

Eleven Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities



These are general suggestions for appropriate behavior.

Not all people are the same, these guidelines hold true for most individuals most of the time.

Be aware that there are many people with hidden disabilities that are not always visibly apparent.

Just because you can't see it, doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

Just because someone has a disability, it doesn't mean that they are incompetent, sick, dependent, unintelligent, or contagious.

Just because someone has a disability doesn't mean that they are hard of hearing.

You don't necessarily have to speak louder, or use a voice that you would use around children.

Just because someone has a disability doesn't mean that they have to become a spokesperson for said disability, nor does it mean that they owe anyone an explanation of their disability. Before inquiring about an individual's disability, it is recommended that one first forms a relationship with said individual.

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. Individuals with intellectual disabilities are not big kids, do not refer to them, or treat them like a child. At the end of the day, treat others how you would like to be treated.
6. 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.)
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. When speaking with 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. Do not treat them like they are sick or have a disease. If they have a guide dog, remember the dog is working and do not interact with it.
10. 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.
11. 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.

Your Words, Our Image, 8th Edition

You are in a unique position to shape the public image of people with disabilities. By putting the person first and using these suggested words, you can convey a positive, objective view of an individual instead of a negative, insensitive image. www.rtcil.org/guidelines

Do say

Disability
People with disabilities
Person with spinal cord injury
Person with autism, on the autism spectrum
Person with Down syndrome
Person of short stature
Uses a wheelchair, wheelchair user
Has a learning disability
Has chemical or environmental sensitivities
Has a brain injury
Blind, low vision
Deaf, hard of hearing
Intellectual disability
Amputee, has limb loss
Congenital disability
Burn survivor
Post-polio syndrome
Service animal or dog
Psychiatric disability, mental illness
How should I describe you or your disability?
Accessible parking or restroom

Don't say

Differently abled, challenged
The disabled, handicapped
Cripple
Autistic
Mongoloid
Midget, dwarf
Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
Slow learner
Chemophobic
Brain damaged
Visually handicapped, blind as a bat
Deaf - mute, deaf and dumb
Retarded, mental retardation
Gimp, lame
Birth defect
Burn Victim
Suffers from polio
Seeing eye dog
Crazy, psycho, schizo
What happened to you?
Handicapped parking, disabled restroom



Building Rapport (Relationships)

- Make eye contact. If you are looking at someone you are listening to them. Minimize distractions – turn off electronic devices.
- Be responsive – use facial expressions and make verbal comments.
- Be inclusive. Include people in making plans and decisions.
Build positive associations.
- Engage people in conversations about things that interest them.
- Avoid sarcasm, irony or too much slang.
- Speak at an age appropriate level.
- Be considerate of the extra time that it might take someone with an intellectual disability to say something and allow them time to speak.
- Inform people what is about to happen before it occurs.
- Try giving verbal and written instructions or try giving examples that illustrate ideas and summarize ideas.
- Give instructions in small bit size pieces.
- Never assume someone is unintelligent and will believe anything you tell them. Always tell people the truth when communicating. Lies create mistrust.
- Put yourself in the place of the person that you are speaking to and ask yourself how you would like to be talked to.

Parallel Talk: Describe what the individual is doing as they are doing it.

Self-Talk: Describe what you doing with the individual as you are doing it.

Name Names: Speak the words aloud for objects in the individual's environment.