

Guidelines for discussing or portraying people with Down syndrome

About to write, film or photograph a piece about a person with Down syndrome? Media professionals focus on reporting the news quickly and accurately, in a fast-paced world, under increasingly tight deadlines and across a broad variety of mediums.

It's important to ensure that people with Down syndrome are portrayed as real people – rather than as heroic, inspirational, victims, or sufferers. They have jobs, families, talents, opinions and faults, just like everyone else.

This resource may help you to present the person and their story in a sensitive and dignified way. This resource covers:

- Before you start
- Pre-interview
- During the interview
- Photos, video and TV
- Language
- A final checklist

Before you start

Think about...	Because...
If it's not essential to the story, do you need to focus on or include the person's disability?	People with a disability are people first - they are not all the same or defined by their disability.
Giving the person with Down syndrome a voice, even if it's a challenge.	Otherwise, it implies they can't speak or think for themselves.
Portraying the person as part of their community.	People with Down syndrome are not a separate class of people. They have jobs, friends, families, relationships and viewpoints.
Trying not to portray people with Down syndrome who achieve great success or physical feats as 'heroic/inspirational'.	It suggests that it is surprising that people with Down syndrome can achieve great success.

<p>Avoiding terms like 'despite' and 'overcoming the odds/adversity' when describing a person's achievements.</p>	<p>It implies that people with Down syndrome are limited by their disability and unable to achieve success.</p>
<p>Trying not to portray people with Down syndrome who marry/have a job/have children/undertake daily activities as 'extraordinary'.</p>	<p>It implies that people with Down syndrome are not capable of these things.</p>
<p>Being careful not to portray having Down syndrome as a tragedy or an affliction/illness.</p>	<p>Every person with Down syndrome is an individual whose life is valuable and rich.</p>
<p>Trying not to divulge too much information about the person.</p>	<p>Those with Down syndrome, like others in the community, can be targets of violence and crime. Also, like people without a disability they choose to share personal information as they see fit.</p>

Pre-interview

Along with your usual pre-interview research and preparation, some things you might like to consider when interviewing a person with a disability are:

1. Have you thought about the right interview location, e.g. accessible via ramps/lifts/accessible parking/accessible toilet?
2. Will the interviewee require any additional support, for example an attendant carer or a sign language interpreter? Ask the person if they need anything.

During the interview

When interviewing a person with Down syndrome, it's important to take a moment to think about your approach. Here are some key considerations to keep in mind:

1. Ask the person how they feel - every person is different and can view their disability differently.
2. Ask them how they would like their disability to be described.
3. Make sure you focus on the person during the interview, even if a carer, friend or family member tries to speak on their behalf. It is important the person with a disability is heard.

4. In many instances you will need to allow the person time to provide their answer.
5. Ask the hard questions (if the disability is central to the story) - don't assume a person with a disability will be too sensitive to talk about the way they deal with certain tasks in their life.

Photos, video and TV

How people with Down syndrome are represented visually is just as important as the language used to describe them. This list provides a guide for photographing or filming people with a disability:

- Use photos that show the person with a disability in a way that is positive and respectful, not as a victim or someone to be pitied.
- Refer to the person's disability only if it is critical to the story.
- Try not to include the person's carer or family unless it is absolutely necessary to support the person or central to the piece – show them as independent.
- Avoid cutting away to equipment like wheelchairs when filming – focus on the person, as you would in any other interview unless it is central to the story.
- Unless this is the focus of the story, try not to show the person in isolation. Many people with Down syndrome are active in the community.

Language

Media professionals will always need to describe things in the most concise way possible, particularly when it comes to headlines. It's a journalist's job to communicate in clear and simple language. While it won't always be possible, consider these language preferences wherever you can.

Some of the more common misused terms and recommended alternatives are provided here. The key consideration is to always put the person first, not the disability.

Do use	Instead of
Person with a disability Person with Down syndrome, for example: John has Down syndrome	Disabled/the disabled/victim of/suffers from/handicapped/special/stricken with/unfortunate Autistic person Epileptic person/autistic person
Person with an intellectual disability	Mentally disabled/intellectually challenged

Person with Down syndrome	Down's kids
Accessible toilet/accessible parking space/accessible entry	Disabled toilet/disabled parking space/disabled entry
Person who uses a wheelchair	Confined to a wheelchair/wheelchair bound
Person without a disability	Normal/non-disabled

A final checklist

Have I checked?

1. Is the story about a person's disability? If not, don't mention it.
2. Is the person or their disability described appropriately? (See language section)
3. Does the piece use excessive emotive language? e.g. tragedy/triumph.
4. Is the headline/teaser appropriate? Try to use the person first principle.
5. Are the visuals sensitive and appropriate? (See photos, video and TV section).
6. Are there quotes/grabs from the interviewee?
7. What is Down syndrome?
8. Do I need to contact Down Syndrome Australia for expert comment?

*Much of this information has been sourced from the Victorian Office For Disability resource 'Reporting it Right'.