

President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities



Communicating With and About People with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), other legislation, and the efforts of many disability organizations have begun to improve accessibility in buildings, increase access to education, open employment opportunities, and develop realistic portrayals of persons with disabilities in television programming and motion pictures. However, more progress needs to be made. Many people still view persons with disabilities as individuals to be pitied, feared, or ignored. These attitudes may arise from discomfort with individuals who are perceived to be different or simply from a lack of information. Listed below are some suggestions on how to relate and communicate with and about people with disabilities. We must look beyond the disability and look at the individual's ability and capability -- the things that make each of us unique and worthwhile.

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 deaf," or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities. Following are examples of positive and negative phrases. Note that the positive phrases put the person first.

Affirmative Phrases

person with mental retardation
 person who is blind, person who is visually impaired
 person with a disability
 person who is deaf, person who is hard of hearing
 person who has multiple sclerosis
 person with cerebral palsy
 person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder
 person who uses a wheelchair
 person who has muscular dystrophy
 physically disabled
 person without disability
 unable to speak, uses synthetic speech
 seizure
 successful, productive
 person with psychiatric disability
 person who no longer lives in an institution
 says she/he has a disability

Negative Phrases

retarded, mentally defective
 the blind
 the disabled, handicapped
 suffers a hearing loss, the deaf
 afflicted by MS
 CP victim
 epileptic
 confined or restricted to a wheelchair
 stricken by MD
 crippled, lame, deformed
 normal person (implies that the person with a disability isn't normal)
 dumb, mute
 fit
 has overcome his/her disability;
 courageous (when it implies the person has courage because of having a disability)
 crazy, nuts
 the deinstitutionalized
 admits he/she has a disability

Actions

Outlined below are the "Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities" to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities.

1. When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.
2. 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.)
3. When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. (Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.)
6. Leaning on or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
7. Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.
8. When speaking to a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
9. To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do lip-read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when speaking.
10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seems to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

The information for this fact sheet came from three sources: The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, Guidelines to Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities, produced by the Media Project, Research and Training Center on Independent Living, 4089 Dole, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, and Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities, National Center for Access Unlimited, 155 North Wacker Drive, Suite 315, Chicago, IL 60606

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