Access a school program, building, or school information
- Receive a service or support

The MEI Schools Accessibility Committee reviews feedback quarterly and will be used for the revision of future accessibility planning. If you need an accommodation for your student or if this is an urgent matter, please contact the school directly.

1. Please provide the date the barrier or support was experienced.
2. Please select the school the barrier or support was experienced.
3. What were you or someone you know trying to access?
4. What was the barrier?
5. Accessibility barrier or support details (be as specific as possible).
6. Do you have any recommendations for what would make it better?
7. Do you wish to be contacted about your responses? Yes No
  - a. If yes, please provide your name and email address

Thank you for providing your valuable feedback!

## Section 6: Accessibility Accomplishments and Barriers

### Key Discussion Themes – Accessibility Accomplishments Identified

The guiding principles of inclusive practice inform MEI Schools programs, policies, practices, and services to reduce and minimize barriers to accessibility for people with disabilities. We strive to create an environment that is accessible and to ensure continuous improvement in accessibility. There are several initiatives at MEI Schools to identify, remove and prevent barriers for people with disabilities. The following is a synopsis of some of the major achievements noted in the feedback:

#### Learning

1. Great team of integrated learning support staff.
2. Variety of supports available for students including educational assistants.
3. Adaptations to learning workflows and ongoing communication with teachers.

#### School Policies and Practices

1. Mental Health and Well-being Supports
  - a. The school recognizes the importance of mental health and well-being of its students and staff, especially as the world has experienced the COVID-19. Ongoing initiatives are being explored to assess and improve the mental health of students and staff to ensure support and positive outcomes.
2. Accessibility Awareness Training
  - a. Ongoing training continues to be provided to staff and students that supports accessibility awareness, obligations, and inclusive environments.
3. Physical and Architectural Environment
  - a. The school conducted a Physical and Architectural Environment Audit.
  - b. The schools have invested in equipment and upgrades to facilities that support accessible school communities. Ex: standing desks, office that allows for sensory diffusion, elevators in each school, railings on the stairs or railings around, level entrances, quiet learning areas outside of classrooms, chairs that rock, access to corner lockers with more space for mobility.

### Key Discussion Themes – Accessibility Barriers Identified

#### Learning Barriers

1. Additional spaces in each school that are designated as quiet learning environments
2. Continued sensitivity to decibel impact for those sensitive hearing needs - audiology Volume of music at school events (chapels and assemblies).

#### Physical and Architecture Environment Barriers

1. Accessibility of washrooms.
2. Accessibility through doorways.
3. Accessibility of walkways around campus.

## **Resource Barriers**

1. Assessment of sound barrier usage throughout various learning environments.

## **School Policy and Practice Barriers**

1. Continued monitoring and adjustment of emergency evacuation protocols and individual evacuation plans.

## **Section 7: Our Three-Year Plan (2024-2027)**

### **Overview**

This Accessibility Plan outlines the measures MEI Schools will take to remove and prevent barriers and to promote inclusion for individuals with disabilities in our school community. The plan is based on the Accessibility Principles of Adaptability, Collaboration, Diversity, Inclusion, Self-Determination, and Universal Design, as set out in the Accessible B.C. Act.

### **Accessibility Priorities**

The Accessibility Advisory Committee acknowledges both that a lot of good work has already been done to address accessibility barriers and that there is still work to do. To evoke meaningful and lasting change, the Committee is recommending only a few priority actions to start, with the expectation that further actions will arise as the school engages more intentionally in this work. Based on the feedback gathered from staff, parents/guardians, and students, the Accessibility Committee has identified the following areas as the top priority for improving accessibility in the school district community.

#### **Priority #1: Physical and Architectural**

MEI Schools will improve the accessibility of the physical architectural environment for all individuals, including those with disabilities, starting with the following action:

- Reviewing the full Site Accessibility Audit that was conducted to get a better overview of accessibility needs and strengths across the campus.

