



Engaging and Communicating Effectively with People with Developmental Disabilities

What is a **developmental disability**?

Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions that cause persons many difficulties in certain areas of life, especially in learning, language, mobility, independent living, or behaviour areas. These conditions begin early on and persist throughout the person's lifespan.

About one per cent of Ontarians have a developmental disability. Some people with a developmental disability were born with Down syndrome. Some were born with fetal alcohol syndrome. Some have autism. Others may have had an illness or accident before they turned 18, which limited their intellectual development.

People with a developmental disability still participate in and contribute to their communities. They can be great employees, artists, athletes, advocates, and friends.

What is **Developmental Services Ontario (DSO)**?

People with developmental disabilities rely on various developmental services throughout their childhood including Special Services at Home, Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities, and services through the Ontario Autism Program during childhood. But when they turn 18, those services end.

They may then apply for supports during adulthood through Developmental Services Ontario (DSO). They may be eligible to receive adult developmental services funded by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) in Ontario.

DSO connects people to available services and supports so that they can become more independent and actively involved in their communities, and ultimately, have more meaningful lives.

Some of those supports can include case management services, support workers, housing supports, community participation supports, caregiver respite supports, and more.

There are nine DSO locations across the province. The area DSO will help connect adults with developmental disabilities to MCCSS-funded services and supports available.

Over 50,000 adults with a developmental disability receive funding through the Passport program to support their community participation (Sept 2020). Many Ontarians who have a developmental disability live in communities with parents or other relatives, with additional supports.

Why do **first responders such as police officers need to know this?**

Some families are no longer able to support their adult children with developmental disabilities. Sometimes, the adult with a developmental disability is brought to the hospital, finds themselves on the street or is taken to a shelter with no other place to go.

While this often occurs due to the changing circumstances within a family, another factor can be the responsive or challenging behaviours that the person exhibits, including; injury to self or others, property destruction, wandering or substance misuse.

Many people with developmental disabilities are also at higher risk of having untreated mental health issues. This, along with their disability, can result in increased vulnerability, making them susceptible to unsafe situations and people who may take advantage.



Here is what you need to know **when you interact with persons with developmental disability.**

If you encounter a person with a developmental disability who is in distress, it may help to know how to interact and communicate effectively.

People with a developmental disability have varying levels of cognition and, when they are in stressful situations, they may not be able to understand everything that you are saying.

KEEP IN MIND THE FOLLOWING:

- Think about how you would ask a person a question using clear, simplified language?
- Think about the question you asked – how much of it did they understand?
- Think of how well that person can communicate day-to-day
- Now, think about how well that person can communicate when they are frightened, anxious, or when they do not understand what is happening

Here are some do's and don'ts to keep in mind when you are interacting with a person with a developmental disability.

DON'T:

- Touch or get too close
- Back the person into a corner
- Expect eye contact
- Make quick unexpected movements, wave or point rapidly
- Chase or run after them
- Shout, yell or raise your voice
- Speak quickly or loudly
- Use threatening language or body language
- Ask several questions at once
- Give several instructions at once
- Ask a question without pausing for 10 seconds at a time
- Use open questions
- Use leading questions
- Use abstract language and concepts
- Use idioms or slangs
- Pretend to understand if you don't
- Make any promises that can't be kept



DON'T ASSUME THAT...

- they understand what you are communicating
- you understand what they are communicating
- the person's ability to express themselves is an indication of how they understand
- their ability/skills in one context means they have the ability/skills in another, for example, being able to speak well but not able to fully comprehend what they are being told

DO:

- Create a calm environment and model calm body language (slow breathing)
- Give the person extra space
- Use low gestures for attention
- Always seek out a support person to be present
- Provide regular movement breaks
- Remove/reduce identified sensory stimuli... as the person may not react well to the presence of uniformed strangers
- Be supportive and reassuring



ASK:

Always ask the person if this is a good time to talk.

