



## Disability Etiquette Guidelines

Here are general guidelines for providing services to individuals with disabilities, as well as language guidelines.

### Respect Personal Property

Canes, wheelchairs, crutches, communication devices, or any other assistive technology should be considered personal property of the individual. Unless given explicit permission, do not touch, use or play with any personal items of a person with a disability. Service animals are not pets. Therefore, do not pet or play with animals until permission is granted from the owner.

### Speak Directly to the Individual

Always speak directly to the individual with a disability, not to their companion or language interpreter. If the individual has a disability that affects their ability to comprehend information, make all attempts to communicate information in a way that can be understood. Provide concrete examples and alternative explanations of complex terms. Remember who is the participant in the program and make appropriate accommodations.

### Do Not Focus on the Disability

Do not focus on the person's disability. A person's disability is just one aspect of who they are. Focus only on the aspects of the disability that are relevant to their success in the program. People with disabilities have the same interests and achievements as the population at large.

### Offer to Shake Hands

When introduced to an individual with a disability, you may offer to shake hands. It is acceptable to shake with the left hand. Some individuals may decline your offer.

### If You Are Not Sure, Ask Questions

If you are unsure about what an appropriate action should be, ask the individual what he or she prefers. A person with a disability would much rather be asked questions about what the appropriate protocol is rather than be caught in an uncomfortable situation. Be clear in explaining what types of services and classes will be offered and what will be expected of the individual to complete the program. Indicate that asking about the

disability and accommodations are in the participant's best interest - you want them to succeed!

## **However, Do Not Ask about a Person's Disability**

Avoid asking overly personal questions about a person's disability; ask only questions that are relevant to the individual's success in the program. If you do ask questions, be sensitive and show respect. Do not insist on pursuing the questioning if the person wishes not to discuss it. Specific information about diagnoses, medications, and personal routines are usually not essential to their participation.

## **Treat Disabled Adults as You Would Any Other Adult**

Adults with disabilities appreciate the same respect and treatment as any non-disabled adult. Therefore, only use first names when extending the same level of familiarity to others who are present and for close friends. Never patronize people with disabilities or treat them like they have less intelligence or capability.

## **Do Not Exclude People with Disabilities from Activities**

Do not exclude persons with disabilities from any social or work-related activity because you think it would be too difficult for them to participate. If the location is inaccessible, make all attempts to re-locate to an accessible environment; however, if an accessible location is not available, indicate that to the individual and allow them to request accommodations and choose whether to attend.

## **Make Conversation**

People with disabilities have the same interests as non-disabled people. Make conversation as you would with anyone else. Do not worry about using common phrases such as "*See you later*" or "*I've got to be running along.*"

## **Speak with a Normal Tone of Voice**

There is no need to speak loudly regardless of a person's disability. If someone needs you to speak in a louder voice, he or she will let you know.

## **Be Respectful of Public Disability Accommodations**

Be respectful of the rights of people with disabilities to use disabled parking and special seating on buses and subways. Remember that not all individuals requiring accommodations have visible disabilities. For example, back problems and heart conditions frequently require accommodations even though the person's disability may not be apparent.

## It is Alright if You Make a Mistake

As with any other general etiquette issue, when a mistake is made, just apologize and correct the problem, learn from the mistake, and move on.

## Disability Language Guidelines

Use of language is a powerful tool for changing attitudes. However, language can be tricky—it is always changing and different individuals prefer different terminology. The following tips and terms are meant as a basic guide to ease the anxiety that some people feel when communicating with people with disabilities.

### Use Person-First Language

Many people with disabilities prefer what is called "person-first" language, meaning refer to the person first, as in 'a person who is blind,' or a 'person who uses a wheelchair,' or a 'person with a disability.' In a publication on this topic, Access AmeriCorps summarized this concept nicely: "One is a person before one is disabled, people with disabilities are individuals who share a common condition." Furthermore, when referring to a person's disability, use the noun form of disability instead of the adjective. For example, say "a person who has epilepsy" instead of "a person who is epileptic."

### Avoid Old Stereotypes

Try to avoid outdated language that supports old stereotypes that imply that people with disabilities are experiencing constant distress and hopelessness. Words to avoid include handicapped, cripple, victim, defective, afflicted, suffers from, invalid, special.

### Do not Refer to People who are not Disabled as "Normal"

Avoid referring to those who do not have a disability as "*normal*". It is preferable to use words such as "*non-disabled*" or "*people without disabilities*."

### Avoid Confining Adjectives for People in Wheelchairs

Avoid terms like "*wheelchair-bound*" and "*confined to a wheelchair*" since a wheelchair in reality improves access and mobility. Instead use phrases like "*uses a wheelchair*" or "*wheel-chair rider*."

### Do not Portray People with Disabilities as Superhuman

Using words such as "*brave*" and "*courageous*" implies that skill and achievement by people with disabilities is unusual. Instead, use language that is accurate and non-judgmental.

The following table summarizes key language principles.

<b>Disability Vocabulary: Do's and Don'ts</b>	
<b>Affirmative Language</b>	<b>Language to Avoid</b>
person with a disability, people with disabilities, disabled	handicapped, cripple, victim, crip, unfortunate, defective, handi-capable
wheelchair user, uses a wheelchair	wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair
blind, low vision, partially sighted	blind as a bat, sightless, the blind
mobility disability	deformed, maimed, paralytic, lame
psychologically/emotionally disabled, emotional disorder	the mentally ill, mental, crazy, insane
developmentally disabled, person with a cognitive/intellectual disability	retard, mentally defective
birth anomaly, congenital disability	birth defect, mongoloid
a person who is deaf or hard of hearing	suffers a hearing loss, the deaf
person with epilepsy	spastic, epileptic, spaz
speech disability, communication disability	tongue-tied
non-disabled	healthy, normal, whole
non-vocal, a person who is non-verbal	mute, dumb
person of short stature	midget, dwarf

learning disability	slow
chronic illness	suffers from, afflicted, as a patient, stricken with, arthritic

Taken from: <http://idaresources.acf.hhs.gov/page?pageid=a047000000ArROc>

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