

Communication Guidelines on Disability

USE PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE. People with disabilities prefer to be seen for their individuality, not their disability. For example, instead of using the term “the disabled”, the preferred usage is, “people with disabilities.” The stress is on the humanity of individuals, as opposed to labeling based on disability. Also, be specific when referring to a person’s disability. For example, use “person with cerebral palsy” or “person who uses a wheelchair” versus “physically-challenged” or “handicapped”. In addition, the terms “handicapped”, “physically-challenged” and “differently-abled” are discouraged as they are no longer used or accepted by the disability community. For example, “handicapped” derives from “cap-in-hand,” a beggar’s association to which people with disabilities do not wish to be compared.

ASK RESPECTFUL QUESTIONS ABOUT A PERSON’S DISABILITY. It isn’t rude to be curious or ask questions about a person’s disability, as long as the questions are asked in a courteous and respectful way. It is also acceptable to politely ask a person with a speech impairment to repeat themselves if you have not understood them correctly at first. Education, information and interpersonal relationship building are the best ways to counteract stereotypes and negative attitudes about people with disabilities.

ASK BEFORE HELPING. Many people with disabilities lead independent lives; therefore, ask people if they would like assistance before helping them. If they accept your assistance, ask how they would prefer to be helped before you act. People with a visual disability need their arms for balance; therefore, it is best to offer your arm or elbow to lead or for support if the person requests to be guided.

BE RESPECTFUL OF PERSONAL SPACE AND ASSISTIVE DEVICES. Assistive devices, such as guide dogs, wheelchairs, crutches, hearing aids, etc, are part of people’s personal space and are an extension of their bodies; therefore, do not lean on, push or help with any assistive device if not invited to by a person. Similarly, never move a person’s assistive device (e.g. wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility aides) out of reach of the person. Bear the following in mind:

- Some people with disabilities are reliant on the dominant parts of their body, thus shaking or grabbing a person’s hands, arms or artificial limbs could be unsafe, or could throw the person off balance. Always ask the person if it is acceptable to shake hands, and offer physical assistance before acting.
- People with visual disability or blindness who use guide dogs are reliant on their guide dogs to be alert; thus a person should not pet or distract a guide dog, and should always walk on the side opposite to where the guide dog walks, so as not to stand as an obstacle in the way of the person.

ALWAYS TALK DIRECTLY TO A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY. People with disabilities are individuals who should be treated with respect. Even when using a sign language interpreter or special aide, always speak directly to a person with a disability. For people who use hearing aids, speak in a normal tone; hearing aids are set to standard voice levels. In the case of a person with a visual disability, always introduce yourself first before asking to make any form of physical contact, and if in a large group, always have others introduce themselves accordingly.

CONSIDER ACCESSIBILITY. Be aware of the physical space around you and check for accessibility for people with physical and/or visual disabilities. Ensure that all items, facilities and tools for safety are within reach of people with disabilities. When directing people with a

visual disability to the nearest exit, give instructions based on where they are physically located in a room, in the event they are in an unfamiliar environment. Also, mention any obstructions that may be in their path to ensure their safety.

PROMOTE EQUITABLE CONDITIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. Ensure that all conditions and environments are made accessible to people with disabilities, according to legislation on the rights of persons with disabilities (e.g. Americans With Disabilities Act, Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, Federal Family and Medical Leave Act).

Sources:

- *Adele Schwartz, Ed.D., Marymount Manhattan College, "Educational Inclusion Course Materials", 1999.*
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http://www.ada.ufl.edu/publication/faculty_guide/language.htm
- *Center for Disability Information and Referral:* <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/cedir/>
- *Cohen , Judy, [Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting With People With Disabilities](#), United Spinal Association, 2003.*

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