#### **Priority #2: Attitudinal**

MEI Schools will seek to remove attitudinal barriers through ongoing learning opportunities for staff, starting with:

- Developing priorities for staff training.

#### **Priority #3: School Policy and Practice**

MEI Schools will complete a review of its policies and practices to ensure alignment with the principles of accessibility, and to address any identified gaps in staff training or knowledge on accessibility issues.

## Section 8: Monitoring and Evaluation

The Accessibility Planning Committee will meet quarterly, or more often, if necessary, to review progress and evaluate the effectiveness of the plan's implementation and plan for increased accessibility throughout the school. The committee will ensure the following steps are taken regarding the Three-Year Accessibility Plan:

- Prepare an annual status report on the progress of the measures taken to implement the plan.
- Review and update the Three-Year Accessibility Plan every three years in consultation with persons with disabilities and other relevant community members.

## Section 9: How to Give us Feedback

In addition to the public availability of the plan, MEI Schools will continue to post an annual status report on the progress of the Three-Year Accessibility Plan on the school's website. Accessible formats of the plan will be made available upon request. Questions, comments, or feedback regarding the Accessibility Plan may be directed to: [accessibility@meischools.com](mailto:accessibility@meischools.com)

## Section 10: Appendices

### Appendix A: About Disability

#### The Disability Continuum

Although there is no universally accepted meaning for the word "disability". However, the Ontario Human Rights Code provides definitions of disability that form our guiding principles. Definitions of disability can be placed on a continuum. At one end, disability is explained in terms of medical conditions (medical model). At the opposite end, disability is explained in terms of the social and physical contexts in which it occurs (environmental model).

The medical model focuses on deficiencies, symptoms and treatments. The World Health Organization's (WHO) 1976 definition for disability, for example, is "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being." Medical model definitions promote the idea that disability is a deviation from the norm.

Many people with disabilities are troubled by definitions that regard disability as abnormal, preferring instead to portray disability as commonplace, natural, and in fact, inevitable. As people age, they experience gradual declines in visual acuity, auditory sensitivity, range of motion, bodily strength, and mental powers. Significant functional limitations affect almost half of people between the ages of 55 and 79, and over 70% of people over 80 (World Health Organization (WHO) report titled "Ageing and health", 2015). Beyond middle age, disability is the norm.

The environmental model explains disability in relation to social and physical contexts. In this view, the environment, not an individual's medical condition, causes disability. For example, during an electrical blackout, a person who is completely blind can effortlessly navigate around the home, hammer nails, and, if a Braille user, read a novel. A sighted person would be unable to perform these tasks easily, if at all. In this example, the environment disables the sighted person.

The environmental model emphasizes that people with disabilities are capable individuals, and it is the barriers in the built and human environments, not their medical conditions, that create disability. Disability occurs when the world is designed only for a certain way of living, without considering the natural variation among human beings. Barriers are created by humans, and modifying how we live, the tools we use, and our understanding of the proper way to do things can eliminate or minimize design problems that cause barriers. Systematic barriers can be eliminated by modifying policies, plans, and processes. Attitudes that cause barriers can be addressed through disability awareness, respect, and positive interactions with people with disabilities.

#### Types of Disability and Functional Limitations

A person's disability may make it physically or cognitively challenging to perform everyday tasks such as operating a keyboard, reading a sign, differentiating colours, distinguishing sounds, climbing stairs, grasping small items, remembering words, or

doing arithmetic.

There are many kinds of disabilities, including physical, sensory, hearing, mental health, developmental and learning. Disabilities can be visible or invisible.

