

# Disability Etiquette Guide

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## The Basics

### **ASK BEFORE YOU HELP**

Interact with the person as a person first! Just because someone has a disability, don't assume he or she needs help. Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it, and ask how you may help before you act.

### **BE SENSITIVE ABOUT PHYSICAL CONTACT**

Some people with disabilities depend on their arms for balance. Grabbing them – even if your intention is to assist – could knock them off balance. Avoid patting a person on the head or touching his wheelchair, scooter or cane. People with disabilities consider their equipment part of their personal space.

### **THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK**

Always speak directly to the person with a disability, not to his companion, aide or sign language interpreter. Don't apologize if you use an expression such as "I gotta run" or "See you later" that relates to the person's disability. These expressions are part of everyday language and it is likely the apology will be more offensive than the expression.

### **DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS**

People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Don't make decisions for them about participating in any activity.

## Terminology Tips

- **Use "People First" Language** – refer to the individual first, then to his or her disability, when it is relevant and appropriate. Say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person" or use the following formula:

Name or Title of a Person	+	Verb	+	Assistive Device or Disability
Professor, student, child, applicant, etc.		Has, uses, utilizes, etc.		Wheelchair, autism, developmental delay, etc.

- The following terms should be avoided in a disability context, because they have negative meanings:
  - Invalid
  - Wheelchair bound
  - Defect
  - Handicapped
  - Victim
  - Suffers from
  - Crippled
  - A patient
- Don't portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special, or superhuman. This implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.
- Avoid using the term "normal" to describe people who don't have disabilities. It is better to say "people without disabilities" or "typical", if necessary to make comparisons.

<b>Labels Not to Use</b>	<b>People First Language</b>
The handicapped or the disabled	People with disabilities
The mentally retarded or he's retarded	People with mental retardation or he has a cognitive impairment
The autistic child	The child has autism
She's a Down's; she's mongoloid	She has Down Syndrome
Birth defect	Has a congenital disability
Epileptic	A person with epilepsy
Wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair or mobility chair, or is a wheelchair user
She is developmentally delayed	She has a developmental delay
He's crippled or lame	He has a physical disability
She's a dwarf or midget	She has short stature, she is a little person
Mute	Communicates with her eyes/device, etc.
Is learning disabled	Has a learning disability
Afflicted with, suffers from, victim of	Person who has.....
She's emotionally disturbed; she's crazy	She has an emotional disability
Normal and/or healthy	A person without a disability
Quadriplegic, paraplegic, etc.	He has quadriplegia, paraplegia, etc.
She's in Special Ed	She receives Special Ed services
Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.	Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.
Client, consumer, recipient, etc. (e.g., when a person is making a purchase at a store)	Customer

## **People Who Use Wheelchairs or Have Mobility Impairments**

- Offer to shake hands when greeting someone.
- Don't lean on or touch someone's wheelchair.
- Place yourself at eye level when in conversation.
- People who use canes, crutches or other assistive devices use arms for balance. Refrain from touching them or moving an object around them unexpectedly.

## **People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired**

- Identify yourself and allow the rest of the group to do the same.
- Offer your elbow if someone needs to be guided; don't take his.
- Walk on the opposite side of a guide dog or cane.
- Give specific, non-visual directions.
- Orient people with visual impairments using numbers on the face of a clock.

## **People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

- Follow the person's cues to find out if she prefers sign language, gesturing, writing or speaking.
- Before speaking to a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, tap on her shoulder or wave your hand to get her attention.
- Use a normal tone, speak clearly and distinctly.
- Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences that the person doesn't understand.

- Use facial expression, body language and pantomime.
- If a sign language interpreter is present, speak directly to the person who is deaf, not to the interpreter.
- Be prepared to write notes to communicate, if necessary.

### **People with Speech Disabilities**

- Give the person your full attention and be patient.
- Don't interrupt or finish the person's sentences.
- If you are not sure whether you have understood, you can repeat for verification.
- If, after trying, you still cannot understand the person, ask him to write it down or to suggest another way of communicating.

### **People with Developmental Disabilities**

- Speak to the person in clear sentences, using simple words and concrete concepts.
- Rephrase comments or questions for better clarity.
- Stay focused on the person as he responds to you and be patient.
- Avoid talking about a person with a developmental disability when he is present.

### **Service Animals**

- Some people who are Deaf, blind or have low vision, or who have seizure disorder or a range of other disabilities may use a service animal to assist them with daily living.
- Don't distract, feed or pet the animal.
- Respect the handler.

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### **References**

"Disability Etiquette – Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities"

United Spinal Association

[www.unitedspinal.org](http://www.unitedspinal.org)

"Pathways to Success for People with Disabilities"

Rory A. Cooper, PhD; Diane Collins, Elaine Houston

University of Pittsburgh, School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences

"Disability Etiquette"

Naval Air Systems Command

[www.navair.navy.mil/nawcwg/hrd/disability/etiquette.html](http://www.navair.navy.mil/nawcwg/hrd/disability/etiquette.html)