I have been teaching people with disabilities for a long time now, and through my experience and learning I have seen my students do amazing things that have even astounded them. People with disabilities sometimes view themselves as “incapable” of doing routine daily activities. Sometimes in their lives, it has been easier for a parent or carer to do the task themselves instead of allowing the person with the disability to have a go. This Tip will look at how you can encourage people with disabilities to “have a go” and show them they can succeed at literacy and numeracy if they just try.

It is important that all people who are involved with people with disabilities be aware
of the 10 Queensland Disability Service Standards which govern the Industry. It is an essential read and makes us aware, as educators, what is required when working with people with a disability. The Standards can be found:  

My class
My students have a range of disabilities; from legal blindness to physical impairment and many have intellectual impairment. I have a couple of students who have Down Syndrome. I start by teaching them as a group then break into individual tuition or small groups. I have some with carers who also work as tutors with the students. It is a lovely group.

Steps to encourage students

NUMBER 1 > HAVE A CHAT!
When I start my class, I make sure that everyone is acknowledged and we have a chat about what has happened since we have seen each other last. I have had a few students who were non-verbal or with speech impediments, but these students were still encouraged to speak, sign, draw a picture or whatever helps them to communicate with the class. Everyone has a story and it needs to be heard and validated.

NUMBER 2 > ACKNOWLEDGE THE PERSON, NOT THE DISABILITY
It is important to note that people with disabilities have personalities, hates, likes and sometimes fabulous senses of humour. They want to be acknowledged for their personality traits, not their disabilities. So, it is essential that educators and other people within the education sector acknowledge the person and not their disability. I always make sure I see the person, not the disability. Whatever their disability is, you can accept them as a person including all their quirks and, in my opinion, this is what makes the person fun to teach and also learn from. I had one student who had cerebral palsy, in a wheelchair, non-verbal, but who could work a computer better than I could. He wanted to make sure I knew he was capable, so I ensure he used his abilities by designing and editing the class recipe book. He was thankful that he was able to use his computer abilities and intelligence.

NUMBER 3 > NO MORE EXCUSES
Through my experience, I have seen a lot of people with disabilities rest on it. I mean, they have found it easier in their lives to let everyone else do it. It is much easier for them, physically and mentally to allow other people to overtake their everyday lives. I don’t allow this in my class. I do not believe in the words “I can’t!” It is possible to make people with disabilities “have a go” at things they never have done before. It is important to note that you must work within the range of their disability. You must find their strengths, and build from there. One of my students was 90% blind in both eyes, but could get to class on public transport. He was consistently late and used the excuse that he could not see the trains. I told him that if he was late to a job, he would not keep the job. The trains are called out and he needs to know what trains are coming as this is his main method for getting around. Once he saw that he could actually get to class on time, he prided himself on beating me to the classroom. It is way too easy in life to create excuses why we can’t do things, so I say, no more excuses…. Let’s have a go and see where we can get to………

NUMBER 4 > GENTLE ENCOURAGEMENT
It is important that any learner, whether adult or child receive encouragement. Disability students thrive on it. It can be a pat on the back, a sticker or stamp, a kind comment on a page or just a tick. Disability students love to hear positive feedback. It can make a person want to try a bit more, go out of their comfort zone. I had a student who could not read more than three letter words. Over a period of 18 months, weekly spelling tests and my encouragement, he can now spell three syllable words without any assistance. He walks a bit taller and is very keen for the weekly spelling test now