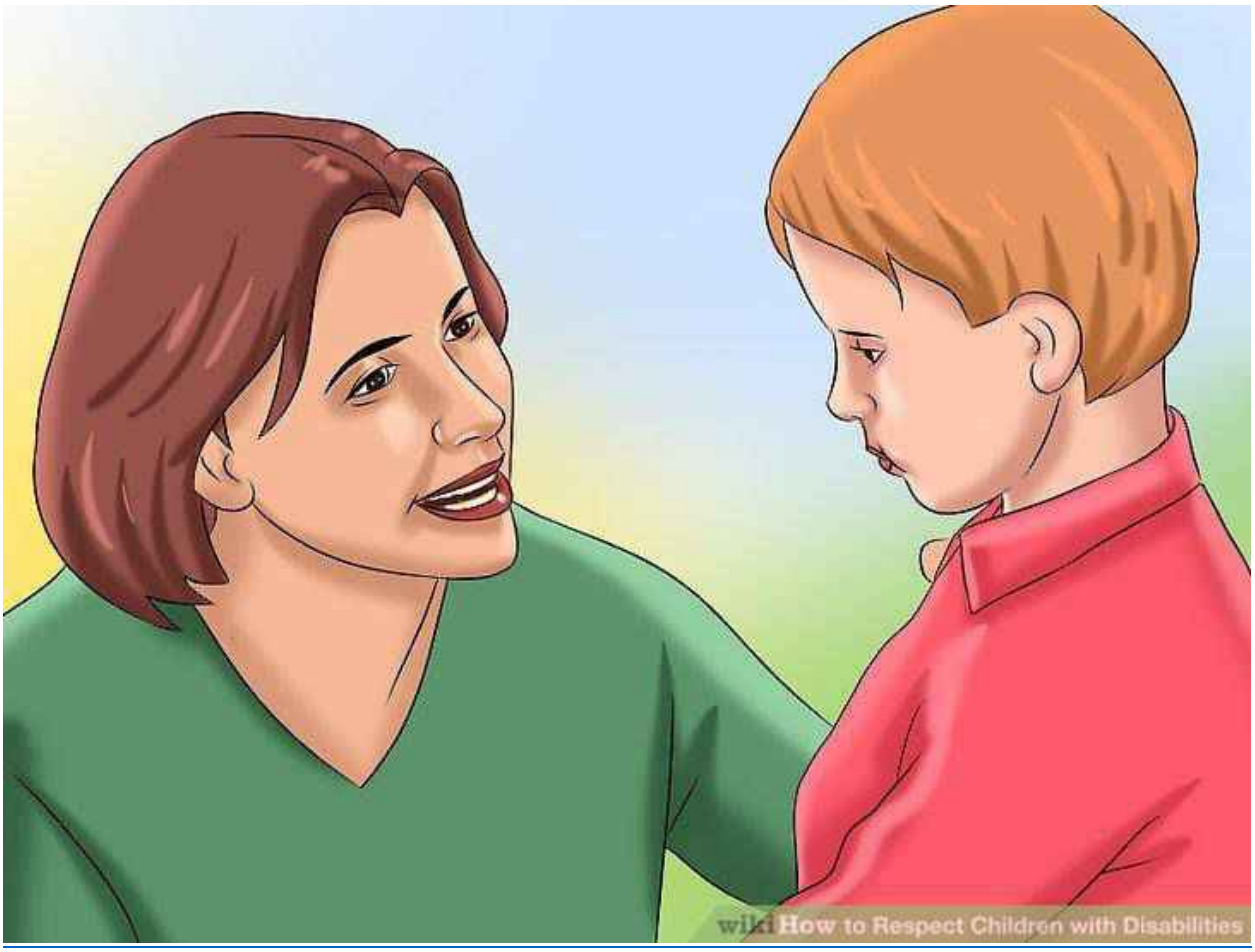
How to Respect Children with Disabilities

Author Info |11 References

It can be surprising or confusing when you first meet a disabled child and you wonder what to do. Society provides very little training regarding how to interact with its impaired individuals. This guide will help you learn how to treat a disabled child, and recognize their unique impairments and gifts as an individual.



