

People with Disabilities Etiquette...

The following suggestions enable better communication with people with a disability:

1. The key concept? People with disabilities prefer that you focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. The person should always be stressed first. The term handicapped should be avoided. The preferred usage is people with disabilities or persons with disabilities. The term disabled people is acceptable, but this term still defines people as disabled first and people second.
2. It is appropriate to shake hands with a person who has a disability, even if they have limited use of their hands or wear an artificial limb.
3. Always ask the person with a disability if he or she would like assistance before you jump in to help. Your help may not be needed or wanted.
4. A person in a wheelchair is a "wheelchair user" or "uses a wheelchair." Don't hang or lean on a person's wheelchair. A wheelchair is part of his or her own personal or body space, so don't lean on it, rock it, etc.
5. Speak directly to the person, not to someone who is nearby as if the person with a disability did not exist. Talk directly to the person, not to an aide or interpreter. It is important to make eye contact.
6. If your conversation lasts more than a few minutes, consider sitting down, etc. to get yourself on the same eye-level as the person who uses the wheelchair. It will keep both of you from getting a stiff neck!
7. Don't demean or patronize the person who uses a wheelchair by patting him or her on the head.
8. Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration that you have for everyone else. Treat the person as an individual, not as a disability. Don't assume that "disability" is all that person can talk about or is interested in.
9. Don't discourage children from asking questions of a person with a disability about their impairment. Open communication helps overcome fearful or misleading attitudes.
10. If you need to attract the attention of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, touch him or her lightly on the shoulder or arm. When you talk to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, talk directly to them, not to the interpreter, and face them so they can see your lips. Slow your rate of speech, speak your words clearly, and increase your volume, if requested. Shouting is often counterproductive. Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing may offer to write messages back and forth.

11. It is OK to use expressions like "running along" or "let's go for a walk" when speaking to a person who uses a wheelchair. It is likely they express the idea of moving along in exactly the same way.
12. You don't have to speak loudly to people with visual disabilities. Most of them can hear just fine. If you are asked for assistance, let a blind person hold your arm as a guide. Offer to read written information for a person with a visual disability when appropriate. It's okay to ask blind people if they "see what you mean." If you are meeting a blind person, identify yourself. If you have met before, remind the person of the context because he or she won't have the visual cues to jog their memory.
13. Persons with speech disabilities. Listen patiently and carefully. Address persons with speech disabilities as you would any other person in the same situation. Don't complete sentences for a person with a speech disability unless he or she specifically asks you for help. Don't pretend you understand what he or she says just to be polite. Ask the person to repeat if you don't understand. Ask the person to say something a different way if you're not sure what he or she is saying.
14. Check your assumptions! Don't assume that having a disability is a tragedy.
15. Do not touch someone's cane, wheelchair, or other assistive device. It is a part of that person's personal space. Don't pet guide dogs or other service animals...they are working.