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World Institute  
on Disability



Gadim  
Media & Disability

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**Authentic portrayals of  
people with disabilities**





## Introduction

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Individuals with disabilities represent a worldwide community that's 1 billion people strong—in fact, it's estimated that 15% of the global population has some form of disability. In 184 countries their rights are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or by a country's own anti-discrimination laws.

In the United States alone, they have buying power as consumers of \$490 billion, and in the UK, estimated spending power of this group and their families is £249 billion. Globally, the disability market is said to rival the buying power of China.

Yet people with disabilities are forgotten by many companies and creators, they are rarely seen in the advertising/marketing, news, or entertainment media of a country. This is in large part due to ableism, which includes multiple forms of oppression of disabled people – outright discrimination and prejudice, fueled by the belief that disabled people are inferior or unimportant.

Shutterstock is focused on promoting more authentic representation in our content and marketing. This guide, created in partnership with the Global Alliance for Disability in Media and Entertainment (GADIM) and the World Institute on Disability (WID), provides ways to showcase the diversity of people with disabilities.





## Focus on Authentic and Diverse Representation

We can prevent negative stereotypes of people with disabilities by authentically showcasing the diversity of their identities and experiences:

- **All models should be real people with disabilities or chronic illnesses.** Models should consent to disclosing their disability in the photo description if it is not apparent. Descriptions and keywords should be specific to the disability, and not misidentify the model's disability.
- **Represent different disabilities, even hidden ones.** People with hidden disabilities are the largest group within the disability community. You can identify their disability in the description. For example - "Portrait of a teenage girl with Type 1 diabetes using her insulin pump."
- **Show all backgrounds, ages, races, ethnicities, genders, and LGBTQIA+ identities.** Be careful not to associate one racial or ethnic group with a specific disability. For example, depicting physically disabled white males as professionals in wheelchairs and young African Americans as working-class people with intellectual disabilities.<sup>6</sup>
- **If the photo is to depict a disability, the person with the disability should be front and center.** Do not focus on aides, interpreters, parents/family members, or caregivers.
- **Do not portray the experience of a disabled person as tragic or pitiful.** This is demeaning.
- **People with disabilities should not be depicted as "inspiring" for doing ordinary activities.** This objectifies them.
- **Do not represent a disability or chronic illness based on what an organization or parents' group says instead of actual people with the disability or condition.**
- **When photographing autistic people, do not take pictures of them with their hands over their ears, looking distressed, or sitting alone in a corner;** these are examples of some pervasive negative stereotypes.<sup>7</sup>



# Showcase the diversity of people with disabilities and their experiences

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These individuals live full lives. Depict a wide range of activities in your images. They hold similar jobs and participate in the same educational and recreational activities that we all enjoy. Show more:

- **Daily life scenarios:** People doing household chores, traveling, cooking, reading, outdoor activities, in transit, health visits at a doctor's office or at home or at work. A blind college student can enjoy a baseball game just as much as his sighted peers, but he follows the announcer's play by play or supplements his enjoyment of the game with its radio broadcast.
- **Enjoying entertainment, celebratory dining, shopping for and trying on clothes** either in a store or at home. A young autistic Asian man may be performing in a high school play, or a Latina woman with Down syndrome might be dancing at Carnival in Rio de Janeiro.
- **Crowning achievements:** Birth of a child, purchase of a new house, accessible renovations, new job, graduation, dating and relationships, milestone birthdays, etc.
- **Interacting with other people:** Including taking selfies. If you have control over grouping people with and without disabilities, try to represent at minimum the correct percentage of disabled individuals globally, i.e. 10-15%. Also, while photos of a group of disabled people are important to show cross-disability collaboration, do not only group people together without nondisabled people, because that can imply their segregation from mainstream activities, which frames them in an isolated way.
- **Respectfully and accurately represent medical settings and assistive devices.** When in medical settings, try to show the person as active and empowered, e.g. exercising in a rehab gym or playing an adaptive sport as part of recreation therapy







- **People who use assistive equipment or devices should be depicted with their personal mobility aids or devices.** Avoid depicting hospital mobility equipment because people do not use that in their everyday life. For example, there is a difference between transport wheelchairs and wheelchairs that are more common in day-day use.
- **When showing medical equipment or mobility aids, do not depict empty wheelchairs or focus solely on someone's assistive devices** such as hearing aids or prosthetic limbs.
- **Show the faces of your subjects.** Avoid cropping photos so the person is not seen, or showing only someone's back as they walk on their walker.