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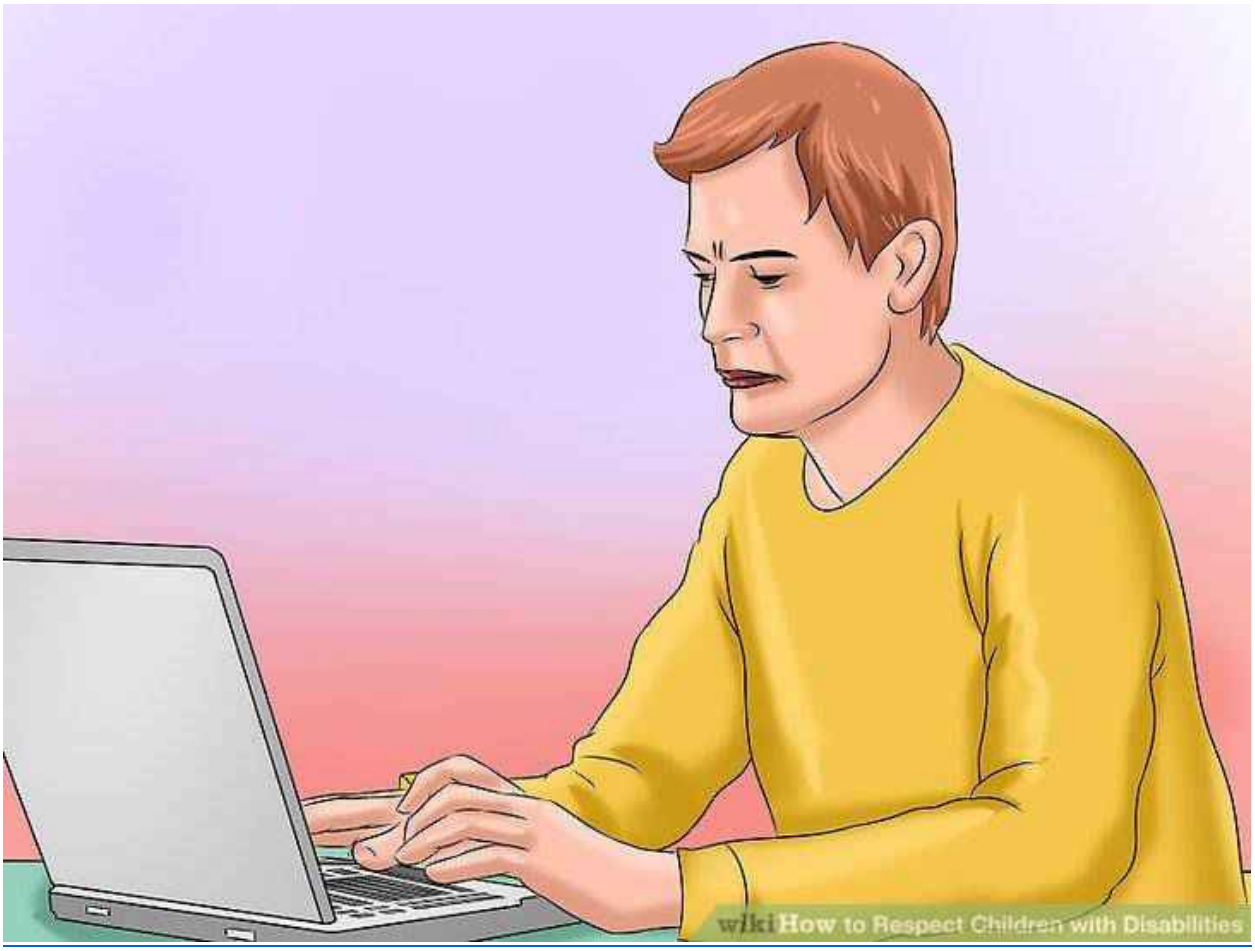
Approach the child the same way you would approach one of their peers—with kindness and respect. If you treat a disabled 8-year-old the same way you would treat a non-disabled 4-year-old, she or he is going to pick up on that and feel insulted.

- If the disabled child seems to be struggling with something, offer to help the same way you would to a non-disabled child: "Do you need help with that?".
- As you get to know the child, you will naturally learn the best way to communicate with him or her, just as you would for other children.



