
Wheelchairs and physical access

Best practice guidelines

Recommended supplement: Social model of disability

Definitions

In this guide, we refer to **physical access** as a property of an environment or space that determines how well a person can physically access the environment or space. If a person has **physical access needs**, they need additional support or modifications to physically access the environment or space.

This may be due to their **physical mobility**, which refers to their ability to perform physical movements. This includes both **gross motor skills**, which are movements that use lots of your main muscles (sitting, standing, walking) and **fine motor skills**, which are smaller movements that involve being precise (writing, tying a shoelace, using cutlery) (Lewis 2020).

Conditions and reasons

A person may have limited physical mobility for any number of reasons. These may include:

- A **temporary** physical condition, like a broken leg
- A **permanent** physical condition they have had all their life, like cerebral palsy
- A permanent physical condition they have **acquired later in their life**, like a spinal cord injury
- An ongoing physical condition that **fluctuates** in severity day-to-day, like arthritis
- An ongoing physical condition that **deteriorates over time**, like muscular dystrophy or multiple sclerosis

People may use **mobility aids** to support themselves to access an environment or space. This includes aids like: wheelchairs; walking frames; canes; reaching devices. We will explore these in-depth within the guide.

People may also use particular **accessibility aids** to support themselves to perform physical movements within an environment or space. These are tools, devices, or support that enable disabled people to



perform particular tasks, or to enjoy a better quality of life. They may be used by any disabled person—not just those with a physical mobility condition or with physical access needs.

Accessibility aids that may be particularly useful for those with physical mobility conditions or physical access needs include:

- Wheelchairs: there are both manual and electric wheelchairs, as well as shower wheelchairs and wheelchairs for specific situations (hospital visits, air travel, uneven terrain, beach and swimming)
- Walking frames
- Reaching and grabbing tools
- Walking cane
- Switches: head switch, hand switch, breath activated switches

A person who uses a wheelchair or another mobility aid may only need their aid in certain situations. For example, a wheelchair user may be able to stand up to reach something on a higher shelf. This is referred to as an **ambulatory wheelchair-user**. It's important to remember that an ambulatory wheelchair-user has not 'recovered' from their condition and was not 'faking' their access needs.

It is also important to remember that most people with physical access needs, including people who use a wheelchair or mobility aid, are not intellectually disabled or nonspeaking. In general, you should speak to and interact with them like anybody else.

A person may also have physical access needs for reasons other than a physical condition or physical disability. For example, a blind person navigating by a cane, with a sighted guide, or with an assistance dog, will have physical access needs as well.

There are also **situational conditions** where physical mobility may be limited. This refers to instances like a person pushing a trolley or a pram who is unable to use stairs; a person unable to use their arms as they are holding a baby, child, or animal; a person wearing a bulky costume who is unable to move down narrow hallways; or a person carrying a heavy box. People in each of these situations will also benefit from the same physical space considerations that a person with a physical condition will benefit from.

Language and identity

Quite often, physical conditions are embraced as a core component of a person's identity, and may be seen as a different and equally valid way for a person's body to exist. This is compounded as society is physically and socially built to meet the physical access needs of people without physical mobility

v.1.0 | Updated June 2021

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conditions as the default. Examining the way that bodies can and cannot interact with physical and social spaces is known as the **social model of disability**.

Many non-disabled people have advocated for using **person-first language** when referring to disabled people. This means using 'person with a disability' instead of 'disabled person' when referring to someone who is disabled. Most disabled people prefer **identity-first language**, such as 'disabled person' or 'I'm disabled', because they consider their disability to be an integral part of who they are. This is why throughout the guide, identity-first language has been used. (If somebody informs you of their preference, regardless of whether that is person-first or identity-first, please respect their personal wishes as reflective of their individual wants or needs—not necessarily as reflective of an entire community.)

When we speak about people who use wheelchairs, the term **wheelchair-user** or **person who uses a wheelchair** is preferred over terms like wheelchair-bound or person confined to a wheelchair. This is because for wheelchair-users, their wheelchairs are seen as something that enables them further mobility rather than something restricting their mobility.

When speaking on behalf of any disabled or neurodiverse group use what actual disabled people—with the relevant disability or neurodiverse condition—suggest as the appropriate language. This is especially when talking about a specific disabled person; ask them how you should talk about them. Different people may have different preferences when it comes to language use, and their preferences are the correct choice in interactions with them.

