There are over eight and a half million disabled people in the UK. That means that about one in seven of us has a disability. There are lots of kinds of disability and they can affect people of all ages and backgrounds.

People become disabled in several ways. Some people are born with a disability and some people become disabled through accidents. Their bodies are changed in ways that cannot be repaired. While some infectious diseases (such as HIV, AIDS or Polio) can cause disability, the disability itself isn't catching. Nobody has ever ‘caught’ a disability from someone else.
Being ‘disabled’ generally means that some parts of your body work differently. When you see a person in a wheelchair, for example, it’s likely that he or she has a problem with his or her legs or back, which means that walking is difficult. But not all disabilities are obvious from looking. How would you know, for example, if somebody were hard of hearing? Or diabetic (a condition where there is too much sugar in the blood)? Or dyslexic (has difficulty reading and writing)? Yet each of these people has a disability which, in a small or large way, affects the way they live.

We’re all better at some subjects than others. Being disabled doesn’t mean that you can’t still be clever or successful. In fact, there have been many successful disabled people throughout history. (Read our interview with actress, Julie Fernandez, for more information about making it to the top with a disability.)

The media (newspapers, magazines and television) frequently portrays an image of disabled people that is not always flattering or accurate. They are often seen as victims or people to feel sorry for. When the same images are used over and over again they can be very unhelpful. Most disabled people don’t want pity. They just want to be treated equally, like everybody else. And they should be, even when they do things that are wrong. Disability is no excuse for being nasty or committing a crime.

There’s more to a disabled person than being disabled – it’s only one part of who they are. Being disabled makes a person different, but it doesn’t make them that different. We all want the same things, whether or not we’re disabled – to have good friends, enjoy ourselves, be successful, and fall in love – in short, to be happy.

Disabled people often say that the environment and attitudes of other people disable them more than their own disability. By this they mean that because society is not fully accessible for disabled people, they are prevented from participating in it as fully as non-disabled people.

And the way they are sometimes treated by non-disabled people can also act as a barrier.

Think about it. Have you ever been stared at because you looked a bit different? (Perhaps you were wearing some dodgy clothes or having a bad hair day!) Can you remember how it made you feel? You probably felt uncomfortable, self-conscious, perhaps even scared.

Now think, have you ever stared at a disabled person because they looked a bit different? And it’s not just staring that disabled people have to deal with. Often people will be rude to them, ask personal questions about their disability or talk about them as if they’re not there. How would you like it?

Disabled people aren’t ashamed of their disability. Sometimes disabled people talk about having a ‘disabled identity’ and actively campaign on issues that are particularly important to them, such as civil rights and equal access.
Julie was born in London in 1974. From the ages of 12 to 18 she attended Lord Mayor Treloar’s College in Hampshire, a boarding school for disabled people. She has appeared in *The Office*, *Eldorado* and *Dangerfield*. Julie has also worked as a presenter on *Wish You Were Here? From the Edge* and *The Politics Show*. She has brittle bone disease and is a wheelchair user.

**What are your memories of school?**
I didn’t go to a mainstream school as my brittle bone disease was very severe when I was younger and it would have been too dangerous for me. I was very lucky and went to a fantastic boarding school for disabled children. It catered for all our needs – we did lots of sports, went on field trips and even had our own driving instructor! The teachers there helped us believe that we were good enough to do anything we wanted to. We were taught never to use our disability as an excuse not to work hard and get on in life.

**So you weren’t bullied then?**
Yes, I was bullied by other disabled students.

**How did that make you feel?**
Bullying is never nice. It’s the weak person’s game. I told my parents who stepped in and spoke to the relevant teacher. It was dealt with and stopped. As I became older I became more confident and would smile and laugh back at people if they made remarks. I think that’s the best way to react to anything a bully says, show them that you’re not affected.

**Did you find it difficult, as a disabled person, to become an actress?**
Extremely difficult. The media’s attitude is that you have to be perfect to be on television, which doesn’t help. They used to tell me at auditions that I was good but that my disability would frighten viewers. And very often they cast non-disabled actors as disabled characters. That makes me angry as there are many good disabled actors.

I’ve had people be rude to me, or sarcastic, or over-friendly – the lot. I was even told once that I should be grateful for being given a job. You have to be strong. Sometimes you need to help people understand their own fears about disability as well as proving that you’re capable.

**Have people ever treated you like David Brent did in The Office?**
The older I’ve got the less it happens and I also don’t give people the opportunity to behave that way. Comedy has a wonderful way of breaking down barriers and *The Office* helped. It made people stop and think about their own behaviour. Beware all those David Brents!

**Do you think the Disability Discrimination Act will make a difference?**
I think it will help and encourage disabled people to move into a range of fields of work. And the more disabled people there are working, the more non-disabled people will be used to having us around and so hopefully become more relaxed.