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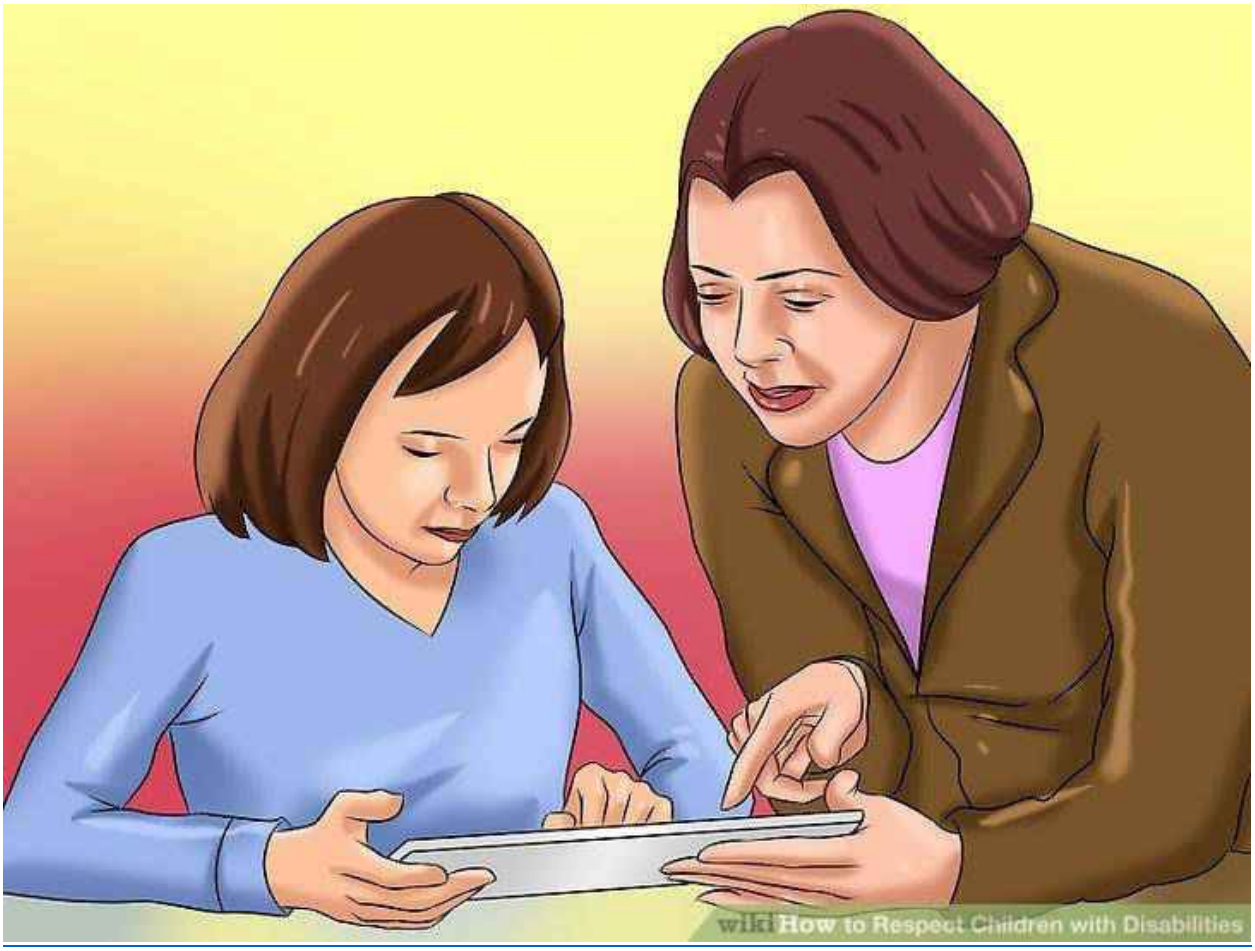
Learn about the child's disability. To educate yourself, you can: Ask other disabled adults (some of whom write informative internet articles), check out organizations run by disabled adults, read relevant books, and talk to the child's parents/caregivers. The child may also be able to give you information about his or her needs directly.