Respectful interactions

It is important to be respectful when interacting with a person who uses a wheelchair, or who has a physical condition. This means both in the initial meeting, and in any ongoing interaction. What this respect looks like will be dependent on the context of the interaction and your relationship to the person (and their relationship with you).

Keep your hands to yourself, and don't touch their wheelchair or mobility aid. It is important to think of a person's wheelchair or mobility aid in the same way we think of their physical body. We shouldn't touch someone's body without their consent first, and we need to do the same thing for their mobility aids and wheelchairs.

Be respectful of their autonomy and independence, and don't help without checking they would like help first. Many people who use wheelchairs or mobility aids have existing systems and strategies for living



their day-to-day life—the same as everyone does. When someone jumps in to help without asking first, it undermines the person's independence and autonomy and may cause more hindrance than help.

Respect their privacy, and avoid asking invasive, personal, or intimate questions unless they are needed as part of your interaction. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Questions about how they have sex
- Questions about why they use a wheelchair or mobility aid, or why they move differently
- Questions like 'What's wrong with you?' or similar
- Questions about how they use the toilet, take a shower, or perform other personal care routines

If you are a carer, support worker, or health professional, or in another professional role where some personal, intimate information is needed for your work with them, some of these questions may be acceptable in context.

Respect their disabledness, and avoid praying for them, pitying them, or talking about how awful their lives must be. Many people with physical access needs, or who use mobility aids, see their disability as a core part of who they are as a person.

Respect their humanity, and avoid glorifying their everyday actions as being remarkable just because they're using a wheelchair, using a mobility aid, or have physical access needs. This is often referred to as **inspiration porn**, where the mundane, everyday actions and existence of a disabled person are then perceived as being 'inspiring', as they are living beyond their disability—this supposedly 'bad' element of their life. This disrespects and trivialises the real achievements and accomplishments of disabled people.

Respect and inclusion within the workplace

Within the workplace, there are particular considerations, laws and policies regarding physical access that need to be accounted for. Some of these will vary from workplace to workplace, based on what sort of work they physically do within that space. Some will vary according to the role of the person with physical access needs. There will be some that apply to any workplace. It's important to look at which will apply in your workplace and for your employees, and to seek consultancy and advice from people with physical access needs.

It is also important to design your workplace to meet access needs, and to have policies in place around access needs, before they are needed by employees. This means making sure your workplace is



physically accessible for people with different access needs before you interview someone with physical access needs. This shows all people that your workplace is somewhere they can physically work.

Creating a physically accessible and physically inclusive space

There are several things you need to consider to make your space physically accessible. Here is a non-exhaustive list of options:

- Making sure the bathrooms are accessible for wheelchairs users
- Create wide aisles and walkways with easily navigable terrain
- Making sure elevators and ramps are free from obstruction and located close to the main space
- Tables, shelves, counters, and demos at adjustable, a variety of, or wheelchair accessible heights
- Create space at tables, counters, and demos for a wheelchair-user to be with non-wheelchair-users within the same space
- Create areas at tables, counters, and demos where multiple wheelchair users can be within the same space
- Provide seating options for queues, talks, demos
- Have a wide range of accessible control schemes for any activities - consider how someone who uses a reaching aid or who has limited muscle movement can participate

Representation in media

There are many different conditions and reasons that can lead to a person having physical access needs, so if you intend to represent these in your game or other media, it is vital that you research the specific situation you are planning to reflect and engage with consultants where possible.

Some tips:

- Ensure your character has more to their personality than just their disability, physical condition, or physical access needs.
- Some people consider their physical access needs or the condition that caused it to be an integral part of their identity, while others don't. Some are happy talking about it, while others would prefer to keep the details private. Reflect this variation in your characters.



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- Think about how the character's condition or needs are shared with the audience. Many people with physical access needs will not immediately speak about these needs or the reasons for them.
- Some chronic conditions have variable limitations, like fibromyalgia, lupus, and arthritis. On a good day, people with these conditions may require minor or no physical access support. Even during a flare-up, these conditions may not be immediately visible to an audience.

Resources

Disabled World

<https://www.disabled-world.com>

Aggregated news site with links about various disabilities and surrounding topics like assistive technology and legal information.

Independent Living Centres Australia

<https://ilcaustralia.org.au/>

Examples of what mobility aids look like.

National Center for Disability and Journalism

<https://ncdj.org/resources/organizations/>

Resource for finding organisations that work with disabilities.

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v.1.0 | Updated June 2021

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hello@representme.charity