

Disabled People- Etiquette and Language

Disabled people are individuals just like everybody else. Don't make assumptions about their abilities or their needs. Don't forget some disabilities are hidden, for example epilepsy and mental illness. If you aren't sure how something might affect a disabled person, ask them for advice.

Communication

If a disabled person is with someone, talk to the disabled person directly, not to the person who is with them. This also applies to a deaf person accompanied by a sign language interpreter.

When talking to a deaf person, find out - if necessary in writing - whether they lip-read. If they do, make sure your face is in the light, look directly at the person, speak clearly and naturally, remembering to keep your hands away from your face.

When you first meet a blind person, introduce yourself. When you are going to move away, tell them. Don't leave them talking to an empty space.

When you are talking to someone with a speech impairment, concentrate on what is being said, be patient and don't try to guess what they want to say. If you don't understand, don't pretend you do.

If someone has difficulty understanding you - perhaps because they have a learning disability - be patient and be prepared to explain something more than once. Concentrate on using simple language.

When talking to a wheelchair user, try to ensure that your eyes are at the same level as theirs, perhaps by sitting down. Don't lean on the wheelchair - it is part of the user's personal space.

Avoid asking personal questions about a person's disability, such as "Were you born like that?" But an employer could ask "Does your disability affect your ability to do this job?"

If someone looks "different", avoid staring. Concentrate on what they are saying, not on the way they look.

If you are talking to an adult, treat them like an adult.

Assistance

If someone looks as if they need assistance, offer it, but wait for them to accept before you help.

When guiding a blind person do not push or pull them. Ask if they would like to take hold of your arm. If there are any steps tell them whether the steps go up or down.

Remember that guide dogs for blind people, hearing dogs for deaf people and other assistance dogs, are working dogs, not pets. They should not be fed, patted or distracted when they are working.

Above all put yourself in the disabled person's place. Most of the above points are just good manners.

Language

Some of the words and phrases we use offend disabled people, because they suggest that the disabled person is dependent or helpless. Some words such as "cripple" or 'retarded' have become terms of abuse or are used to make fun of disabled people. Below are some common words to avoid with suggested alternatives

Do not say "the disabled"; use "disabled people" or "people with disabilities".

Do not say "suffering from", "crippled by", "afflicted by" or "a victim of"; use "a person who has" or "a person with".

Do not say "deaf and dumb"; use "deaf without speech".

Do not say "an epileptic"; use "a person with epilepsy".

Do not say "spastic"; use "a person with cerebral palsy".

Do not say "mentally handicapped" or "subnormal"; use "a person with a learning disability".

Do not say "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair bound"; use "wheelchair user".

(Extract from the guidance prepared by the Disability Rights Commission 2003)