Even if you think you’re not affected by disability now, you may be in the future. As we get older, parts of our body don’t work so well and many elderly people often have a disability. So, it’s simple really. Just treat other people how you would like to be treated – because one day it may be you.
There are two main types of school – mainstream school and special needs school. A mainstream school is open to all children. A special needs school is for children and young people who need more support and help with their education to reach their full potential.

In the past, disabled and non-disabled pupils would have gone to separate schools but now there is much more inclusion (everybody studying together). Wherever possible, changes have been made to mainstream schools so that disabled pupils can attend.

Disabled pupils need to be able to move around as freely as their friends not just to get to their lessons or lunch but also in case they need to leave the building quickly in an emergency. Ramps and lifts help, and mean they are safe.

A lot of disabled people can still take part in physical education or games because the exercise can be adapted to suit them. Pupils with mobility or co-ordination difficulties, for example, can still play wheelchair football, hockey or tennis.

Almost everyone hates exams. They make you feel stressed out, under pressure and you have to remember a lot of information. Think how much harder that would be if you couldn’t read the exam papers properly or write down the answers easily, or if your brain just works differently to other people’s. That’s why some disabled people need help and support when they are sitting exams. They might need extra time because it takes them longer to think and write essays or their disability may make them tired. This is not cheating, it just evens the situation up, so that they have the same chance as everyone else to do well.
Some disabled people need certain things to help them move around school or follow lessons.

If they have difficulty in walking then they may need a wheelchair to help them get around. Some disabled people use manual wheelchairs and push the chair forward by turning the wheels themselves. Others use a wheelchair which is powered by an electrically charged battery. These wheelchairs can go quite fast and are steered by the disabled person, using a sort of gearstick. Riding in one of these can be good fun, but they are definitely not toys! They can be dangerous, so if you want to know more about them, ask the wheelchair user how they work.

Certain wheelchair users may also be able to walk, and only use a wheelchair when they’re feeling tired. Others may need to use a wheelchair more as they get older or change from a manual wheelchair to an electric one.

Some disabled people need help to walk. They may wear special supports for weak parts of the body, like a brace to keep their back straight or support for a leg or arm. These braces aren’t painful to wear but they do mean that the disabled person can’t run or walk fast.

There are other things which disabled children at your school might need to help them, such as hearing aids, large print books or spending extra time with a teacher. Some disabled pupils may need a carer to come to school with them to help them with personal things that they find difficult to do, such as eating, going to the toilet and taking medication.

They may also need to spend time away from school going to the hospital for check-ups.

Everybody likes to be independent, including disabled people, but sometimes we all need a little help. If you think a disabled schoolmate might need help opening a door, for example, or getting down stairs in a wheelchair, then don’t be afraid to ask them if you can do anything. It may be that they are fine and would prefer to do it themselves, but they could also need assistance and be grateful of some help!
BULLYING
Bullying can make people's lives a misery. Whether it's name-calling, physical abuse or intimidation, it can be very upsetting. It makes the person being bullied feel upset, frightened and ashamed.

Often bullies pick on people who are a bit different – such as somebody who has a disability – and who they think they can easily intimidate. Most bullies are weak characters who get a kick out of thinking they can make people unhappy and control their lives.

Those being bullied often don't say anything because they're too scared or distressed. Sometimes they hope that it all might go away if they just keep quiet and do what the bully wants. Unfortunately, this isn't usually the case.

The most important thing about bullying is to deal with it quickly, before it escalates. Anyone who is being bullied, whether they are disabled or not, needs a friend. So, if you think you know someone who is being intimidated, try talking to him or her – maybe ask them how they are, what they did at the weekend. They might not want to talk at first, but at least they'll know that someone is interested.

The best way to be a friend to them, though, is by telling someone about the bullying. It doesn't matter who you tell – it could be your teacher, parents or grandparents – as long as you tell someone. Ideally, the bullies should be caught red-handed so if you know where it's happening (the toilets, for example, or the changing rooms) then let a teacher know.

DISCRIMINATION
The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed in 1995 as a way of trying to end the discrimination that many disabled people face in their daily lives. The DDA makes it illegal to treat a disabled person less favourably than other people because of their disability.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON

The rights of disabled people and DDA
Disability Rights Commission www.drc-gb.org

Bullying
www.pupiline.com offers tips and do's and don'ts on dealing with bullies

Call 0800 1111 or visit www.childline.org.uk for confidential advice and help

Get Connected has a free helpline and e-mail service helping young people find the best solutions to their problems. Visit www.getconnected.org.uk

www.kidscape.org.uk has advice and help for children being bullied