

Etiquette when working with students / audiences with disabilities

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Treat the person with respect; your attitude and actions will be the guiding force of their acceptance by their peers and the public. The following tips on etiquette are not all inclusive. Rather, these highlight some of the more universal and important issues of etiquette.

General Tips for Interacting with Persons with Disabilities

- First and foremost, people with disabilities deserve to be treated with dignity and respect like everyone else.
- People with disabilities are individuals. They have different personalities, different preferences about how to do things, and different effects of the disability. To find out a person's preference, ask them.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability rather than to an assistant, attendant, or sign language interpreter who may accompany the person.
- When referring to people with disabilities, remember "person" first. They are a person who is blind, a person who is learning disabled.
- If you wish to assist the person with a disability, ask how you can help before you act and follow their instructions. Don't be embarrassed or offended if they decline your assistance.
- A service animal is a working animal. Avoid distracting, petting or feeding the service animal so that its responsibility to the person is not compromised
- Be alert to possible existence of architectural barriers or environmental hazards in places you may want to enter with a person who has a disability.
- Be aware that there are many people who have disabilities that are not apparent. Just because you cannot see a disability does not mean it doesn't exist.
- For classroom educators planning field trips, let the informal venue know that you have a student with a disability in your classroom. Many facilities can accommodate students with disabilities in their programs. Advance notice and pre-planning your visit may avoid embarrassing situations and will lead to a successful field trip experience.
- If you use PowerPoint presentations as part of your program, be willing and prepared to share your presentation in hard copy and other alternate formats and to fully explain any diagrams and/or images shared in the presentation.

- Keep the lines of communication open. Classroom tasks, events, and programs change constantly.

Learning Disabilities

- Be thorough, direct, and specific in communication. Ask questions to ensure understanding. Allow adequate time for a response.
- Give frequent and constructive feedback.
- Allow adequate time to learn certain skills.
- Whenever possible, notify the person of changes well in advance.

Sensory Disabilities (Hearing and /or Vision Impairments)

People who are Deaf use American Sign Language (ASL), identifying with the Deaf Community. People who have a profound hearing loss or are hard of hearing may not know ASL, communicating orally or through a variety of assistive listening devices.

People who have vision loss have individual variances for accessing text depending on the nature and severity of their vision loss. People with residual vision are also affected by lighting and other environmental factors. For instance, one person may need increased lighting while the other may be functionally blind with too much lighting.

Blind and Visually Impaired

- Address the person by using their name and giving yours.
- Be explicit with your directions and avoid place referent pronouns. Rather than “Watch this!” say “Watch what happens when the ball is rolled down the 30-degree incline”.
- Tell the person when you are leaving so they are not left speaking when no one is there.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing

- When in doubt about the person’s communication preference, ask.
- Gain the person’s attention first before speaking to the person.
- Shouting or exaggerating your speech will not help communication.
- Rephrase rather than repeating yourself to ensure your message is understood.

Orthopedically Impaired

- If a person uses crutches, a walker, a cane, or some other assistive equipment, offer assistance with coats, bags, or other belongings.
- Some people with paraplegia, quadriplegia, or other disabilities may have difficulty in holding a pen or writing. Although you should not assume so, the individual may want or need your assistance in this task and ask for it. If this is the case, ask how you can best assist him.
- When conversing with a person who uses a wheelchair or scooter, position yourself so that you are at eye level in front of the person. It is permissible to sit or crouch down.
- The wheelchair is an extension of the person's individual space. Do not lean or hang on a person's wheelchair or scooter or use it to carry your belongings.
- Be aware that people with mobility impairments have a broad spectrum of physical capabilities. Whenever in doubt, ask.

Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

- Communicate in direct, clear terms. Be patient, specific, and consistent. Apply structure whenever possible in communication and work tasks.
- Clearly state expectations, policies, and procedures.
- Ask clarifying questions throughout the conversation to ensure that the person is grasping the information provided. Repetition may be necessary.

Autistic Spectrum

- Remember that the person may have difficulty making eye contact and interpreting nonverbal cues, such as facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice in social settings.
- Be aware that the person may be sensitive to touch, sounds, light, or color.
- Be aware that the person may tend to focus or fixate on particular objects or topics of discussion.
- Be aware that the person may quietly talk to himself or herself frequently throughout the day.
- Be aware that the person may be socially awkward or shy.
- As the person may have difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues, direct, specific, and clear communication is important.

Speech and Communication Disabilities

- If the person's speech is difficult to understand, do not hesitate to ask him or her to repeat what was said. Never pretend to understand when you do not.
- If a person chooses to communicate using assistive technology, such as an augmentative communication device, be patient with the speed of the technology. Though not generally done, some individuals may not mind having his or her sentences finished by you in order to ease communication. Absolutely confirm this, though, before doing it.