People with disabilities may act, learn, get around, or read differently. The important word in that sentence is differently.

Disabilities are differences, not deficiencies.

In Anne Donnellan’s 1994 book on diversity, she describes the principle of the “least dangerous assumption.” We should make the assumption which, if proven to be false, would be least dangerous to the individual.

Take the example of a student who does not use words. Teachers tried all the methods they know to teach the student for a nine-week grading period and got no response. Teachers could make the dangerous assumption that the non-verbal student cannot learn. Five years later when he learns to communicate, the student tells the teachers that he wished they had not wasted five years of his life by not teaching him (because of a dangerous assumption.)

On the other hand, the teachers could have made the least dangerous and most respectful assumption that the student could learn, but just couldn’t express it. Then, when the student communicates after five years of good education, he will thank the teachers for all he learned. And if the student had never learned to communicate, what would have been lost? Nothing would be lost by the student.

Making the least dangerous assumption is similar to giving someone the benefit of the doubt.

Source material: Rossetti, Z. and Tashie, C., University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability www.iod.unh.edu

RESOURCES:
autisticadvocacy.org
autismacceptancemonth.org