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Disability Etiquette

People with disabilities tend to prefer that you focus on their abilities not their disabilities. Appreciate the person first. Avoid using the term "handicapped". The preferred usage is people with disabilities or persons with disabilities. The term disabled people is acceptable, but this term still defines people as disabled first and people second. Language is powerful but attitudes and behaviors are the most difficult barriers for people with disabilities to overcome.

Persons With Mobility Disabilities "A person in a wheelchair is a "wheelchair user" or "uses a wheelchair." When having an extended conversation with someone in a wheelchair or scooter, try sitting or crouching down to his or her approximate height. It's okay to invite a person in a wheelchair to "go for a walk." Never touch or lean on a person's wheelchair unless you have permission-it's that person's private space. Give a push only when asked."

Touching "You may gently touch people with disabilities to get their attention. Touch them when appropriate, such as when shaking hands or greeting or if assistance is requested. If you meet people with HIV/AIDS, shake their hands as you would anyone else's... Do not touch someone's cane, wheelchair, or assistive device. It is a part of that person's personal space. If you are interested in a demonstration of someone's electronic aid, ask the person. Do not try to use such equipment unless you are invited to do so. Guide dogs and other service animals are working animals. Do not pet or touch them without specific permission."

Communication "People are considered to have communication disabilities when their ability to receive, send or process information is reduced. Talk directly to the person, not to an aide or interpreter. It is important to make eye contact. If you don't understand someone, ask the person to repeat. If the person doesn't understand you when you speak, try again. Sometimes it takes repeated attempts at listening or speaking for communication to be successful. Let the person know your communication with him or her is worthwhile to you. When appropriate, offer to make public information available in alternative formats such as Braille, audio tape, or large print."

Helping Do not automatically give assistance. Ask first if the person wants help. Follow the person's cues, and ask if you are not sure. Assistance with doors, as long as you are clear of the path, is usually very much appreciated. If your offer of assistance is accepted, listen or ask for instructions. Don't be offended if someone refuses your offer. It is his or her choice to be as independent as possible.

Persons With Visual Disabilities Be descriptive. Describe surroundings, especially obstacles, to a blind person. You may have to help orient people with visual disabilities and let them know what's coming up. Be the assistant, not the director. If you are asked for assistance, let a blind person hold your arm as a guide. If they are walking, tell them if they have to step up or step down; let them know if the door is to their right or left; and warn them of possible hazards.

You don't have to speak loudly to people with visual disabilities. Most of them can hear just fine. Offer to read written information for a person with a visual disability when appropriate. It's okay to ask blind people if they "see what you mean." If you are meeting a blind person, identify yourself. If you have met before, remind the person of the context because he or she won't have the visual cues to jog their memory.

Be Yourself Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration that you have for everyone else. Treat the person as an individual, not as a disability. Don't assume that "disability" is all that person can talk about or is interested in. Find a topic of small talk the way you would with anyone. Use a normal voice when extending a verbal welcome. Do not raise your voice unless requested. As in any new situation, everyone will be more comfortable if you relax.