

The Power of Words

A Guide to Interacting with People with Disabilities

Indiana Governor's Council for People with Disabilities

Living in a Diverse Culture

People with disabilities are part of the landscape in a diverse America. The more than 54 million Americans with disabilities are neighbors, friends, classmates, family members and co-workers.

People with disabilities are people first. Yes, disabilities are part of their lives, but disabilities do not define people.

Changes in laws, technology, public policies and attitudes have opened opportunities for people with disabilities to pursue education, recreation and employment in the mainstream of community life. Like other Americans, people with disabilities live, work, attend school, play, worship and volunteer in their communities.

The Council has designed this brochure to help enhance understanding and communication in everyday interactions with people with disabilities.

Language – A Powerful Tool

"Handicapped man confined to wheelchair..." "Girl stricken with cerebral palsy..." Words and phrases such as these shape incorrect perceptions of people with disabilities. Negative attitudes are often the greatest barrier for people with disabilities to overcome. Even the word "handicap" itself is considered insulting by many because it was a term coined by people outside the disability community.

By working together to create positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, we can create a better society – and that is a positive step for everyone. Rules to use when writing or speaking about people with disabilities:

1. Always use people-first language. Refer to the person first and not his or her disability. Do not say "a disabled person." Instead, refer to "a person with a disability."
2. Never group individuals together as "the mentally retarded," which puts the focus on the disability, not on the individual.

3. Avoid emotional and sensationalist words. People with disabilities are often either thought of as inspirational and courageous or pitiful and in need of charity. Both extremes are erroneous stereotypes.

Be sensitive when choosing words. The reality is that people with disabilities succeed not “in spite of” their disabilities but “in spite of” an inaccessible and discriminatory society. They do not “overcome” their disabilities so much as “overcome” prejudice.

You can help by using nonjudgmental terms and phrases that portray an image of dignity and respect.

Easy Ways to Avoid Inappropriate Language

DON'Ts

Disrespectful terms

crippled, spastic.....
retard, mongoloid.....
dumb/deaf-mute.....

handicap.....
fit.....
insane, crazy, deranged
wheelchair bound/confined
differently-abled
stricken, victim or suffering from
patient

handicapped parking/seating.....
special bus, special housing.....
the disabled
the blind
disabled rights or group

DOs

Respectful terms

cerebral palsy/paraplegia/ physical disability
cognitive or intellectual impairment
communication disorder/ unable to speak/deaf
disability
epilepsy/seizure
psychiatric disability
uses a wheelchair
avoid trendy or cute terms
had or has a disability
use only if the person is under a doctor's care
accessible parking/seating
separate bus, segregated housing
person with a disability, people who are blind
disability rights, disability advocates/community

Ten Commandments of Etiquette

The following “Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities” will help you communicate more effectively with people with disabilities.

1. When talking with a person with a disability, use eye contact and 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 usually can shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
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. A wheelchair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it. Leaning on a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning on a person and is generally considered inappropriate.
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 in 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. Be sensitive to those who lip read by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keeping hands and food away from your mouth when speaking.

10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you use common expressions – such as “See you later” or “Did you hear about that?” – that seem to relate to a person's disability. It's okay to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

Sources: Guidelines to Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities, produced by the Media Project, Research and Training Center on Independent Living, 4089 Dole, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045; Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities, National Center for Access Unlimited, 155 North Wacker Drive, Suite 315, Chicago, IL 60606; and Beyond the AP Stylebook: Language and Usage Guide for Reporters and Editors, The Advocado Press, Inc.

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