

Interacting with Persons with Disabilities

When communicating with a person with a disability, it is important to interact based on the communication needs and their type of disability. Talking to someone with a disability is just like talking to anyone else. But sometimes, you might feel you are saying or doing the wrong thing. Here are some etiquette tips to help with interacting with people with disabilities:

General Etiquette Guidelines

- Always be aware of barriers, both permanent and temporary.
- When talking to a person with a disability, speak directly to the person. If there is a companion or interpreter present, always direct your comments to the person with the disability.
- Never assume that a person with a disability needs your assistance. It is always polite to offer your assistance, but once you have offered, wait for a reply before acting. If the person accepts your offer, wait to be directed. Do not be offended if your offer of assistance is not accepted; many persons with disabilities would rather do things for themselves whenever possible.
- Do not assume that a person with a physical disability also has a cognitive disability.

- Never lean on a person's wheelchair. A chair is often considered an extension of the body and leaning on it is the same as leaning directly on the person. If you bump into a person's wheelchair, say, "Excuse me." It's the same as bumping into the person directly. When talking to a person in a wheelchair, try to sit so that you are at eye level.
- When interacting with a person who has difficulty with attention or short-term memory, face the person and maintain eye contact. Use short sentences and give instructions in increments.
- Assistive devices (canes, crutches, wheelchairs, walkers, communication boards, etc.) should be respected as extensions of the person or as personal property. Do not move or play with them without permission from the user.
- When talking with a person who is blind or has a visual impairment, always identify yourself at the beginning of the conversation and remember to inform the person when you are ending the conversation, changing location, or leaving the area. Never hold the person's arm while walking; let her hold your arm. This will allow her to walk slightly behind you and get a sense of what to expect from the motion of your body. Ask if the person would like verbal cues as to what is ahead when you approach steps, curbs, or other barriers.

- When talking with an adult with a cognitive disability, do not speak as you would to a child. Use age-appropriate language and mannerisms. Also, do not assume that because a person may not speak, that they are unable to understand or hear you.
- When speaking with a person who is deaf or has a hearing loss, always look directly at the person. Keep your mouth and face free of hands or shadows. Do not speak with exaggerated slowness or with exaggerated facial expressions. As is proper telephone etiquette with all persons, speak clearly and distinctly when leaving voice mail messages. Also, do not shout; an increase in volume may actually make it more difficult for the person to understand you.
- If you are speaking with a person with impaired speech, listen carefully and repeat what you've heard. Don't pretend to understand if you don't, and don't give up and say, "Never mind, it wasn't important." That tells the person you're talking to that you don't value his input enough to continue the conversation. Also allow more time for a conversation with a person with speech impairment; do not rush him or try to finish his sentences.
- Fear is one of the main reasons why we are reluctant to interact with person with disabilities – do not let fear of making a mistake, fear of saying the wrong thing, or fear of the unknown make you

reluctant to interact with person with disabilities. The greatest mistake we can make is to exclude person with disabilities because of those fears. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, apologize, and move on.

Source: “Inclusion by Corporation for National & Community Service”