

## **The Social Model of Disability**

It is widely accepted that disabled people generally have fewer opportunities and a lower quality of life than non-disabled people. How disabled people can be supported to overcome the ways in which they are disadvantaged depends on what society views as the cause of the disadvantage. There are two different ways of explaining what causes the disadvantage and using 'models' can illustrate these, namely:

- **an individual (or medical) model of disability, and**
- **a social model of disability**

The medical model of disability encourages explanations in terms of the features of an individual's body, whereas a social model explains it in terms of how we organise our society.

## **The Medical Model of Disability**

Under this model of disability, disabled people's inability to join in society is seen as a direct result of having an 'impairment' and not as the result of features of our society which can be changed.

When people such as policy makers and managers think about disability in this individual way they tend to concentrate their efforts on 'compensating' people with 'impairments' for what is 'wrong' with their bodies by targeting 'special' welfare benefits at them and providing segregated 'special' services for them and so on.

The medical model of disability also affects the way disabled people think about themselves. Many disabled people internalise the negative message that all disabled people's problems stem from not having 'normal' bodies or ways of learning.

Disabled people too can be led to believe that their 'impairments' automatically prevent them from participating in social activities.

This internalised oppression can make disabled people less likely to challenge their exclusion from mainstream society.

## The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability makes the important distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability'.

The social model has been worked out by disabled people who feel that the individual model does not provide an adequate explanation for their exclusion from mainstream society - because their experiences have shown them that in reality most of their problems are not caused by their 'impairments', but by the way society is organised.

So, in a social model of disability the key definitions are:

### **Impairment**

An injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a long term effect on physical appearance and / or limitation of function within the individual that differs from the commonplace.

The use of the term 'impairment' is preferred by many disabled people to describe the reason that society disables them. The 'impairment' is individual, but 'disabled' is how people are regarded by society.

### **Disability**

Disability means the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers.

Disability is shown as being caused by 'barriers' or elements of social organisation which take no or little account of people who have impairments.

Society is shown to disable people who have impairments because the way it has been set up prevents disabled people from taking part in every day life. It follows that if disabled people are to be able to join in mainstream society, the way society is organised must be changed. Removing the barriers which exclude (disable) people who have impairments can bring about this change.

Barriers can be:

- Prejudice and stereotypes
- Inflexible organisational procedures and practices
- Inaccessible information
- Inaccessible buildings; and,
- Inaccessible transport

Also, disabling barriers experienced in the past can continue to have an adverse effect.

For example, those disabled people who attended segregated schools may have gained lower academic qualifications than their non-disabled peers, simply because their 'special' school failed to provide a proper mainstream curriculum.

These barriers have nothing to do with individual disabled people's bodies, they are created by people which means it is possible to remove them.

You can take a social approach to disability by identifying and getting rid of the disabling barriers which are within your control such as;

- Management practices, the way work is organised, or building design.
- You can also assist disabled people and employees to get around other barriers over which your organisation has no direct control. For example, an employer can enable a disabled employee to start work later than her or his non-disabled colleagues because it takes her or him longer to get to work because of an inaccessible transport system.
- You can adopt a positive attitude towards disability and join the campaign to reduce the way society excludes disabled people.

The ideas behind the social model of disability have been around for at least twenty years. However, disabled people, both children and adults continue to experience ignorance, fear and discrimination every day. For the social model of disability to have a positive impact in society there needs to be a greater understanding of what it is and how we all need to respond.

(Much of the information for this fact sheet was taken from Manchester City Council's website. Manchester City Council have worked with disabled people to come write the definitions and change the way they work)