## **Visual Disabilities**

Visual disabilities reduce one's ability to see clearly. Very few people are totally blind. Some have limited vision such as tunnel vision, where a person has a loss of peripheral or side vision, or a lack of central vision, which means they cannot see straight ahead. Some can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light. Impaired vision can restrict a person's ability to read signs, locate landmarks or see hazards. In some cases, it may be difficult to tell if a person has a visual disability. Others may use a guide dog or white cane.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with visual disabilities:

- Identify yourself when you approach the person and speak directly to them.
- Speak normally and clearly.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like "handicapped".
- Unless it is an emergency, only touch the person if you have been given permission.
- If you offer assistance, wait until you receive permission.
- Offer your arm (the elbow) to guide the person and walk slowly.
- Service animals are working and must always pay attention. Refrain from engaging with the animal.
- If you're giving directions or verbal information, be precise and clear. For example, if you're approaching a door or an obstacle, say so. Don't just assume the individual can't see you.
- When entering a room, show the individual to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- Identify landmarks or other details to orient the person to the environment around them.
- Ensure you say good-bye prior to leaving the individual.
- Be patient. Things may take a little longer.

## **Hard of Hearing and Deafness**

People who have hearing loss may be deaf or hard of hearing. Like other disabilities, hearing loss has a wide variety of degrees. People who are hard of hearing may require assistive devices when communicating. While some people may use sign language, notes or hearing aids when communicating, others may also use email, pagers, TTY telephone service or Bell Canada Relay Service.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people who are deaf or hard of hearing:

- Always ask how you can help. Don't shout.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like "handicapped".
- Attract the person's attention before speaking. The best way is a gentle touch on the shoulder or gently waving your hand.
- Make sure you are in a well-lit area where the person can see your face.

- Look at and speak directly to the person. Address the person, not their interpreter.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier, for example a pen and paper.
- Keep your face clearly visible when speaking.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood.
- Service animals are working and must always pay attention. Refrain from engaging with the animal.
- Any personal (e.g., financial) matters should be discussed in a private room to avoid other people overhearing
- Be patient. Communication for people who are deaf is different because their first language may not be English. It may be American Sign Language (ASL).
- If the person uses a hearing aid, try to speak in an area with few competing sounds.

### **Physical Disabilities**

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities and not all require a wheelchair. For example, people who have arthritis, heart or lung conditions, or amputations may also have difficulty moving, standing, or sitting. It may be difficult to identify a person with a physical disability.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with physical disabilities:

- Speak normally and directly to the person rather than someone who is with them.
- People with physical disabilities often have their own ways of doing things. Ask before you help.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like “handicapped”.
- Be patient and be sure you understand their needs.
- Unless it is an emergency, refrain from touching any assistive devices, including wheelchairs.
- Provide the person with information about accessible features of the immediate environment (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.).



## **Intellectual Disabilities**

People with intellectual or developmental disabilities may have difficulty doing many things most of us take for granted. These disabilities can mildly or profoundly limit one's ability to learn. You may not be able to know that someone has one of these disabilities unless you are told, or you notice the way people act, ask questions or body language.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with intellectual disabilities:

- As much as possible, treat the person with an intellectual disability like anyone else. They may understand more than you think, and they will appreciate you treating them with respect.
- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like "handicapped".
- Use simple words and short sentences.
- Make sure the person understands what you've said.
- If you can't understand what's being said, ask again.
- Give one piece of information at a time.
- Be polite and patient.
- Speak directly to the person, not to someone who is with the person.

## **Learning or Cognitive Disabilities**

Learning or cognitive disabilities can result in a host of different communications difficulties for people. They can be subtle, as in having difficulty reading, or more pronounced, but they can interfere with the person's ability to receive, express or process information. You may not be able to know that someone has one of these disabilities unless you are told, or you notice the way people act, ask questions or body language.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with learning disabilities or disabilities:

- Patience and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.
- Recognize that some people with communication difficulties use augmentative communication systems such as Signed English and Picture Exchange System.
- When you know that someone with a learning disability needs help, ask how you can best help.
- Speak normally and clearly, and directly to the person
- Take some time — people with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- Try to find ways to provide information in a way that works best for them. For example, have a paper and pen handy.
- If you're dealing with a child, be patient, encouraging and supportive.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like "handicapped".
- Be courteous and patient and the person will let you know how to best provide

service in a way that works for them.