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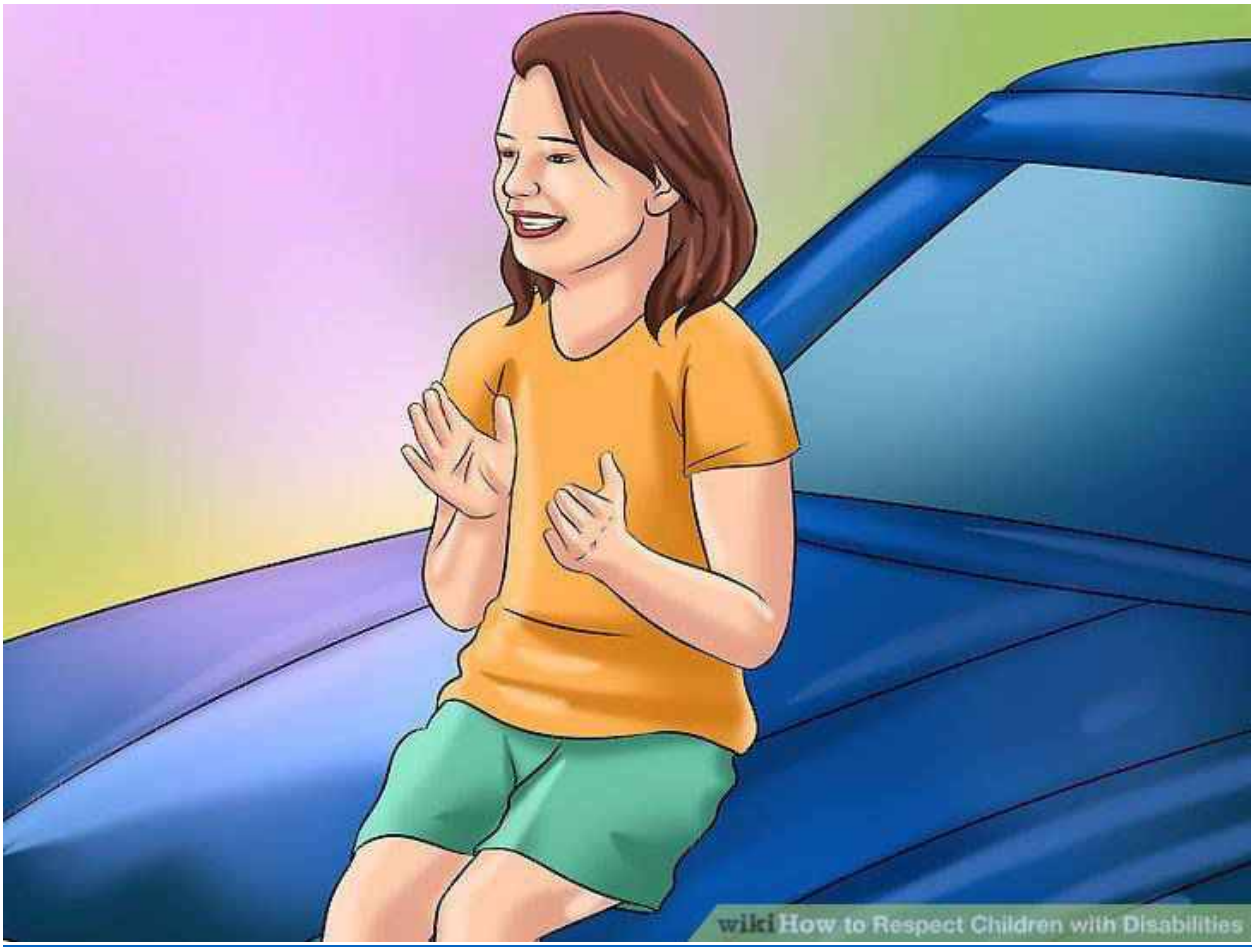
Assume that the child is competent and well-meaning.[1] If you hold positive expectations of the child, then he or she will seek to meet those expectations. Become a model of respectful behavior, and the child will follow you.

- Talk to the child, even if he or she isn't capable of talking. Chances are, the child can understand some or all of what you're saying, and will feel pleased that you respect him or her. (Consider the presence of nonspeaking autistic writers and activists, such as Amy Sequenzia.[2] Nonverbal people can be very intelligent.)
- If the child engages in harmful behavior, try to figure out what caused it,[3] rather than leaping to a punishment right away.[4] Talk with the child, not at him or her.



