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PROMOTING PROFESSIONALISM

Person First Language
Confidentiality
Respect
Acceptance
Reliability
Cultural Diversity

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PROMOTING PROFESSIONALISM

As you begin the journey of supporting individuals with disabling conditions it is important to reflect on what is meant by professionalism. Professionalism refers to standards of action that guide how the Direct Support Provider (DSP) relates to families and individuals supported. Families and individuals need and expect professionalism from the individuals who provide support to them. In this section you will learn about six key professional standards for direct service work. These are:

- ◆ Person-First Language
- ◆ Confidentiality
- ◆ Respect
- ◆ Acceptance

- ◆ Reliability
- ◆ Cultural Diversity

PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE

You will notice throughout this guide that every effort has been made to use **Person First Language**. This refers to the way we speak to and about individuals with disabling conditions. Person First Language makes a point of referring to people as **individuals** first, and referring to the disability only when and where it is needed.

Examples of Person First versus Disability First

- ◆ “the young man with autism” versus “the autistic boy”
- ◆ “the woman with cerebral palsy” versus “the cerebral palsy woman”
- ◆ “the man with quadriplegia” versus “the quadriplegic”

The key is to always refer to the person first and the disabling condition second. This is done to stress that the individual is a person first and is not defined by his or her condition. Language has a powerful influence over how we see individuals with disabling conditions and how they see themselves. Language can either raise or lower an individual’s self-esteem. How we talk **to** and **about** people does matter!

Helpful Hints

- **Avoid** outdated terms such as “handicapped,” “retarded,” “epileptic”
- **Avoid** images of pity such as “afflicted,” “burden,” “confined,” “crippled”
- **Avoid** medical/clinical terms such as “patient,” “case,” “syndrome”
- **Avoid** predictive terms such as “high functioning” and “low functioning”

The use of **Person First Language** communicates respect. It notes that the disability is part of someone’s identity, but it is not **all** they are as a person.



*There is so much good in the worst of us,
and so much bad in the best of us,
that it hardly behooves any of us
to talk about the rest of us.*

Edward Wallis Hoch

CONFIDENTIALITY

One of the most important principles involved in helping others is confidentiality. Confidentiality can be defined as ***the ability to be entrusted with personal information which you are only aware of due to your position.*** In other words, the information is not public and permission has not been given by the individual (or, in some cases, by

their guardian or parent) for you to discuss it with others. Confidentiality applies to both paid and volunteer positions.

Violations of confidentiality can happen anywhere, such as on a bus or in a restaurant. Conversations may be overheard by someone who knows who is being talked about. It does not matter if the violation of confidentiality was intentional or accidental. It can still result in anger and hurt feelings. Respecting confidentiality is also important when a DSP is at home talking to their own family members. Maintaining confidentiality is not optional. DSPs must conform to standards of privacy outlined in The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and The Personal Health Information Act.

The only situation where confidentiality cannot be kept is when reporting violence, abuse, or neglect. In these situations a DSP has a duty to report suspected violations to the appropriate supervisor or Resource Coordinator. For more information on the reporting of abuse please consult the DSP Orientation Manual.



➡ *When in doubt, say nothing and check with your supervisor*

RESPECT



“Respect: Give it, Get it, Got it?”

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When we respect others it means that we hold them in esteem and treat them considerately. The concept of respect takes on special importance when we are involving ourselves, as professionals, in the lives of others. As a DSP you will be working with people who may have experienced a lack of respect because of their disability. The onus will be on you to be respectful in your interactions - even at times when you don't feel like being respectful.

It is Important to:

- ❶ Model respect **towards** individuals and families
- ❷ Speak respectfully **to** individuals and families
- ❸ Speak respectfully **about** individuals and families



- ➞ Ask permission
- ➞ Ask for advice or information
- ➞ Express appreciation
- ➞ Listen sincerely
- ➞ Be mindful of the feelings of others
- ➞ Treat people age-appropriately

See **Promoting Effective Communication** for more information on respectful ways to communicate.



ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is maintaining an attitude of good will towards others even when their actions are not socially acceptable or to our personal liking. Similar words for acceptance are tolerance, accommodation, and consideration. Acceptance is about being valued and understood for who we are. It is the opposite of being rejected. Acceptance does not mean that we like everyone or are liked by everyone.

It Does Mean

- ➔ You need to be mindful of your own attitudes
- ➔ You need to understand difference as uniqueness
- ➔ You need to realize that how you see a person will influence how you respond to them

See **Promoting Effective Communication** for information on how to express ourselves when we have a concern while still showing acceptance of the person.

RELIABILITY

Reliability refers to the simple expectations of showing up for work on time and being ready to go. Not being reliable causes inconvenience and distress. Obviously there will be times when events such as a death in your family or a serious illness will overtake you and work will be missed. However, when missing work becomes a habit, you are not placing a high enough priority on your job.

Families and individuals need to know:

- ◆ That they can count on you to be there for them
- ◆ That you will follow through on commitments
- ◆ That you will be as good as your word



“Hard work spotlights the character of people: some turn up their sleeves, some turn up their noses, and some don’t turn up at all”

Sam Ewing

See ***Sensitivity to Family Experiences*** for more information on the importance of reliability in family support.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Not everyone thinks, believes, feels, or lives the same way. We are each brought up in the unique subculture of our own family. We also have larger cultural differences such as:

- 1 Our country of origin

- ② Our religious faith
- ③ Our ethnic background
- ④ The language we speak

As a DSP you may find yourself working with individuals and families from various cultures. For instance, you may be supporting families with differing religious beliefs, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and sexual orientation. It is important that you are culturally aware and sensitive to differences that exist.

Problems sometimes occur if we start to believe that our cultural experience is the only valid one. This is called ethno-centricity. It means we see cultural differences as inferior. For instance, someone might say, “What a bizarre custom,” “That’s a very strange way to dress,” or “I can’t understand a word they’re saying.” When someone fails to respect cultural differences, misunderstanding, bigotry, and racism can occur.

The good news is that we are all different. The bad news is that cross cultural understanding takes effort. It requires investigation, negotiation, and making fewer assumptions.



- ➞ Take time to understand the cultural differences in others
- ➞ Use **empathy** to understand and appreciate the differences between yourself and others
- ➞ Keep an open mind and ask questions of others to gain understanding

See **Promoting Effective Communication** for more information on how to check perceptions in order to increase empathy.

See **Sensitivity to Family Experiences** for more information on family and culture.



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So . . .

Your respectfulness, commitment, acceptance, and skill will show the individuals you support, as well as the community, that you are a professional.

Resources

Bernstein, G. S. (1999). **Human Services? That must be so Rewarding: A practical guide for professional development.** Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

DiLeo, D., & Nisbet, J. (1989). **Enhancing the Lives of Adults with Disabilities.** New Hampshire Division of Mental Health & Developmental Services: The Institute on Disability.

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Resources