## **Mental Health Disabilities**

People with mental health disabilities look like everyone else. You won't know that the person has a mental health disability unless you're informed of it. But if someone is experiencing difficulty in controlling their symptoms or is in a crisis, you may need to help. Be calm and professional and let the person tell you how you can best help.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with mental health disabilities:

- Treat people with a mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Be confident and reassuring and listen to people with a mental health disability and their needs.
- If someone appears to be in a crisis, ask him or her to tell you the best way to help.
- Take the person with a mental health disability seriously, and work with them to meet their needs.

## **Speech and Language Disabilities**

Some people have communication challenges. It could be the result of cerebral palsy, hearing loss, or another condition that makes it difficult to pronounce words, causes slurring or stuttering, or not being able to express oneself or understand written or spoken language. Some people who have severe difficulties may use communication boards, sign language or other assistive devices.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people with speech and language disabilities:

- Just because a person has one disability doesn't mean they have another. For example, if a person has difficulty speaking; make no assumption they have an intellectual disability as well.
- If you don't understand, ask the person to repeat the information.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like "handicapped".
- If you are able, ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- Take some time. Be patient and polite and give the person whatever time they need to get their point across.
- Allow the individual to finish their sentences themselves without interruption.
- Patience, respect, and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.

## **Deaf-Blind Disabilities**

A person who is deafblind cannot see or hear to some extent. This results in greater difficulties in accessing information and managing daily activities. Most people who are deafblind will be accompanied by an intervener, a professional who helps with

communicating. Interveners are trained in special sign language that involves touching the hands of the client in a two-hand, manual alphabet or finger spelling, and may guide and interpret for their client.

Here are some suggestions to help you interact with people who are deafblind:

- Make no assumptions about what a person can or cannot do. Some deaf-blind people have some sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- Avoid referring to the disability or using phrases like “handicapped”.
- A deaf-blind person is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them or give you an assistance card or a note explaining how to communicate with them.
- Speak directly to the person, as you normally would, not to the intervener.
- Identify yourself to the intervener when you approach the person who is deaf-blind.
- Don’t touch service animals – they are working and must always pay attention.
- Unless it’s an emergency, refrain from touching a deaf-blind person without permission.

## **Appendix B: Suggested References/Resources**

### **Global, Canadian and Local Accessibility Context and Legislation**

[United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

[Canada Ratifies the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

[Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#)

[British Columbia Framework for Accessibility Legislation](#)

[Accessible British Columbia Act](#)

[BC Accessibility Legislation Plan Language Summary](#)

### **Accessibility Planning Resources for Schools and School Boards:**

[BC Accessibility Hub](#)

[Developing Your First Accessibility Plan: A Guide for BC Prescribed Organizations](#)

[Creating an Accessibility Committee](#)

[Universal Design](#)

[Special Education Technology BC \(SET BC\)](#)

[Accessible Resource Centre - BC](#)

[Standards Council of Canada](#)

[B6521-95 Barrier-Free Design](#)

[A Guide to Creating Accessible Play Spaces](#) (Rick Hansen Foundation)

[Canadian National Institute for the Blind \(CNIB\)](#)

[Provincial Resource Centre for the Visually Impaired \(PRCVI\)](#)

[Canadian Hard of Hearing Association](#)

[Canadian Hearing Services](#)

[Provincial Outreach Program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing \(POPDHH\)](#)

[Auditory Outreach Provincial Resource Program](#)

[Provincial Outreach Program for Students with Deafblindness](#)

[Provincial Inclusion Outreach Program](#) (Complex Needs)

[Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders](#)

[Provincial Outreach Program for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder](#)

[Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada](#)

[Learning Disabilities Association of Canada](#)

[Brain Injury Canada](#)

[Spinal Cord Injury Canada](#)

[Tourette Canada](#)

[Kelty Mental Health \(BC Children's Hospital\)](#)

[Gifted Children's Association of BC](#)

[Specialist Association of Gifted Educators in BC](#)