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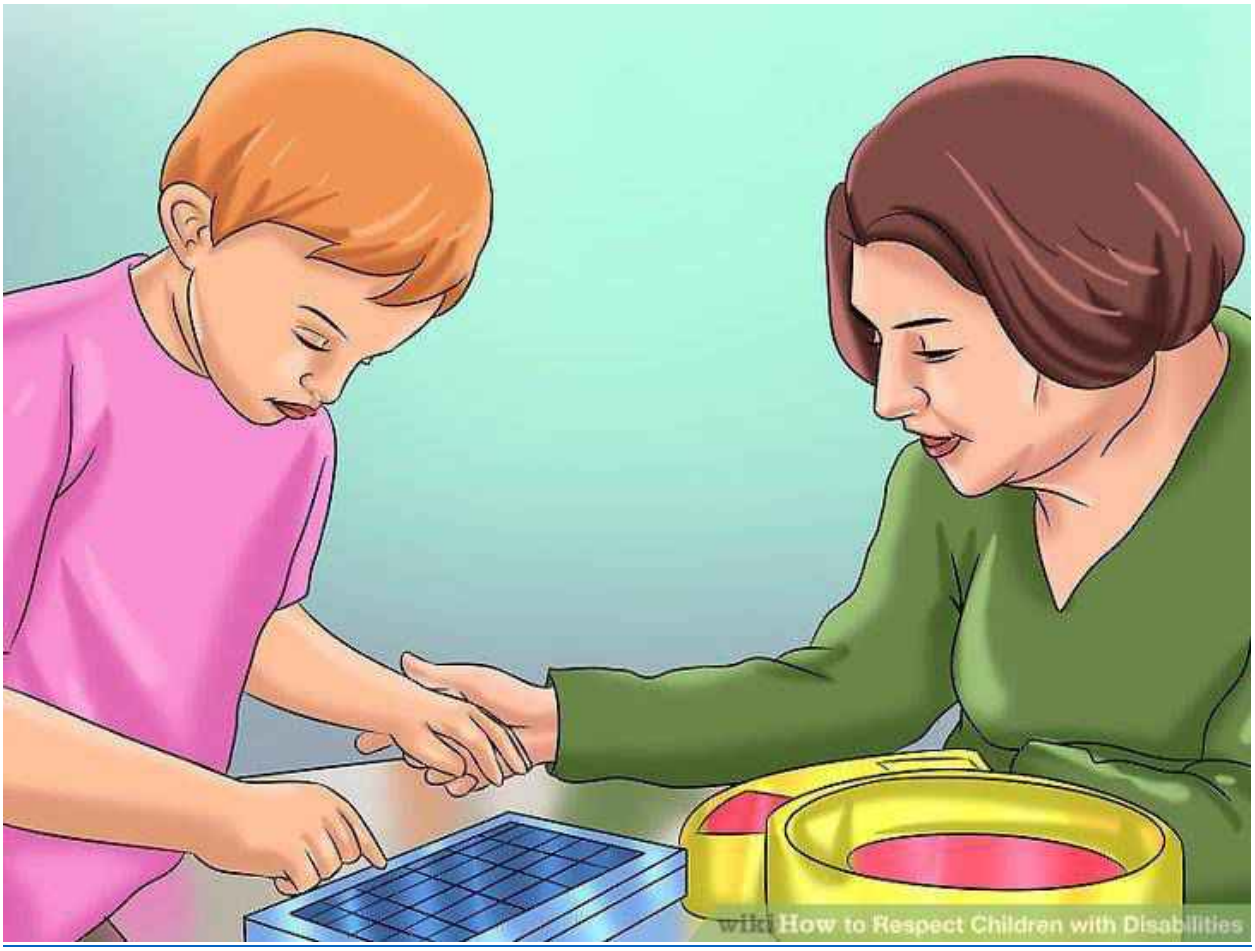
Respect the child's differences. Don't teach a child to be ashamed of his or her accessibility equipment, therapists, or coping methods (for example, stimming). If the child isn't hurting anyone, he or she has no reason to be ashamed. Instead of teaching disabled children to look normal, teach others to accept differences.



