

Disability and Effective Communications

EARN Training Center
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Effective Communications

Positive Phrases

Person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability

Person who is blind or visually impaired

Person with a disability

Person who is deaf or hard of hearing

Person with multiple sclerosis

Person with cerebral palsy

Person who uses a wheelchair

Negative Phrases

The retarded; mentally retarded

The blind

The disabled; handicapped

The deaf; deaf and dumb

Someone afflicted by MS

A CP victim

Wheelchair bound/confined

Person-First Language vs. Identity-First Language: <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/amp/70/3/255/>

Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

- When speaking with a person with a disability, talk directly to the person, not to his or her companion
- Extend common courtesies to people with disabilities
- If the person has a speech impairment and you are having difficulty understanding what he or she is saying, ask the individual to repeat, rather than pretending to understand
- If you believe that an individual with a disability needs assistance, go ahead and offer the assistance — but wait for your offer to be accepted before you try to help
- If a person uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter



DISABILITY DOs & DON'Ts

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Speak directly to the Deaf person, not his or her sign language interpreter
- Please don't cover your face, exaggerate speech or chew gum
- Face the person
- Write notes to help facilitate communication
- Body language, gestures and pointing can help with communication
- Deaf culture is rich in its beauty and storytelling
- American Sign Language (ASL) is not universal

Preferred Semantics

- Say “Deaf or Hard of Hearing,” not Hearing Impaired
- Deaf activists use a capital “D” to claim their Deaf identity, power and pride

Blind or Low Vision

- Announce yourself when you enter and leave a conversation
- Offer your arm and ask the person if they need assistance
- When giving directions, be specific - five steps to the right, down seven stairs, instead of “over there”
- Not all people who are Blind use Braille; many people with low vision read large print (at least 14 point font), not Braille
- If a person who is Blind uses a service animal, don’t distract or pet it; the service animal is working

Preferred Semantics

- Blind and low vision is preferred
- It’s OK to say: “See you later” or “Good to see you again”

Mobility

- Never lean on someone's wheelchair; it is part of their personal space
- Don't push someone using a wheelchair unless he or she asks
- When talking with a wheelchair user, position yourself at eye level
- If a wheelchair user is with a non-disabled companion, don't talk with the companion instead of the individual
- If a wheelchair user uses a service animal, don't distract or pet it

Preferred Semantics

- Wheelchair user or wheelchair rider
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Don't say "wheelchair bound" or "confined to a wheelchair"

Speech

- Talk in a normal tone of voice
- If you don't understand what was said, ask the person to repeat what you heard and ask if that was correct
- Don't finish sentences or hurry the person
- If “language” issues (in addition to problems with fluency and articulation) are present, expect:
 - “talk-around” behavior
 - word-finding difficulties
 - very short or very long answers to questions

Preferred Semantics:

- People with speech disabilities or people who stutter

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

- Developmental Disability is a broad term that encompasses Intellectual Disability, the difference between the two is focused on intellectual functioning and limitations in adaptive behaviors
 - Developmental disabilities (occurs before age 22): Cerebral palsy, Epilepsy, Down syndrome
 - Intellectual disabilities (occurs before age 18)
 - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
 - Autism (1 in 68 children in the United States)
 - Autism Spectrum Disorder – Asperger's Syndrome, Rett Syndrome

Preferred Semantics

- Please do not use medical model words such as: victim of, afflicted with, or suffers from
- People first language, people with IDD, not mentally retarded
(Spread the Word to End the Word www.r-word.org)
- Many people living with autism prefer to be called autistic
- Neurotypical (not having autism or an IDD); Neurodivergent (having autism, on the ASD)

Non-Apparent / Hidden

- Don't assume someone is not a person with a disability because you don't see his or her disability
 - Learning Disabilities: Auditory Processing Disorder, Dyslexia, ADHD
 - Emotional or Psychiatric Disabilities: Bi-Polar Disorder, Anxiety, Depression
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
 - And many more, including: Diabetes, HIV, Cancer
- According to Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, 70% of college students with disabilities have non-apparent disabilities.
- These people are not dangerous

Preferred Semantics

- People first language
- People with disabilities aren't "crazy"

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