



Tips for interacting with people with disabilities

One in five Americans — an estimated 65 million people — will be affected by a special need or disability in their lifetime.* Another 105 million people serve as a parent, sibling or caregiver.**

This guide offers tips on interacting with people who have various special needs and disabilities.



Words with Dignity

Using words with dignity encourages equality for everyone. When in doubt, use people-first language (e.g., “a person with a disability,” not “a disabled person.”)

USE: Person with a disability, disabled

NOT: Cripple, handicapped, handicap, invalid (literally means “not valid”)

USE: Person who has, person with (e.g., person who has cerebral palsy)

NOT: Victim, afflicted with (e.g., victim of cerebral palsy)

USE: Uses a wheelchair

NOT: Restricted or confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound

USE: Nondisabled or able-bodied

NOT: Normal (referring to nondisabled people as “normal” insinuates that people with disabilities are abnormal)

USE: Deaf, hard of hearing

NOT: Deaf-mute, deaf and dumb

USE: Disabled since birth, born with

NOT: Birth defect

USE: Psychiatric history, psychiatric disability, emotional disorder, mental illness, consumer of mental health services

NOT: Crazy, insane, mental patient, wacko, a lunatic, a psychotic, a schizophrenic

USE: Epilepsy, seizures

NOT: Fits

USE: Learning disability, intellectual disability, developmental disability, cognitive disability, ADD/ADHD

NOT: Mental retardation, slow, retarded, lazy, stupid, underachiever

USE: Dwarfs, little people, people of short stature, having dwarfism

NOT: Midget



Preferred Terms to Use when Discussing Disabilities

- Blind (no visual capability)
- Legally blind, low vision (some visual capability)
- Hearing loss, hard of hearing (some hearing capability)
- Hemiplegia (paralysis of one side of the body)
- Paraplegia (loss of function in the lower body only)
- Quadriplegia (paralysis of both arms and legs)
- Residual limb (post-amputation of a limb)

These terms should be avoided because they have negative connotations and tend to evoke pity and fear:

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|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|
| ■ abnormal | ■ incapacitated | ■ pitiful |
| ■ afflicted | ■ imbecile | ■ retard |
| ■ burden | ■ maniac | ■ spastic |
| ■ condition | ■ maimed | ■ stricken with |
| ■ deformed | ■ madman | ■ suffer |
| ■ differently abled | ■ moron | ■ tragedy |
| ■ disfigured | ■ palsied | ■ unfortunate |
| ■ handicap able | ■ pathetic | ■ victim |
| ■ handicapped | ■ physically challenged | |

* US Census Bureau, Americans with Disabilities: 2010

** National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP: Caregiving in the US: 2015



Disability Etiquette: Basic Guidelines

- Refer to the person first, then the disability. Say “a person with a disability” rather than “a disabled person.”
- Avoid the word “handicapped” in any use. The word comes from the image of a person standing on the corner with a cap in hand begging for money. People with disabilities do not want to be the recipients of charity or pity. They want to participate equally with the rest of the community. A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc.
- If the disability isn’t relevant to the story or conversation, don’t mention it.
- Remember, a person who has a disability isn’t necessarily chronically sick or unhealthy.
- A person is not a condition, so avoid describing a person as such. Don’t introduce someone as “autistic.” Instead, say, “a person with autism.”



Conversation

- When speaking about people with disabilities, emphasize achievements, abilities and individual qualities. Address them as parents, employees, business owners, etc.
- When talking to a person who has a disability, speak directly to that person. For people who communicate through sign language, speak to them, not to the interpreter.
- Relax. Don’t be embarrassed if you use common expressions such as “see you later” or “gotta run.”
- To get the attention of a person who has a hearing loss, tap him or her on the shoulder or wave. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to establish if he or she reads lips. Not all people with hearing loss can read lips. Those who do, rely on facial expressions and body language for understanding. Keep food, hands and other objects away from your mouth. Shouting won’t help; written notes will. Use an interpreter if possible.
- When talking to a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, place yourself at eye level with that person.
- When greeting a person who has low vision or is blind, always identify yourself and others. For example, say, “On my right is John Smith.” Remember to identify people to whom you are speaking. Speak in a normal tone of voice and indicate when the conversation is over. Let him or her know when you move from one place to another.



Common Courtesies

- Don’t feel obligated to act as a caregiver to people with disabilities. Ask if help is needed, but always wait until your offer is accepted. Listen to any instructions the person may have.
- Leaning on a person’s wheelchair is like leaning or hanging on a person. It is considered annoying and rude. The chair is part of a person’s personal body space. Don’t hang on it.
- Share the same social courtesies with people with disabilities that you would share with someone else. If you shake hands with people you meet, offer your hand to everyone you meet, regardless if a person has a disability. If the person is unable to shake your hand, he or she will tell you.
- When aiding a person with a visual impairment, allow that person to take your arm. This will enable you to guide, rather than propel or lead the person. Use specific directions, such as “left in 10 feet,” when directing a person with a visual impairment.
- When planning events that involve people with disabilities, consider their needs before choosing a location. Even if people with disabilities will not attend, select an accessible spot.

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