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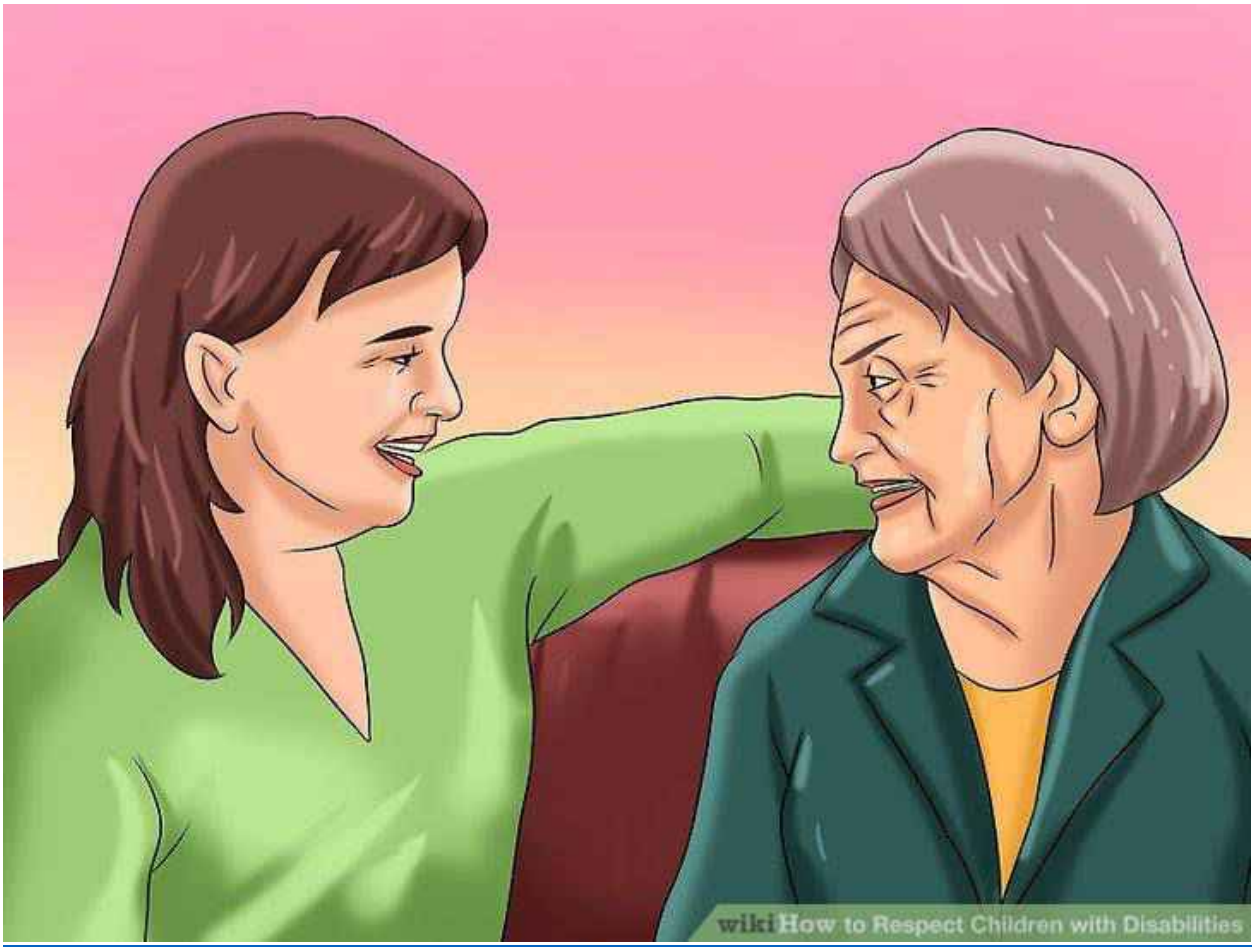
Work to include the child in the community. Enlist other adults to find ways that the child can participate in activities (for example, field trip destinations where wheelchair ramps are easily accessible, a pleasant and quiet room at school where an anxious child can take a break).

- Ask the child how certain situations might be made more accessible to him or her. He or she may have great ideas!
- Educate the child's peers so they can become part of the supportive community. Teach them about the child's disability, and tell them how to behave towards people who are different.



