

Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities

The Basics:

- Ask before you help.
 - Offer to help (opening a door, carrying packages) if it makes sense. Ask yourself, “Would I want help in a similar situation?”
 - People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do.
- Be sensitive about physical contact.
 - Consider a person’s wheelchair, walker or other assistive device as an extension of their body.
- Communicate at their level.
 - Communication can be easier when people are at the same level. If someone is at a lower level than you, sit or stand back so they can make eye contact without having to strain their neck.
- Be Considerate.
 - Always speak directly to the person with a disability.
 - Treat the person with a disability as you would everyone else.
- Be aware of your environment:
 - Ensure your pathways and operational space allow for easy passage and maneuverability for wheelchairs and other assistive devices.
 - Use fragrance-free or scent-free products if possible.
- Respond graciously to requests.
 - If someone with a disability asks for assistance, accommodate their needs to the best of your ability.

Terminology Tip:

- Put the Person First.
 - Remember the disability does not define the person, examples of appropriate terminology are below:
 - Person with a Disability
 - People with Disabilities
 - Person who uses a wheelchair

For people who use Wheelchairs or other Mobility Devices:

- When speaking with someone using a wheelchair, sit at their level or stand a slight distance so eye contact can be made more easily.
- Consider a person’s wheelchair or walker as an extension of their body.
- If you offer a seat to a person who has limited mobility, keep in mind that chairs with arms or with higher seats are easier for some people to use.
- Remember some people may not have a visible disability, but still have needs related to their mobility.

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For people who are Blind:

- Identify yourself before you make physical contact with a person who is Blind. Tell them your name and your role if it is appropriate.
- People who are Blind may need their arms for balance, so offer your arm if they need to be guided.
- It is appropriate to guide the hand of a person who is Blind to a banister or the back of a chair to help direct them to a stairway or a seat.
- If the person has a guide dog, walk on the opposite side of the dog.
- If you are giving directions, give specific, non-visual information.
- If you need to leave a person who is Blind, inform them you are leaving and ask if they need anything before you leave.
- Use verbal answers to questions, remember people who are Blind cannot see a head nod.

For People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing:

- Follow the person's cues to find out if they prefers sign language, gesturing, writing, or speaking.
- When using a sign language interpreter, look directly at the person who is Deaf and maintain eye contact to be polite.
- Before speaking to a person who is deaf or has loss of hearing, make sure you get their attention.
- For lip reading, if after repeating sentences multiple times the person still does not understand, try rephrasing the sentences.
- Speak in a normal volume, if the person uses a hearing aid, it will be calibrated to normal voice levels.

People with Speech Disabilities:

- Give the person your full attention.
- If you are not sure whether you have understood you can repeat for verification.
- If, after trying, you still cannot understand the person, ask him/her to write it down or to suggest another way of facilitating communication.
- Be patient; take as much time as necessary to communicate effectively.