

Talking to and About People With Disabilities

During the past 25 years, improved access to educational institutions, the job market, public buildings and transportation services have enhanced the lives of many people with disabilities. But while access to education and the workforce has increased, people with disabilities often find their social interaction with other people to be very limited.

Many individuals avoid communicating with people who have developmental or cognitive disabilities because they are afraid of saying something inappropriate or offensive. Others do not think they would have anything to talk about with a person who is disabled so they say nothing.

Words

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first. Group designations such as “the blind,” “the retarded” or “the disabled” are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. Further, words like “normal person” imply that the person with a disability is not normal, whereas “person without a disability” is descriptive but not negative. The accompanying lists show examples of positive and negative phrases.

Affirmative Phrases

- Person with an intellectual, cognitive or developmental disability
- Person with a disability
- Person who is blind; person who is visually impaired
- Person who is deaf
- Person who is hard of hearing
- Person who has multiple sclerosis
- Person with cerebral palsy
- Person with epilepsy; person with a seizure disorder
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Person who has muscular dystrophy
- Person with a physical disability; physically disabled
- Unable to speak; uses synthetic speech
- Person with a psychiatric disability
- Person who is productive and successful

Negative Phrases

- Retarded; mentally defective
- The blind
- The disabled; handicapped
- The deaf; deaf and dumb
- Suffers a hearing loss

- Afflicted by MS
- Cerebral palsy victim
- Epileptic
- Confined or restricted to a wheelchair
- Stricken by muscular dystrophy
- Crippled; lame; deformed
- Dumb; mute
- Crazy; nuts
- Has overcome his/her disability; is courageous (when it implies that the person has courage because of having a disability)

General Tips for Communicating with People with Disabilities

Etiquette considered appropriate when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy.

Outlined below are tips to help you communicate with persons with disabilities.

- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
- Listen to the individual, and treat them with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions. Do not insist on helping or be offended if your offer is not accepted.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others.
- Relax. Do not be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as “See you later,” or “Did you hear about that?” that seem to relate to a person’s disability.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions when you are unsure what to do.

Communicating With Individuals Who are Blind or Visually Impaired

- Speak to the individual when you approach him or her.
- State clearly who you are and speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Never touch or distract a service dog without first asking the owner.
- Do not attempt to lead the individual without first asking. Allow the person to hold your arm and control her or his own movements.
- Be descriptive when giving directions, and verbally give the person information that is visually obvious to individuals who cannot see. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many steps.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the individual's hand on the back or arm of the chair so the person can locate the seat.

Communicating With Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Gain the person's attention before starting a conversation (i.e., tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm).
- Look directly at the individual, face the light, speak clearly, in a normal tone of voice, and keep your hands away from your face. Use short, simple sentences. Avoid smoking or chewing gum.
- If the individual uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- If you do not have a Text Telephone (TTY), dial 711 to reach the national telecommunications relay service, which facilitates the call between you and an individual who uses a TTY.

Communicating With Individuals with Mobility Impairments

- If possible, put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye level.
- Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Do not assume the individual wants to be pushed. Ask them if they would like assistance first.

- Offer assistance if the individual appears to be having difficulty opening a door.
- If you telephone the individual, allow the phone to ring longer than usual to allow extra time for the person to reach the telephone.

Communicating With Individuals with Speech Impairments

- If you do not understand something the individual says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then say it back to them to show you understood.
- Be patient. Take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish her or his sentences.
- If you are having difficulty understanding the individual, consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the individual if this is acceptable.

Communicating With Individuals with Cognitive Disabilities

- If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions, and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the individual to accept the offer of assistance; do not "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.



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