

HOW DISABILITY STORIES CHANGE THE WORLD

A Quick Guide for Creators



Funded by the **Ruderman Family Foundation**, *The State of Disability Representation on Television (2016–2023)* from the **Geena Davis Institute** analyzed 350 scripted series over eight years to see how often disability is portrayed — and how authentically.

The findings are clear: when disability is invisible or distorted, it shapes how millions of people understand inclusion — how they see themselves *and* how they see each other. But when storytellers get it right, they do more than change what audiences watch — they shift perceptions, influence attitudes, and open doors to entire cultural change.

Only 3.9% of TV characters have a disability.

Real-world impact:

One in four adults in the U.S. lives with a disability — yet almost none see themselves on screen. When disability is invisible, it quietly tells audiences that it's rare, peripheral, or somehow "other." That silence feeds stigma.

What creators can do:

Greenlight more stories told *with* and *by* people with disabilities. Let those characters be funny, ambitious, romantic, complicated — everything real people are.

What could change:

If we start treating disability as part of everyday storytelling, inclusion stops being a checkbox and starts feeling like common sense.

Just one in five disabled characters are authentically cast.

Real-world impact:

Most disability portrayals are still played by nondisabled actors "acting disabled." However skilled the performance, it shuts out real disabled talent and often leans on imitation instead of lived truth.

What creators can do:

Cast authentically. Hire disabled actors for disabled roles — and bring disabled writers, directors, and crew into the process from day one.

What could change:

When people with disabilities tell their own stories, authenticity isn't performative — it's powerful. The work gets better, the culture gets better, everyone wins.

Disability on TV is still overwhelmingly white.

Real-world impact:

Disability doesn't belong to one race, but most portrayals make it look that way. When audiences see disability as a white experience, it erases the reality of millions of disabled people of color.

What creators can do:

Cast and write with intersectionality in mind. Let race, gender, class, and disability overlap naturally — because that's how life works.

What could change:

Audiences start seeing disability as part of every community's story, not a single narrative. That's how empathy deepens.

Characters with disabilities are less likely to be shown working.

Real-world impact:

Television often paints disability as dependence. When disabled characters aren't shown in jobs or leadership roles, it reinforces the myth that disability means limitation.

What creators can do:

Show disabled characters doing what everyone else does — working, leading, falling in love, raising kids, being messy and alive.

What could change:

Representation like that doesn't just shift perception; it opens doors in the real world too.

Ableist language still appears in about a third of episodes.

Real-world impact:

Words like *crazy*, *lame*, or *psycho* may feel casual, but they quietly teach viewers that disability equals defect. Language drives attitude — and attitude drives exclusion.

What creators can do:

Audit scripts. Swap the shorthand for words that respect instead of diminish.

What could change:

When TV stops using ableist language, audiences start to drop it too. That's how culture evolves — word by word.