

- If the person needs to read your lips, don't put your hand or objects in front of your face, smoke, eat, look down, turn your head, or walk away while talking. Speak clearly at a moderate pace. If possible, converse in a well lit area. If the person uses a sign-language interpreter, speak directly to and maintain eye contact with the person, not the interpreter. Whether speaking or writing, don't use complex words that may not translate into sign language.
- If a person wears a hearing aid, speak in a location with no background noise. Don't raise the volume or pitch of your voice unless asked.

Relax

Don't be embarrassed if you use a common expression like, "Did you hear the latest?" that seems to relate to a person's disability. In fact, many people who are blind say, "See you later!" If you are unsure about what to say or do, ask the person. If you make a mistake, relax! People with disabilities don't expect perfection. Showing empathy and having a positive attitude are the most important gestures you can make.

Further Consideration

To find out more about interacting with people with disabilities, please consult the following sources:

Disability is Natural
disabilityisnatural.com

Job Accommodation Network
askjan.org/topics/disetiq.htm

United Spinal Association
unitedspinal.org

Agency for Persons with Disabilities
4030 Esplanade Way, Suite 380
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0950
1-866-APD-CARES (1-866-273-2273)
850-488-4257
apdcares.org

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Manners that Matter

An etiquette guide for interacting
with people with disabilities



agency for persons with disabilities
State of Florida

Words

A person with a disability is a person, not a disability. Terms like “the disabled,” “retarded,” or “the blind” are inappropriate because they emphasize disability rather than individuality. “Normal person” implies that a person with a disability isn’t normal. Also, avoid describing a disability as an affliction or disabling condition with language like “suffers from,” “victim of,” “incapacitated by,” “confined to,” “restricted to,” or “bound.”

Instead, use person-first language, which emphasizes the person rather than the disability. Person-first language is positive, respectful, and does not limit, label, segregate, or devalue the person. It affirms, empowers, and emphasizes abilities. In the table below, note how person-first language puts the person first.

SAY THIS	NOT THIS
person with a disability	disabled person, the handicapped
person with cerebral palsy	CP victim
person who has multiple sclerosis	afflicted by MS
person who is deaf, hard of hearing	the deaf, suffers from a hearing loss
person who is blind, visually impaired	the blind
person with cognitive disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities	the retarded, mentally defective, feeble-minded
person with epilepsy, seizure disorder	epileptic
person who uses a wheelchair	confined or restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
person with a physical disability	crippled, lame, deformed
person who has a psychiatric disability	crazy, nuts, the mentally ill
person who uses a communication device	dumb, mute, nonverbal, noncommunicative
short in stature, of short stature	dwarf, midget

Actions

Here are a few examples of respectful and supportive actions:

- If you offer assistance, wait until the person accepts; listen to or ask for instructions.
- Speak directly to the person, not to their companion. Do not stare.
- When meeting a person for the first time, show the same respect that you would show to anyone else. Never pat people on the head or shoulder.
- Make eye contact when speaking with a person who is in their wheelchair or scooter.
- Never assume that the person cannot shake hands, despite appearances. Either hand may be used.
- When greeting a person who is blind or visually impaired, wait for them to extend their hand first. You could say, “May I shake your hand?” as a verbal cue. Always identify yourself and others who may be with you. In a group setting, name the person to whom you are speaking. Inform the person when you leave the room. Don’t pet, feed, address, or distract the person’s guide dog, even if it is sitting, standing, or lying down; disrupting the dog’s concentration jeopardizes the person’s health and safety.
- Do not lean on a person’s wheelchair, scooter, crutches, walker, or cane. This equipment is part of their personal space. Never move their equipment away from them without their permission, even temporarily. If they allow you to move it, remember to put it back.
- Listen attentively when a person’s speech is slow or different. Be patient and wait for them to finish, rather than speaking for or correcting them. If necessary, ask questions that require short answers or perhaps a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap them on the shoulder or wave your hand.