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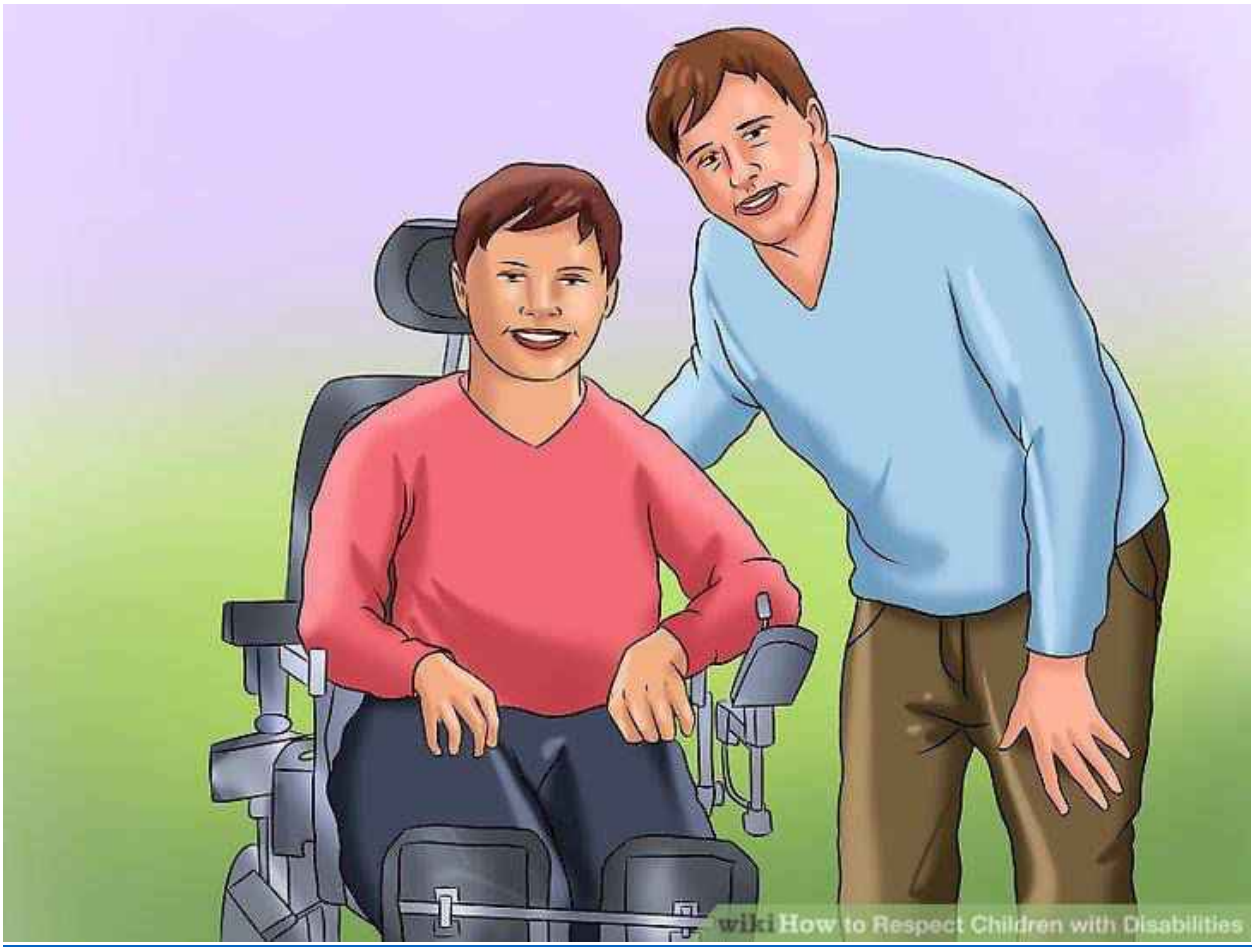
Be careful about the strategies you use and the people whom you consult. Some disability-related disciplines focus on eradicating signs of differences, rather than promoting what is best for the child. Disabled children have been accused of lying when they cry for help,[5] subjected to compliance therapies that open the door to abuse[6] and PTSD,[7] restrained and secluded,[8][9] and more. Use a critical eye and don't accept anything that you suspect will frighten, undermine, physically injure, or traumatize the child. (Yes, this happens.)

- Apply this perspective to organizations also, as some of these encourage this behavior.
- Remember it this way: Work with the child, not against the child. For example, instead of holding down[10] a screaming child, calmly tell the child that his or her behavior is not appropriate, and work on solutions and alternative modes of communication once the child is calmer.