### **Inclusive shooting settings and working with people with disabilities. Make sure all images include accessibility for both subjects and viewers**

- **Photos should show locations that are accessible.** For example, if the subject of a photo has dwarfism, they should be photographed with objects that are appropriate for their height, such as in their adapted kitchen with lower countertops.
- **Plan camera angles carefully.** Research shows that a high-angle shot (one from above) makes the subject seem less important and a low-angle shot (one from below) makes the subject seem powerful. The eye-level shot is best because it conveys that the subject is equal. <sup>8</sup>
- **Lighting the setting for the image should be discussed with the model.** Bright or flashing lights or sounds associated with the lights might be distressing for people with certain conditions such as autism, and can cause seizures for people with epilepsy.
- **Don't ignore it - It's okay to ask how someone likes to be treated surrounding their disability** and to acknowledge their differences as you would anyone's uniqueness.
- **Have a conversation and speak directly to your subject.** Do not talk down to them literally or figuratively. If they use a wheelchair, sit in a chair to be on their same eye level if you are having a long conversation.





- **Follow the person's lead - Ask if they need help and respect the person's right to choose.** If the person has a service animal, discuss the animal's place in the photo and how you can interact with the animal. Never pet or interact with a service animal that has its harness on. It is working and should not be distracted.
- **Avoid sympathy and emphasizing "how hard" things must be** or how you feel sorry for them.
- **Avoid unwarranted praise** - It can be patronizing to tell someone with a disability that they're "inspiring" for doing things you wouldn't praise a nondisabled person for doing.
- **Respect personal space** - A person's mobility equipment, such as a wheelchair, scooter, walker, or cane, is part of their personal space. Do not touch or move it without permission.
- **To support and properly represent autistic people, ask them first what language, symbols, and terminology they prefer before asking neurotypical people.** Be aware of how symbols can support ableist notions. For example, many autistic self-advocates find it offensive that some autism organizations use the colorful puzzle piece to signal autism awareness.







## Descriptions and Keywords

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Descriptions tell us what the main subject is and defines the unique and specific actions that are taking place, always aim to include the who, what, and how of the scene.

The key to writing a good inclusive and accessible description is to describe the nuances of the visual narrative for the viewer.

For example, a photo could easily be described as “Two people talking on a softball diamond”, which leaves the viewer missing out on the crucial details of ethnicities, age ranges, where the models are standing in the frame, time of day etc.

To expand on the first description to provide inclusive and accessible details try: “An African American woman in her 30s talks to an elementary school-age white girl in the batter’s box on a softball diamond in bright summer sun”.

To mitigate any harmful metadata associated with people with disability, it is always important to clarify any descriptive terms with your model.

Remember to discuss disability terminology with your model to see if they prefer person-first or identity first language. i.e. autistic person, person with cerebral palsy, etc. Avoid referring to people as their disability, for example, “the disabled” or “the paraplegic.” Include high-level keyword phrases where applicable to enhance the model’s narrative and interaction with the scenario. For more information read our [Guidelines for Submitting Diverse and Inclusive Content](#).



