

Communicating with People who have Disabilities

People First Terminology Because positive language is empowering, it is important to put the person first when writing or speaking about people with disabilities. Group designations such as “the blind,” “the deaf,” or “the disabled” are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people who have disabilities. The following table includes examples of affirmative and negative phrases. Note that the positive phrases put the *person* first.

Affirmative Phrases	Negative Phrases
person with a disability	the disabled; handicapped
person who uses a wheelchair	confined or restricted to a wheelchair
person who is blind	the blind
person with a physical disability	crippled; lame
person who is unable to speak	dumb; mute
person with cerebral palsy	CP victim
person who has multiple sclerosis	afflicted by MS
person who is successful	has overcome his/her disability
person without a disability	normal person (implies that a person with a disability is not normal)

Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People who have Disabilities

1. When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.
2. 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. Shaking hands with the left hand is also acceptable.

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3. When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
6. Leaning or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
7. 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 or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
8. When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
9. To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.
10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you are unsure of what to do.

Sources: The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, The Research and Training Center on Independent Living's Guidelines to Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities, and The National Center for Access Unlimited



DISABILITY TRAINING NETWORK

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