

Disability Etiquette: Engaging People with Disabilities

Don't let fear and uncertainty keep you from getting to know people with disabilities. Fear of the unknown and lack of knowledge about interacting can lead to uneasiness when meeting a person who has a disability.

Remember: a person with a disability is a person with feelings. Treat him or her as you would want to be treated, and then let common sense and friendship break down any barriers you may encounter.

Meeting a person with a disability

1. **A handshake is NOT a standard greeting for everyone.** When in doubt, ASK the person whether he or she would like to shake hands with you. A smile along with a spoken greeting is always appropriate.
2. **Speak directly to the person with a disability,** not just to persons who may be accompanying him or her.
3. **Don't mention the person's disability,** unless he or she talks about it or it is relevant to the conversation.
4. **Treat adults as adults.** Don't patronize or talk down to people with disabilities. Likewise, don't lavish praise on a person with a disability for having the "courage" to overcome a disability.
5. **Be patient and give your undivided attention,** especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort.
6. Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase.
7. **It is okay to use common expressions** like "see you soon" or "I'd better be running along."
8. **Relax.** We all make mistakes. Offer an apology if you forget some courtesy. Keep a sense of humor and a willingness to communicate.

Interacting with a wheelchair user

1. **Personal space** – Do not push, lean on, or hold onto a person's wheelchair unless the person asks you to. The wheelchair is part of his or her personal space.
2. **Eye-to-Eye** – Try to put yourself at eye level when talking with someone in a wheelchair. Sit or kneel in front of the person.
3. **Clear a path** – Rearrange furniture or objects to accommodate a wheelchair before the person arrives.
4. **Know the geography** – If asked, know where someone can find accessible restrooms, telephones, and water fountains in the building.

5. **Directions** – When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, consider distance, weather conditions, and physical obstacles (curbs, stairs, steep hills, etc.).

Meeting someone with a cognitive impairment that affects learning, intelligence, or brain function

1. **Keep your communication simple.** Use short sentences and rephrase comments or questions for better clarity.
2. **Stay on point** by focusing on one topic at a time.
3. **Allow the person time** to respond, ask questions and clarify your comments.
4. **Focus on the person** as he or she responds to you and pay attention to body language.
5. **Repetition.** If appropriate, repeat back any messages to confirm mutual understanding.

Engaging someone who is blind or has a disability that affects vision

1. **Greetings** – When meeting the person, identify yourself and introduce others who may be present.
2. **Departing** – Don't leave the person without excusing yourself first.
3. **Guiding** – When asked to guide someone, never push or pull the person. Offer your arm and allow him or her to reach for you, then walk slightly ahead. Point out doors, stairs, and curbs as you approach them.
4. **The Landscape** – As you guide a person into a room, describe the layout, the location of furniture, and note who else is nearby.
5. **Details Matter** – Be specific when describing the location of objects. (Example: "There is a chair three feet from you at eleven o'clock.")
6. **Guide Dogs** – Don't pet or distract a guide dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety and is always working. It is not a pet.

Meeting a person with a disability that affects speech

1. **Pay attention, be patient, and wait** for the person to complete a word or thought. Do not finish it for the person.
2. **Ask the person to repeat what is said** if you do not understand. Tell the person what you heard and see if it is close to what he or she is saying.
3. **Be prepared for persons who use assistive technology** to enhance or augment speech. Don't be afraid to communicate with someone who uses an alphabet board or a computer to communicate.

Communicating with someone who is deaf or uses an assisted hearing device

1. **Let the person take the lead** in establishing the communication mode, such as lip-reading, sign language, or writing notes.
2. **Talk directly to the person** even when a sign language interpreter is present.
3. **If the person lip-reads**, face him or her directly, speak clearly and with a moderate pace.
4. **With some people** it may help to simplify your sentences and use more facial expressions and body language.

Service animals

1. **It takes all kinds** – Service animals come in all shapes and sizes. In addition to the traditional guide dog, a variety of dogs and other service animals may detect seizures before they occur, enhance therapies for children with autism, provide a calming presence for adults, or assist with a wide range of daily living activities.
2. **Engaging animal** – A service animal is a physical extension of a person with a disability and is there to work. It may be tempting to pet or call for a service animal's attention. However, for the safety and well-being of the team ask permission from the service animal's owner first.
3. **Questions** – The law varies widely so if you have a specific question, please contact the Tennessee Disability Coalition.

