

Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

Suggestions for Communication & Interaction with People with Disabilities

- When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than to a person accompanying them.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions. Do not just assume that help is needed. Do not act without asking for the person's permission. Make sure you offer assistance subtly and with discretion so that the person is not embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help.
- 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.
- When meeting a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself and others who may be with you.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others present. Also make sure you engage in age appropriate conversations with adults, no baby talk!
- An individual in a wheelchair generally considers their wheelchair an extension of their body. Leaning or hanging on a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on a person's body and is generally considered annoying and disrespectful.
- 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, interrupting, or speaking for the person. You may have to wait a few minutes to get an answer from someone because they may need more time to process a question. You can also try asking yes or no questions, showing pictures with different choices, or pointing to tangible choices.
- Be honest with yourself about what you are comfortable with. If a person with a disability is making you uncomfortable in any way you can say, "I am not comfortable answering that question" or, "This conversation is making me uncomfortable, can we talk about something else?" or, "I'm listening to the teacher now."
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions that seem to relate to the person's disability such as saying "See you later," to a person with visual impairment or, "Did you hear about this..." to a person with hearing impairment.
- Don't feel obligated to communicate outside of your volunteer time. Only give out your cell phone number to people who you want to contact you. You can choose to connect or not to connect on social media.
- Be yourself!

Thanks to Christi Bishop and St. Mary's County Commission For People with Disabilities for sharing this information.

Thanks to Best Buddies International for sharing information from their Tips on Being a Dedicated Peer Buddy and Friend training resource.

Irene M. Ward (Author). (1994). Ten Commandments of Communicating With People With Disabilities (DVD).

Using Person-First Language

General Guidelines

- Do not refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant to the conversation.
- Use the word "disability" rather than "handicap" to refer to a person's disability. Never use "cripple/crippled".
- Avoid referring to people with disabilities as "the disabled, the blind, the epileptics, the retarded." Descriptive terms should be used as adjectives, not as nouns.
- Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person's disability. Don't say "suffers from, a victim of, or afflicted with." These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities. Respect and acceptance is what people with disabilities prefer.
- Don't use "normal" or "able-bodied" to describe people who do not have disabilities. It is better to say "people without disabilities," if necessary to make comparisons.
- When referring to a person's disability, use "People First Language." People who have disabilities are present in every aspect of society. They are:
 - Sons and daughters
 - Moms and dads
 - Employees and co-workers
 - Friends and neighbors
 - Students and teachers
 - Most importantly, they are people first

Making the Change to People First Language

- "Handicapped" or "disabled" should be replaced with "people with disabilities"
- "He/she is wheelchair bound" or "he/she is confined to a wheelchair" should be replaced with "He/she uses a wheelchair"
- "He/she has a birth defect" should be replaced with "he/she has a congenital disability"
- "Handicapped" in reference to parking, bathrooms, rooms etc. should be replaced with "accessible"
- "He/she is retarded" should be replaced with "he/she has an intellectual disability or developmental disability"

Language is power. Our words have the power to inspire, motivate, and uplift people.

The information provided above is taken directly from the Best Buddies International Peer Buddy Training on People First Language.

Interacting With Someone in a Wheelchair

General Guidelines

For a person in a wheelchair, their wheelchairs are like a part of their body. You must respect the person in the wheelchair, as well as the wheelchair itself. Here are some basic Do's and Don'ts when interacting with a person in a wheelchair:

Do...

Do make sure wheelchairs are locked when appropriate.

Do approach individuals in wheelchairs from the front.

Do make sure you introduce yourself and explain what you are doing before pushing someone in a wheelchair.

Do try and get on the level of a person in a wheelchair when talking to them (i.e sit in a chair next to or in front of the individual).

Do not...

Do not take off wheelchair parts, without a staff member present.

Do not move a person in a wheelchair, unless authorized by a staff member.

Do not lean on wheelchairs.

Never sit in a person's wheelchair if they are not in it.

Thanks to Potomac Community Resources for sharing this information