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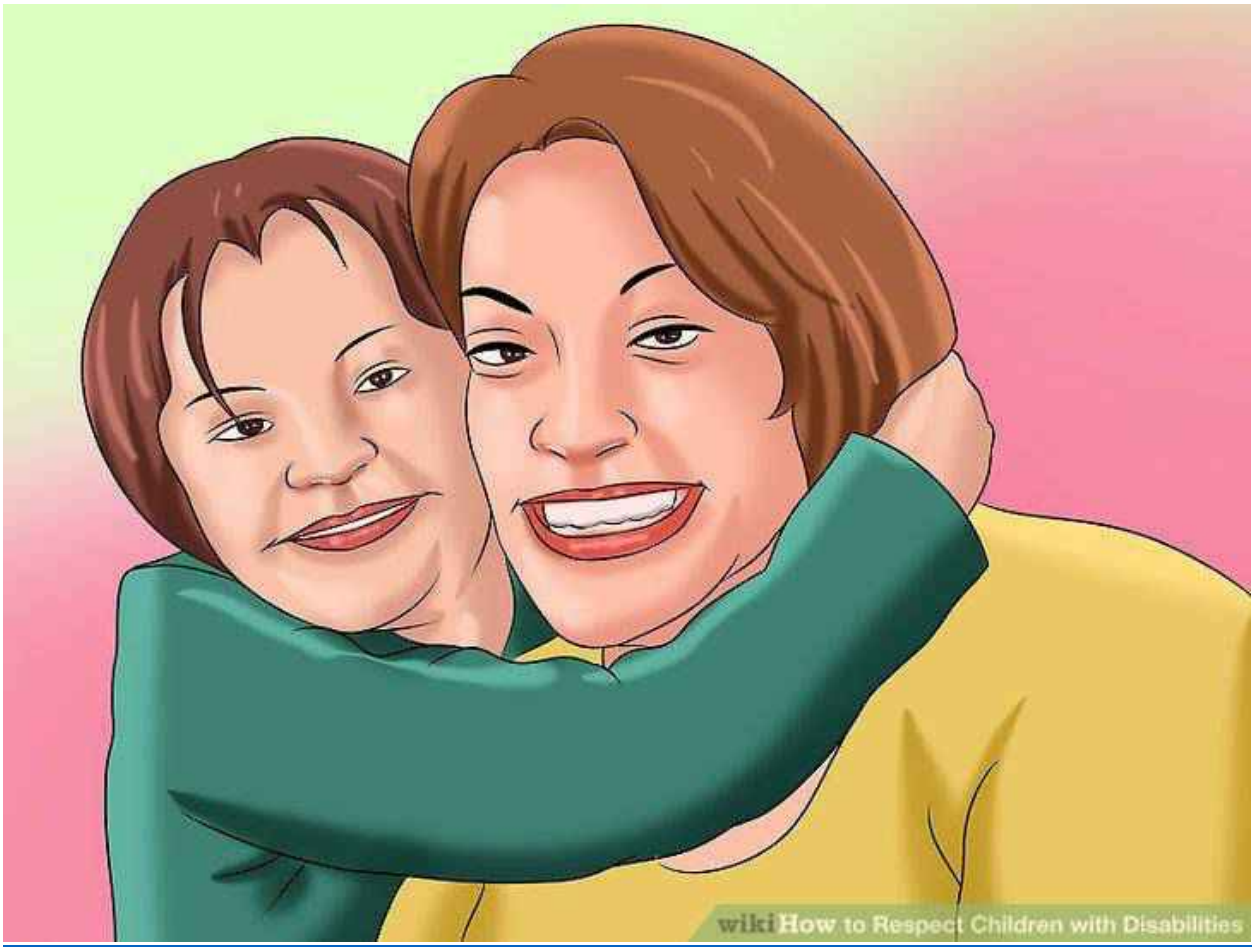
Help the child meet other disabled people, and present him or her with stories of disabled people (fictional and real). This will help build the child's self-esteem and teach him or her that a good life is possible if you are disabled.

- Disabled people can also share tips and coping strategies with each other. They can connect in a way that others can't.



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Accept the child for who he or she is. Build upon his or her strengths, help the child to overcome or get around any weaknesses, and teach him or her that disability has nothing to do with human dignity. Your unconditional support will build the child's self-esteem and prepare him or her for a happy and fulfilling life.