

Self-Protection For People With Disabilities

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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Personal safety and disabilities – This combination of issues often leads to assumptions about helplessness that can cause people with disabilities to worry that they do not have any way to protect themselves from an attack. Our experience in teaching personal safety to people of many different abilities and life challenges is that what is most important is to focus on how to use what you **can** do to keep yourself safe.

Unfortunately, if you have a disability that is obvious to other people, you might be more likely to be attacked. Some attackers target people who seem more vulnerable because they are disabled. The following ideas from Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower can help you keep yourself safe most of the time whether you are large or small, disabled or not, old or young, female or male.

In order to avoid drawing a potential attacker's attention, project an aware confident attitude. This will prevent most attackers from actually selecting you as their victim. Make sure your body language and attitude let people know that you know they are there without acting afraid or challenging them. Move as if you are sure about where you are going. Sit or stand as upright as you can.

Instead of staring at someone aggressively or looking away passively, glance briefly towards the person and then continue on your way. Even if you can't see, you can still turn your face towards people so they understand that you are aware of their presence. Projecting an attitude of awareness and confidence can overcome someone's first impression that you are probably an easy target.

Take charge of the space around you so that a potential attacker does not have the opportunity to get close to you. If you are in an isolated place, move away from people who seem like they might be a threat to you. The "I'm OK, You're OK" approach works most of the time. Just leave cheerfully and get to a safe place. If someone is being rude, or calling you to come over, you could act as if there is no problem - smile, wave and say something neutral like, "Hi" or "No thanks" or "Sorry, No."

If someone starts confronting you and you can't just leave, take charge by setting a boundary. Put your hands up in front of you like you are making a wall and get yourself into balance. Tell the person politely and assertively what you want. If someone is being predatory, make it clear that you are not an easy victim. "Stop right there.... Turn around and leave." If someone is being competitive, make it clear that you are not a

challenge, "I don't want any trouble. I just want to leave."

Be sure you use a calm, firm, loud voice and strong, neutral body language - without fists waving at someone's face and without shrinking away. Adapt these skills with both your personal safety and disabilities taken into account. A one-handed boundary can be just as effective as a two-handed boundary. Simple short words, such as "Stop! Leave now!. Leave," or even just "NO!" can be very effective as long as you look and sound like you mean it.

Know where safety is and how to get help. Have your cell phone programmed to the local police, who often respond more quickly than a general emergency number. Always have a plan for where you would go if you have a problem. Be willing to make a scene and order bystanders to call the police or come to your aid. Be willing to embarrass, inconvenience, or offend other people in order to protect your well-being.

Know how to set clear boundaries with people you know. Most of the people who bother others are people they know. Be prepared to tell people you care about what is and is not okay with you even if it hurts their feelings or makes them upset. Your safety and self-esteem are worth causing anyone inconvenience, embarrassment, or offence. Problems should not be secrets, so talk issues over with people you trust.

Identify and take the power out of your triggers. Triggers are thoughts or words or feelings or other behavior that cause us to explode with feelings. When we are exploding with feelings, we cannot think clearly. Common triggers are bad words and foul language, insults, scary words and threats, or confusing words and feeling sorry for someone. Make sure what you do is a decision based on what is really happening, rather than an automatic reaction or a habit.

As a last resort, know how to forcefully defend yourself. Practice with both your personal safety and disabilities taken into account so that you can quickly access your own personal strengths and resources. Most attacks are stopped by just one strong move, but be prepared to keep fighting until you feel it is safe to leave and get help. Strong moves can be: yelling at bystanders for help, telling someone to "STOP," hitting or kicking someone. Whatever you do, sound, look, and act as if you **mean it**.

Developing skills for personal safety and disabilities includes looking at **all** of your tools, including your body, your voice, and other tools you have, such as a wheelchair. The basic strategy is to use the parts of your body you can move as well as your wheelchair or walking aid as weapons and the vulnerable parts of an attacker's body as targets. If you keep yelling as you are fighting, you will have more power and other people will be more likely to notice. If you are attacked from the front you can yell NO! and pull away, strike to the eyes, heel palm hit to the face, knee strike to groin, kick or slap to the groin, slam your wheelchair into the shins or knees of the attacker. People who are practicing skills with their personal safety and disabilities in mind can discover power and choices they didn't know they had until they practiced!

When someone attacks from behind you can yell NO! and lower your center of gravity, stomp on or run over attacker's foot with your wheelchair, slap to the groin, grab and squeeze testicles, elbow strike to the solar plexus, head or groin or slam your wheelchair into the attacker's shins, groin or midsection. The same strategies usually work even if the attacker has a weapon, or you end up on the ground, or there are two or more attackers. You are more important than your property so we do NOT recommend that you fight over your stuff. Just hand it over and say, "Take it. It's yours." Our experts say that your risk of injury goes up if you fight to keep a robber from taking your possessions. However, statistically your risk of injury goes down if you fight to keep an attacker from hurting you or taking you away to a more private place.

Leave if you can. Yell for help. Fight if you have to. If you cannot get away right away, keep looking for a new

chance to get away. Instead of freezing, pretend to give up so that the attacker will relax and then leave or start resisting the instant you have an opening to do so.

No matter how the situation ends, any confrontation is not over until you have gotten help. Even when you get away from someone, it is normal to feel shaky and even ashamed. It is scary to encounter someone who has an intention to harm you. For some reason, people often blame themselves for being attacked instead of being proud of themselves for escaping from the attack. Find people you trust and ask for support to help you recover from this experience.

Personal safety and disabilities means adapting how best you can implement the basic self protection strategies of being aware, taking charge, and getting help. Practicing these skills helps to build your confidence. Remember that the fact that someone decides to attack you is not your fault. You have the right and the responsibility to protect yourself and to insist on help and support after you have gotten away.