



**Disability Sheffield**  
The Centre for Independent Living

## **Disability Sheffield Information Service** **Social Model of Disability Factsheet**



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## The Social Model of Disability

Research from the Office for Disability Issues has shown that only six per cent of disabled people know about the social model of disability. Does this matter?

Disability is a very personal issue. We may experience disability ourselves or have relatives or friends who have an impairment. Even if we have no experience of disability now, we may do in the future as a result of ageing, accident or illness. As a society we talk about disability and learn about our attitudes to disability from one another. So what we think about disability and how society treats disabled people is very important and will affect most of us in our lives.

There are two main but different approaches to the way people think of disability.

### The Medical Model of Disability

This view of 'disability' relates to the belief that some part of the body or mind 'has something wrong with it' which causes a **disability**. The attitude of society in this model is that:-

- Disabled people should be made better and a cure found;
- If this is not possible, then disabled people must be looked after and provided with special services
- It is easier to look after disabled people if they are treated differently and separated from 'normal' people
- It is terrible being disabled and everyone should be sorry for disabled people



We can describe this as a **medical approach to disability** which sees the disabled person as the 'problem'.

### The Social Model of Disability

The social model views the **impairment** and **disability** as two separate things.

**Impairment** is 'an injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function'

Impairment might :-

- Affect the way that a person's mind or body works
- Affect the way a person looks
- Affect the way a person behaves and communicates

**Disability** is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers

The way that society is currently organised tends to treat everybody as if they are the same and doesn't take account of individual differences and requirements.



To give a simple example, most people can walk and also use cars. This is not thought to be different or unusual but the 'norm' and society is organised with pavements, roads, garages etc to facilitate this.

Someone who cannot walk may use a wheelchair but because this is thought to be unusual or 'abnormal' the wheelchair user will find it difficult to access the built environment e.g. steps into a building or the first floor of a building. The building has not been adapted for wheelchair users at the design stage creating a **barrier** for wheelchair users.

If a lift or ramp is included as part of the design then someone who uses a wheelchair has no access difficulty.

We can describe this as the **social approach to disability** which views the **barriers** that prevent disabled people from participating fully in society as the 'problem'.

Barriers are not just in the built environment but can include:-

- Stereotypes that reflect negative images of disabled people
- Materials in a format that cannot be understood e.g. use of written text for someone with a visual impairment
- Inaccessible transport and housing
- Insufficient personal assistance or support
- Lack of equipment and/or adaptations
- Inflexible organisational procedures and practices
- Physical obstacles both in and outside buildings
- Inadequate access to educational opportunities and leisure activities
- Reduced employment prospects
- Lack of neurological diversity – communicating in ways that cannot be understood

From the viewpoint of the social approach to disability people with impairment are excluded and discriminated against i.e. treated less favourably because of the barriers in society. Due to these barriers people with impairment have reduced opportunities to take part in ordinary day-to-day activities on an equal level with other people.

Most impairments cannot be cured, or changed, but we can change society.

Disability advocates the 'social approach' to disability, rather than the 'medical approach'. We believe that people with impairments are disabled by the barriers they face in every day life – such as inaccessible communication formats, other people's attitudes or inaccessible buildings - **not** by the way minds and bodies work.

The work of Disability Sheffield is underpinned by a social approach to disability. The company's values and behaviour reflect this. The 'social approach' has been recognised and adopted as good practice by an increasing number of organisations and by central government, as well as internationally.

The social approach to disability offers a way forward for disabled people. It provides a means to challenge and change the way society operates. It enables disabled people to be included

and gives a more positive identity to being a disabled person. We believe that a society in which everyone knows about the social model of disability is one where people will want to see change that improves disabled people's access to and inclusion in society.


You can learn more about the social model at [the website of the Self Direction Community Project](#)

### **What do you think of this factsheet?**

If you would like to comment on this factsheet or provide additional information from your own experience please let us know and we would be happy to consider adding to or amending the factsheet. We welcome any comments to help us improve our service. Our contact details are:-

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