*Example:*

“Middle aged Hispanic business woman with light skin using sign language on a video call from her office”

“Diverse group of 6 multi-ethnic friends, including a person with a prosthetic lower leg, having fun while sitting on the grass in a city park”



# How to find models with disabilities

Many people with disabilities can be found on all social media platforms and through hashtags like #DisabilityTwitter,<sup>9</sup> #WheelchairLife, #DisabledAndCute #DeafCommunity, #ActuallyAutistic, #InvisibleIllness, #ServiceDog, #Blind, #DisabilityInclusion, or the hashtag for a specific disability or condition, such as #EDS or #EhlersDanlos for the chronic illness Ehlers Danlos syndrome. You can also find them all over Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

Other ways to find subjects are to look at organizational lists. United Nations Enable has a list of accredited disability NGO's worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Stanford University's Office of Accessible Education lists a number of U.S. disability organizations by intersectional or disability-specific designations,<sup>11</sup> and disability organizations exist in most local communities as well as statewide. Each U.S. state has independent living centers, which can help photographers find local disabled people.<sup>12</sup> To find subjects in a smaller community, search local media for people who made the news and may be willing to be in photos.

Agencies to find professional disabled models:

- Founded in 2017, Zebedee in the UK calls itself an inclusive talent agency for models and actors with disabilities globally.<sup>13</sup>
- The UK-based Louise Dyson's VisABLE People agency has been representing disabled models since the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>
- Hollywood agent Gail Williamson at KMR Talent in Los Angeles has been representing disabled models and performers for a number of years, after her son with Down syndrome decided to pursue an acting career.<sup>15</sup>
- C Talent is a disabled-led talent management company for Deaf and disabled talent.<sup>16</sup>







## Citations:

<sup>1</sup>United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Disability, "Fact Sheet on Persons with Disabilities," <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html>

<sup>2</sup>United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Disability, "Fact Sheet on Persons with Disabilities," <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

<sup>3</sup>Michelle Yin, Dahlia Shaewitz, Cynthia Overton, and Deeza-Mae Smith, "A Hidden Market: The Purchasing Power of Working-Age Adults with Disabilities," American Institutes of Research, April 17, 2018, <https://diverseabilitymagazine.com/2018/09/buying-power-people-disabilities/>

<sup>4</sup>United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Disability, "Fact Sheet on Persons with Disabilities," <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

<sup>5</sup>Return on Disability website, "The disability market is larger than China and is emerging as other markets have in the past—1.85 billion people and \$1.9 trillion in annual disposable income," 2014, <https://www.rod-group.com/insights>

<sup>6</sup>Beth A. Haller, Disability Rights on the Public Agenda: Elite News Media Coverage of The Americans with Disabilities Act, [Temple University dissertation in the Mass Media and Communication Ph.D. program], 1995, <https://mdsolar.org/handle/11603/13538>

<sup>7</sup>Suggestions from Brazilian journalist, Andreia Azevedo Soares, who has an autistic son. <https://www.publico.pt/autor/andrea-azevedo-soares?page=2>

<sup>8</sup>Beth Haller, "Camera Angle and Media Representations of People with Disabilities." Paper for the Media and Disability Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1995. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288183216\\_Camera\\_Angle\\_and\\_Media\\_Representations\\_of\\_People\\_With\\_Disabilities](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288183216_Camera_Angle_and_Media_Representations_of_People_With_Disabilities)

<sup>9</sup>Liz Jackson, "The world's largest minority is speaking out. This is what they have to say," Upworthy, <http://www.upworthy.com/the-worlds-largest-minority-is-speaking-out-this-is-what-they-have-to-say?c=tpstream>

<sup>10</sup>United Nations Enable, Non-Governmental Organizations Accredited to the Ad Hoc Committee, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/ngosaccredited.htm>

<sup>11</sup>Stanford University Office of Accessible Education <https://oae.stanford.edu/students/advocacy-community/national-disability-organizations-and-resources>

<sup>12</sup>Administration for Community Living, List of CILs and SPILs, <https://acl.gov/programs/centers-independent-living/list-cils-and-spils>

<sup>13</sup>Zebedee Talent website, <https://www.zebedeetalent.com/>

<sup>14</sup>VisABLE website, <https://visablepeople.com/>

<sup>15</sup>KMR Talent website, "Diversity Agents," <https://www.kmrtalent.com/diversity>

<sup>16</sup>C Talent website, <https://ctalent.org/>