Using appropriate language

Life for most people with mental or physical disabilities has vastly improved over the past forty years. However, some things have been slow to change; namely, attitudes and perceptions about people with disabilities. The use of outdated language and words to describe people with disabilities contributes to perpetuating old stereotypes.

If public opinion about people with disabilities is to evolve, then awareness and usage of more appropriate language needs to become part of everyday discourse.

1. **Disability relevance** – Do not refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant to a situation or discussion.
2. **Disability vs. handicap** – The use of the word "handicap" is considered offensive, and the preferred term is "disability." Generally, it is only acceptable to use "handicap" when referring to accommodations such as handicap parking, although accessible parking is preferred today.
3. **People first language** – Say "person with a disability" rather than a "disabled person." This emphasizes that individuals with disabilities are people first and thus should not be defined by their disability.

4. **Referencing groups** – Avoid referring to a group of individuals as the disabled, quadriplegics, or the retarded. Instead, use references such as “persons with a disability,” “persons with quadriplegia,” and “persons with an intellectual disability.” An exception involves people who are deaf and prefer the phrase “The Deaf.”
5. **Negative and sensational descriptions** – Do not say “suffers from,” “a victim of,” “afflicted with,” or “crippled.” Never say “invalid.” These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities.
6. **Gratuitous, but well-meaning praise** – Don’t portray people with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, special, or superhuman because they have “overcome” a disability. Doing so implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents, skills, and the ability to contribute in society.
7. **Wheelchairs and adaptive technology** – Never say “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.” People use mobility or adaptive equipment as tools of greater independence.
8. **Presume competence** – Never assume that a person who looks or speaks differently has a cognitive disability.

Talking About Disability

The preferred “people first language” recognizes that someone is a person first, and that the disability is a part of, but not the whole person. However, some people with disabilities reject use of people first language. These guidelines have developed independently within distinct disability communities, and they may sometimes appear contradictory. For example, some persons with reduced vision find the term “visually-impaired” acceptable, but some persons with reduced hearing find the term “hearing-impaired” offensive and prefer “hard of hearing.”

Words and Phrases to Avoid	Preferred Alternatives
a disabled person	a person with a disability
the handicapped or the crippled	a person with a disability
normal, healthy or able-bodied person/people	people without disabilities or a typical person
wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair	a wheelchair user or uses a wheelchair
birth defect or affliction	congenital disability or birth anomaly
a victim of cerebral palsy or other condition	has cerebral palsy or has (insert condition)
suffers from polio, afflicted with polio or post-polios	has had polio, experienced polio or has a disability due to polio

Words and Phrases to Avoid	Preferred Alternatives
mentally retarded, a retard, slow or special	person with an intellectual or developmental disability
the Down's person or Mongoloid	person with Down Syndrome
the epileptic or epileptics, fits or epileptic fits	person with epilepsy, person with a seizure disorder, a seizure, or epileptic episode
the mentally ill, crazy, psycho, nuts, mental case	people who have mental illness, person with a mental or emotional disorder
the blind or blind as a bat	people who are blind or visually impaired
hearing-impaired, deaf-mute, deaf and dumb	person who is hard of hearing, the Deaf, a person who is deaf

Common Courtesies for Engaging People with Disabilities

1. **Personal Questions** – Avoid asking personal questions about someone's disability. If you must ask, be sensitive and show respect. Do not probe if the person declines to discuss it.
2. **Patience** – It may take extra time for a person with a disability to do or say something.
3. **Offering Assistance** – Be polite and friendly when offering assistance and wait until your offer is accepted. Listen or ask for specific instructions.
4. **Meetings & Events** – Create an environment that is welcoming to everyone. Anticipate specific accommodations that a person with a disability or group might need and contact them for information on how to best meet their needs.

About the Tennessee Disability Coalition

The Coalition is an alliance of organizations and individuals who have joined to promote the full and equal participation of men, women and children with disabilities in all aspects of life. We work together to advocate for public policy that ensures self-determination, independence, empowerment, and inclusion for people with disabilities in areas such as accessibility, education, health care, housing, and voting rights.

Organizational Membership – If your organization would like to join the Coalition, then please give us a call at the phone number below or contact our Executive Director at coalition@tndisability.org

Individual Membership – If you would like to join the Coalition as a member of our Disability Action Network, please give us a call at the phone number below or contact a member of our Public Policy Team at news@tndisability.org.

Tennessee Disability Coalition

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