



TIPS FOR INTERACTING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

It can sometimes be difficult to know how to teach, work with, or interact with individuals with disabilities, especially if you have never met an individual with a particular type of disability before. This info guide provides general information and tips on how to interact with people with disabilities as well as tips on how to interact with individuals who have a wide variety of disabilities.

General Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

- In general, **RELAX** – above all else, individuals who have disabilities are people; they are not solely defined by their disabilities. People with disabilities have a wide variety of interests, hobbies, and personalities just like people who do not have disabilities.
- Approach people with disabilities from a stance of capability rather than inability.
- Don't assume the needs of people with disabilities – every person with a disability has their own unique preferences and needs.
- When interacting with a person with a disability, speak directly to them rather than speaking to their companion, friend, parent, assistant, interpreter, or anyone else who is with them.
- Offer to shake hands! Often times, those who may have limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb are capable of shaking your hand. Persons with vision loss know to extend a hand when meeting someone.
- Offer assistance with sensitivity and respect, but do not proceed if your offer is declined. If the offer is accepted, listen carefully for instructions.
- Focus on what the person is communicating to you rather than focusing on their disability.
- When speaking with people with disabilities, it is okay to use common expressions such as “Did you hear about it?”, “I’ll see you later” or “Do you want to walk over with me?” that seem to relate directly to a person’s disability; in fact, people with disabilities often use these common phrases themselves.
- Overall, if you aren’t sure about something, **ASK!** An individual with a disability is often the best resource on their disability and their needs.

(Adapted from Dr. Nathalie Whalen and the Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties’ “A Guide to Interacting with People who have Disabilities”)

Using Person First Language:

When addressing disability, the language that you use should emphasize the person rather than the disability; this is called Person First language.

> Appropriate words and phrases include:

- Person with a disability
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Person with cerebral palsy, person with Down Syndrome, or person who has epilepsy
- Little person or person of short stature
- Person who has a mental health condition or person who has a psychiatric disability
- Person who has a learning disability
- Person who is deaf, person who is hard of hearing, or person who has a hearing loss
- Person who is blind, person who is visually impaired, or person who has low vision
- Person with a speech disability, person who stutters, or person who has a communication disability

> Inappropriate words and phrases include:

- The handicapped or the disabled
- Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound, lame, or physically impaired
- Cerebral palsy person, Down’s person, epileptic, or spastic
- Dwarf or midget
- Crazy, freak, maniac, lunatic, psycho, or nuts
- Learning disabled student, slow, or brain damaged
- Hearing impaired or deaf and dumb
- Blind as a bat or visually handicapped
- Mute, dumb, or speech impaired

(Adapted from Dr. Nathalie Whalen)

Individuals with Physical and Mobility Disabilities

- Don't touch or push a person's wheelchair or other equipment without asking for permission or if they need help first.
- Do not speak loudly or slowly to a person who uses a wheelchair unless they need you to do so in order to communicate.
- Don't assume that a person NEEDS help.
- Don't put your hand on or lean on a wheelchair as this is invading the individual's body space.
- Try to lean down or sit down if you are talking to someone who uses a wheelchair for a while.
- Don't assume that being in a wheelchair is a tragedy – it is a means of transportation.
- Don't move a wheelchair away if the user transfers out of the chair.
- Know that an individual who uses a wheelchair may also use other means of transport.

People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Shouting or raising your voice when speaking to a person who has a hearing loss won't help them to understand you; rather, it can distort your words and make it even more difficult for them to understand what you are saying.
- If possible, move to a quiet environment when speaking with someone who has a hearing loss.
- Write important information down and ask for feedback to ensure understanding.
- When an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing is using a sign language interpreter, look at and speak directly to the person who is deaf or hard of hearing, not the interpreter.
- In group conversations, ensure that only one person is speaking at a time so that the individual with a hearing loss can follow along and participate in the conversation.
- If you need to get the attention of someone who is deaf or hard of hearing, lightly tap the person on the arm, wave your hand in their field of vision, or flicker the lights if in a large group.

Individuals with Speech Disabilities or Other Disabilities that Affect Speech

- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if needed; never pretend to understand what the person is saying if you are having difficulty.
- Be patient when the individual is speaking; don't try to speak for them or finish their sentences for them.
- When asking questions, ask short questions that can be answered with short answers or a head nod or shake.
- If a person's speech is labored due to Cerebral Palsy or another disability, remain calm and look away briefly as staring can make it worse.

People who are Blind, Visually Impaired, or who have Low Vision

- Don't grab or lead a person with vision loss without their permission.
- If a person with vision loss requests assistance with reaching their destination, offer your arm (just above the elbow) as a guide and describe any obstacles in the path of travel.
- Don't interrupt a person's cane travelling and don't assume that the individual needs help.
- Ask the person with vision loss if they need assistance with printed materials.
- Don't shout at a person who is blind or who has vision loss – they are not deaf.

Individuals who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Communicate clearly and concisely so that your message is understood; check to ensure that the individual understands before moving on.
- Provide information in writing (checklists, schedules, etc.), pictures and/or symbols.
- Sensory sensitivities can cause extreme stress and anxiety – ask for permission to touch first.
- Allow the individual to choose where they would like to sit, stand, or pace, and provide an area where the person can feel safe and prepare themselves for interaction.
- Try to limit the number of sounds that are in an environment, and allow the individual to use headphones to block sounds if desired.
- Be patient! Make a statement or ask a question and wait – count in your head and wait 5-10 seconds; allow time to process.
- If you see a person acting differently or if you are confused by their behavior, understand that their behavior could be their way of communicating feelings such as confusion, fear, anxiety, pain, anger, excitement, or happiness.

People who have Invisible Disabilities and Chronic Health Conditions

- What may seem like unusual behavior could actually be the result of an individual's hidden or invisible disability, so be careful about interpreting a person's behavior.
- Ask the person what they need and what will make them most comfortable, and respect their needs as much as possible.
- Overall, if you aren't sure what a person needs... **ASK!** A person with a disability is often the best expert on their own disability and their needs.

(Adapted from the Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, the Center on Disability Studies, and the Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence "Tips to Enhance Interactions with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder")