



A2A Disability Etiquette: What You Should Know

This brochure was compiled to teach us all a few myth-busters and some simple guidelines for interacting with people with disabilities. (Note: Even people with disabilities can be unsure of appropriate and helpful behavior toward people with other disabilities).

We encounter people with disabilities every day. We meet them at school, at church, in the stores, and next door. People with disabilities are family members, friends and neighbors. People with disabilities are people with the same feelings and dreams as everyone else.

People with disabilities, however, are often excluded from the community because they are misunderstood. We fear the unknown and we are afraid of offending. The greatest barrier to inclusion in our churches is not architecture; it's our lack of knowledge and understanding.

ABOVE ALL, remember to act in love, acceptance and with common sense, and ALWAYS BE YOURSELF!!!

Basic Suggestions

- **Always speak directly** to persons with disabilities instead of to a companion.
- **Ask first, before assisting.** People with disabilities are capable of doing most or many things for themselves and prefer to do so.
- **Avoid patronizing.** Remember that they are human beings just like you.
- **Ask first, before touching.** People with disabilities may have difficulty with balance or may be concentrating on moving safely, an unexpected touch can disrupt their concentration.
- **Don't ignore.** Include persons with disabilities in what you are saying and doing.
- **Place more importance on inclusion** than on politically correct language. At the same time, however, be aware that some people are sensitive to language. As you get to know the person, you'll learn what they are comfortable with and how best you might assist them.
- **Stress the person, not the disability** (example: a person who is blind, deaf, etc., instead of a "blind person" or a "deaf person").
- **Relax!** Talk as you would to anyone else. Don't hesitate to use words like see, hear, and walk.
- **Be considerate** of the extra time it may take a person with a disability to get things done or said. Let the person set the pace.
- **Consider needs** when planning events involving people with disabilities. If an insurmountable barrier exists, alert the coordinator ahead of time.
- **Guide dogs and assistance dogs are permitted by federal law to go anywhere** their human partner goes stores, restaurants, churches, etc.
- **Do not speak to or touch assistance animals,** it distracts them from their work. When walking beside someone, walk on the opposite side of the animal.
- **Handicap parking is reserved** by law for persons who have been designated by the DMV as permanently or temporarily disabled.

Intellectual Disabilities

- **Speak to the person** in a clear voice using simple words and concrete – not abstract – concepts. Help her/him understand complex ideas by breaking them down onto smaller ideas.
- **Avoid talking down or use baby talk** to people who are intellectually challenged. Gauge your pace and vocabulary in accordance with his/hers.
- **If this person is an adult, treat them as such!** Unless you are informed otherwise, they can make decisions for themselves.
- **Keep questions neutral** to elicit accurate information. Repeat each question in a different way to verify their answers. People with cognitive impairments may be anxious to please and so will tell you what they think you want to hear.
- **Be patient** and allow the person to take his/her time. It can be difficult for people with cognitive impairments to make quick decisions.

Hearing Disabilities

- To get the attention of a person with a hearing disability, **tap them on the shoulder** or wave your hand.
- **Don't shout!!!** Speak clearly, slowly and normally.
- **Never speak directly into a person's ear.** Stand where those who lip-read can get a clear view of your face. Form your words carefully, but naturally without distortion.
- Remember that facial expressions and body language may also be interpreted by a person with a hearing disability, **but don't exaggerate.**
- **If possible, select a quieter spot,** as noise is distracting and makes speech difficult to follow. If more appropriate, communicate in writing or with gestures.
- **Avoid changing topics abruptly,** because the person listening to you might use context to help understand what is being said.



A of for Accessible.
A is for Accommodating.

A is for All.

In Case of Medical Emergency:

- **Never attempt to restrain or put anything into the mouth of a person having a seizure.**
- **Move objects or furniture to prevent injury.**
- **Make the person feel comfortable after the seizure by helping the person to a comfortable place to rest and offering reassurance.**
- **Since an incident could be epilepsy, a stroke, or a reaction to medication, find out if medical personnel or an informed family member is present. Call 911.**
- **In case of emergency evacuation, assist all known persons with disabilities.**

Compiled by Jacky Schofield for the Connecticut Disability Advocacy Collaborative. Sources: United Spinal Association, Easter Seals and Century 21, and the United Church of Christ "Accessible to All" Usher's Guideline. Assembled by Kevin Pettit.

Visual Disabilities

- When greeting a person with visual disability, **identify yourself.**
- If others are present, **identify them also** (e.g. "Joe Smith is on my right and Jane Smith is on my left").
- Be sure to **let it be known when the conversation is over and to indicate when you are moving away.**
- **Explain where things are located in terms of the proximity to the person.** Use the imagery of a clock to help orient the person to surroundings.
- If the person has a guide dog, **ask how much room is needed for the dog.**
- **Ask about seating preference, then walk the person to the seat.** Offer assistance when and if needed. Provide an elbow or shoulder if requested, but avoid grabbing or trying to push the person ahead of you.
- When walking with a visually impaired person, **alert them to obstacles like curbs, stairs and doors.**
- When giving directions to a person with visual impairment **use specifics**, such as, "left a hundred feet" or "right two yards."

Mental Illnesses

- **Mental illnesses are biologically based and should be understood as any other illness.** Always use "first person" language. That means say "a person with a mental illness," rather than "a mentally ill person."
- **Be attentive, without judgment, and responsive as you would with any other person.** Show welcome, inclusion and support during any congregational gatherings as in worship. Be a friend.
- **Be a "StigmaBuster".** Challenge negative attitudes toward mental illness among your friends and acquaintances and in the media.

Speech Disabilities

- **Try to give your full, unhurried attention to the person speaking.** Take time to appreciate the person talking. If you do not understand, ask for repetition or clarification. Do not courteously pretend to understand as you may be missing important information. Repeat what you think you understand and the person's reaction will guide you.
- When necessary, **ask questions that require a short answer** or a nod or shake of the head.
- Remember, a person with a speech difficulty may **use alternative ways of communicating**, including writing, mime or computer-generated speech.
- **Resist the urge to complete words or phrases** for the person with a speech difficulty.

Mobility Disabilities

- When speaking with a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes **pull up a chair and sit down so you both meet at eye level.** You'll both avoid a stiff neck.
- A person who uses a wheelchair may be able to walk. **Honor that choice.**
- **Do not (without permission) move a wheelchair, walker, or crutches out of reach of the person who uses them.**
- **Don't lean or hang on to someone's wheelchair.** It is an extension of that person's personal space and many wheelchair users consider it a part of their body!
- If assisting a wheelchair user up or down a curb, **ask the person using the wheelchair for directions.** The person using the wheelchair knows what works best. Steep ramps can be difficult and chairs can be heavy
- When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, **consider distance, weather conditions and obstacles such as stairs, curbs and steep hills.**