When speaking, follow these tips:

- Use non-threatening language and body language
- Speak in a calm and normal voice
- Speak facing the person
- If there is a dominant ear, speak towards that side
- Repeat and rephrase language, if necessary
- Use language that is literal and concrete
- Ask only one question at a time
- Allow processing time – wait for a response
- Give only one directive at a time
- When intervening in a potential suicide, use specific and direct questions to determine if the person is truly at risk or is simply fixated on the topic of suicide
- Use visual electronic aids if possible
- If appropriate have them draw
- Check for sensory sensitivities
- Always check person's understanding

LISTEN:

Understand the person may be non-verbal or have limited verbal skills and may not respond to your verbal commands or questions.

- Ask for an example of what you are trying to communicate
- Use geographical containment, maintain reasonable distance until situation is fully assessed
- Allow repetitive movements if necessary
- Remain alert to the possibility of outbursts, impulsive acts

Urgent Response and DSO

Adults with a developmental disability who are in crisis, should be linked to the DSO, where staff will screen to see if they meet the Ministry criteria for urgent response. It is important to note that urgent response is a process and not a permanent solution.

The DSO is charged with initiating the urgent response mechanism when the criteria is met and consent has been obtained from the person or their substitute decision maker. DSO will connect with those service providers who can provide short-term, temporary and time-limited supports to mitigate the risk factors that are presenting.

Each urgent situation is different, and even with the urgent response mechanism, services may not be immediately available.

AFTER HOURS URGENT RESPONSE (TO BE USED ONLY BY FIRST RESPONDERS)

When responding to an urgent but non-emergency situation involving an adult with a developmental disability, police officers may call:

1-800-575-2222 (toll-free)

Monday-Friday between 16:30 to 09:00;

Friday 16:30 to Monday 09:00 and all statutory holidays

The officer will be asked a series of questions for a preliminary screening and will then be redirected to the after hours DSO. Officers may be connected to a live responder or can leave a message. A representative from DSO will return the call and review the situation with the officer.

The after-hours DSO will have access to the provincial database to see if the person is already in the system, provide any information that may be helpful and will work in collaboration on a local after-hours response, as appropriate/available.

This after-hours telephone number is not for an emergency and/or mental health crisis. It should only be used when there is perceived risk to an adult (18 and over) with a developmental disability (e.g. loss of residence, caregiver unable to provide care due to illness) and assistance cannot wait until the next business day.

During regular business hours, please call **2-1-1 or your local area DSO.**

Please visit dsontario.ca and click **Find Your Area DSO.**

DSO Locations

DSO Central East Region

Serves Durham, Haliburton, Kawartha Lakes, Northumberland, Peterborough, Simcoe, and York.
1-855-277-2121

DSO Central West Region

Serves Dufferin, Halton, Peel, Waterloo, and Wellington.
1-888-941-1121

DSO Eastern Region

Serves Ottawa Region, Prescott-Russell, Renfrew, Stormont, Dundas, and Glengarry.
1-855-376-3737

DSO Hamilton-Niagara Region

Serves Brant, Haldimand-Norfolk, Hamilton, and Niagara.
1-877-376-4674

DSO North East Region

Serves Cochrane, Muskoka, Nipissing, Parry Sound, and Timiskaming.
1-855-376-6376

DSO Northern Region

Serves Algoma, Kenora, Manitoulin, Rainy River, Sudbury, and Thunder Bay.
1-855-376-6673

DSO South East Region

Serves Frontenac, Hastings, Lanark, Leeds & Grenville, Lennox & Addington, and Prince Edward.
1-855-237-6737

DSO South West Region

Serves Bruce, Chatham-Kent, Elgin, Essex, Grey, Huron, Lambton, Middlesex, Oxford, and Perth.
1-855-437-6797

DSO Toronto Region

Serves Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, and Toronto.
1-855-372-3858

**For more information, call 2-1-1
or visit us at dsontario.ca**

