

COMMUNICATION AND ETIQUETTE WITH PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Etiquette may seem a rather formal term to portray the give and take of our communication with other people. And yet, etiquette really feels like the right word to use to describe the thoughtful, considerate behavior that we expect to receive from others and give to them. Unless you have known a number of persons with varying types of disabilities, you may never have had reason to think about the key points that make relationships with persons with disabilities easier and more relaxed. Here are some basic ground rules we should all keep in mind to create a welcoming and relaxed environment for everyone.

Each situation is unique. If you encounter a person with a disability who may need help, ask to be sure that help actually is wanted. If you learn that it is, then ask exactly how you can help, and what you should do.

Guidelines

When you are with a person who is blind, deaf-blind, or has vision loss:

- Identify yourself when approaching the person and say where you are standing in relation to that person. (e.g., “Hello, I am John, standing on your left.”)
- Don’t assume the person cannot see you at all.
- Use a natural conversational volume and an ordinary tone of voice.
- Never touch, distract, or offer food to a service animal unless you have permission from the owner.
- Don’t touch a person with low vision or no vision (blind or deaf-blind), without warning unless it is an emergency. If you see someone about to encounter a dangerous situation, be calm and clear about your warning. For example, if the person is about to bump into a pole, calmly and clearly call out, “Wait there for a moment; there is a pole in front of you.”
- Never hold the arm of the person while walking. Let the person hold your arm. This will allow the person to walk slightly behind you and the motion of your body will indicate what the person can expect. Offer verbal cues as to what is ahead when you approach steps, curbs, escalators, or doors.
- Ask the individual if help is needed and how you can best give that help.
- During a conversation, give verbal feedback to let the person know you are listening. He or she may not be able to see the expression on your face.
- Ask if the person wants you to describe who is where and what is happening nearby.
- It really is okay to say things like “See you soon.” Feel comfortable using everyday words relating to vision, such as “look,” “see,” or “read.”
- When you leave, say you are leaving. Never leave a person who has low vision or is blind in an open area, such as the middle of a room. Instead, ask where he or she would like to go, such as the side of the room, to a chair, or to some other landmark, and lead the person there.

When you are with a person who is deaf or hard of hearing:

- Be certain you have the person’s attention before speaking. If the person is facing you, gently tap him or her on the arm or elbow and make sure the person is looking at you before you speak. If the person is not facing you, use a gentle tap on the shoulder.
- Don’t expect the person to make eye contact with you, until he or she is finished speaking with others. Breaking eye contact is considered rude, and expecting an immediate response is also inappropriate behavior. Wait your turn. When the person turns to you, begin speaking.
- Don’t exaggerate your speech, or shout.
- Speak at a slow to moderate rate.

- Look directly at the person who is deaf or hard of hearing, not at an interpreter who may be working with him or her. Address your responses only to the person (e.g., don't say "Tell her I said. . ." or "Tell him that..."). Speak to the person and let the interpreter transfer the information back and forth.
- Don't cover your mouth with anything or turn your head away.
- Don't create shadow on your face by standing with your back or side to a bright light or window.
- Don't touch, distract, or offer food to a service dog.
- Be patient. If the individual does not seem to understand you, first repeat what you said initially. Then, if necessary, try using different words.
- If spoken communication is difficult, try using paper and pencil.
- It is not rude to ask "Are you deaf?" but do not use the terms "hearing impaired" or "deaf and dumb."

When you are with a person who has a mobility impairment or other physical disability:

- Don't assume the person has an intellectual disability.
- Speak directly to the person, not to an attendant who may be with him or her.
- If possible, be at eye level with the person.
- Do not touch, distract, or offer food to a working service animal.
- Don't move crutches, walkers, canes, or wheelchairs out of reach without permission. If moved with permission, do not leave until you return them to the person or arrange for their return.
- Ask whether or not you can be of help, and if so, how. Do not assume anything.
- Ask if and how you can help in a buffet line.
- When helping to guide a wheelchair user down an incline, grasp the push handles tightly so that the chair does not go too fast.
- If assisting someone in a wheelchair to go up or down a curb, ask how you can best help.
- When assisting a wheelchair user to go up or down more than one step, tilt the wheelchair back at all times while descending or ascending the stairs.
- Respect everyone's personal space. Do not lean on someone's wheelchair.
- Use the term "wheelchair user" rather than "confined" to a wheelchair. (Wheelchairs provide freedom and access.)
- Use the term "Little People" or "Little Person" rather than "dwarf."
- Allow children to ask questions and allow the person being questioned to answer.

When you are with a person who has a speech or language disorder:

- Don't assume the person has an intellectual disability.
- Don't pretend you've understood if you haven't.
- Do ask the person to repeat what you don't understand.
- Ask questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no."
- Give your whole, unhurried attention. Be patient.
- A person's speech may be slow or difficult, but it is worth waiting for what that person has to say.

When you are with a person who has an intellectual disability:

- Speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Use simple words and short sentences.
- Talk with the person even though he or she may not be verbal enough to respond. Introduce yourself and say that you are pleased to meet the person. Shake hands if that seems appropriate.
- Give one piece of information at a time, and repeat if needed.
- Do not be condescending.

- Be polite and patient. Do not treat an adult as a child.
- Use age-appropriate topics and conversation. Find commonalities for your conversation—movies, TV shows, sports events, church activities, families.
- Be generous, but appropriate, with compliments when the person has accomplished a task or taken initiative.
- Don't make assumptions about what anyone can or cannot do.

Note: This material has been adapted with permission (April 2009) by Dr. Charlotte Shepard, Ph.D., UMC Consultant, Disability Concerns, the Rev. Wineva Hankamer, UMC Consultant, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries, and the Rev. Dr. Devorah Greenstein, Coordinator, Office of Accessibility Concerns, Unitarian Universalist Association, from the publication *Equal Access Guide*, pages 24-25. *Equal Access Guide* was prepared by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA Committee on Disabilities in 2004. The original 2004 NCCC document can be found on the web at www.nccusa.org/elmc/disabilitiesmanual.html
