

Disability Etiquette

Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

Appropriate etiquette when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy.

Use a normal tone of voice when extending a verbal welcome. Do not raise your voice unless requested.

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 acceptable. For those who cannot shake hands, touch the person on the shoulder or arm to welcome and acknowledge their presence.

When addressing a person who uses a wheelchair, never lean on the person's wheelchair. The chair is part of the space that belongs to the person who uses it.

When talking with a person with a disability, look at and speak directly to that person rather than through a companion who may be along. Address a person by their first name only when extending that familiarity to all others present.

Never patronize people using wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.

If an interpreter is present, speak to the person who has scheduled the appointment, not to the interpreter. Always maintain eye contact with the applicant, not the interpreter.

Offer assistance in a dignified manner with sensitivity and respect. Be prepared to have the offer declined. Do not proceed to assist if your offer to assist is declined. If the offer is accepted, listen to or accept instructions. Allow a person with a visual impairment to take your arm (at or about the elbow.) This will enable you to guide rather than propel or lead the person. Offer to hold or carry packages in a welcoming manner (e.g. "May I help you with your packages?") When offering to hand a coat or umbrella, do not offer to hand a cane or crutches unless the individual requests otherwise.

Service Animal Etiquette

Over 12,000 people with disabilities use the aid of service animals. Although the most familiar types of service animals are guide dogs used by people who are blind, service animals assist persons who have other disabilities as well. Many disabling conditions are invisible. Therefore, every person who is accompanied by a service animal may or may not

"look" disabled. A service animal is not required to have any special certification. A service animal is not a pet.

Do not touch the service animal, or the person it assists, without permission. Do not make noises at the service animal; it may distract the animal from doing its job. Do not feed the service animal, it may disrupt their schedule. Do not be offended if the person does not feel like discussing their disability or the assistance the service animal provides.

Sign Language Interpreters Etiquette

The professional interpreter is always considered as an extension of, and part of, the event. Interpreters are part of the team meant to deliver accurate and intended messages given by the presenters or performers.

The more advance notice provided to the interpreter is the more prepared they will be. This process allows the interpreter to prepare for the event and prevent "cold" interpreting. Time for preparation is essential to allow accurate dissemination of the intended messages to the audience.

People using Mobility Aids

Enable people who use crutches, canes or wheelchairs to keep them within reach.

Be aware that some wheelchair users may choose to transfer themselves out of their wheelchairs.

When speaking to a person in a wheelchair or on crutches for more than a few minutes, sit in a chair. Place yourself at that person's eye level to facilitate conversation.

People with Vision Impairments

When greeting a person with vision impairment always identify yourself and introduce anyone else who might be present.

If the person does not extend their hand to shake hands, verbally extend a welcome.

When offering seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat. A verbal cue is helpful as well.

Let the person know if you move or need to end the conversation.

People with Speech Impairments

Give your whole attention when talking to a person who has speech impairment.

Do not pretend to understand if you do not. Try rephrasing what you wish to communicate, or ask the person to repeat what you do not understand.

Do not raise your voice. Most speech impaired persons can hear and understand.

People who are Deaf, Deafened, or Hard of Hearing

If you need to attract the attention of a person who is deaf or hearing impaired, touch them lightly on the shoulder.

If the person lip-reads, look directly at them. Speak clearly at a normal pace. Do not exaggerate your lip movements or shout. Speak expressively because the person will rely on your facial expressions, gestures and eye contact.

Place yourself in a light source and keep your hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.

Shouting does not help and can be detrimental. Only raise your voice when requested. Brief, concise written notes may be helpful.

Most deaf people use American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is not a universal language; it is a language with its own syntax and grammatical structure. When scheduling an interpreter for a non-English speaking person, be certain to retain an interpreter that speaks and interprets in the language of the person.

Resources:

Disability Etiquette Handbook, City of San Antonio Planning Department
(http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/disability_handbook/disability_handbook.asp?res=1024&ver=true)

Disability Etiquette, Memphis Centre for Independent Living,
(<http://www.mcil.org/mcil/mcil/etiqu01.htm>)

United Spinal Association (<http://www.unitedspinal.org/pages.php?catid=7&pageid=472>)