

It can sometimes be difficult to know how to teach, work with, or interact with individuals with disabilities, especially if you have never met an individual with a particular type of disability before. This info guide provides general information and tips on how to interact with people with disabilities as well as tips on how to interact with individuals who have a wide variety of disabilities.

General Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

- In general, **RELAX** – above all else, individuals who have disabilities are people; they are not solely defined by their disabilities. People with disabilities have a wide variety of interests, hobbies, and personalities just like people who do not have disabilities.
- Approach people with disabilities from a stance of capability rather than inability.
- Don't assume the needs of people with disabilities – every person with a disability has their own unique preferences and needs.
- When interacting with a person with a disability, speak directly to them rather than speaking to their companion, friend, parent, assistant, interpreter, or anyone else who is with them.
- Offer to shake hands! Often times, those who may have limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb are capable of shaking your hand. Persons with vision loss know to extend a hand when meeting someone.
- Offer assistance with sensitivity and respect, but do not proceed if your offer is declined. If the offer is accepted, listen carefully for instructions.
- Focus on what the person is communicating to you rather than focusing on their disability.
- When speaking with people with disabilities, it is okay to use common terms like "handicapped" or "disabled".
- Overall, if you aren't sure about something, **ASK!** An individual with a disability is often the best resource on their disability and their needs.

(Adapted from Dr. Nathalie Whalen and the Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties' "A Guide to Interacting with People who have Disabilities")

Using Person First Language:

When addressing disability, the language that you use should emphasize the person rather than the disability; this is called Person First language.

> Appropriate words and phrases include:

- Person with a disability
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Person with cerebral palsy, person with Down Syndrome, or person who has epilepsy
- Little person or person of short stature
- Person who has a mental health condition or person who has a psychiatric disability
- Person who has a learning disability
- Person who is deaf, person who is hard of hearing, or person who has a hearing loss
- Person who is blind, person who is visually impaired, or person who has low vision
- Person with a speech disability, person who stutters, or person who has a communication disability

> Inappropriate words and phrases include:

- The handicapped or the disabled
- Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound, lame, or physically impaired
- Cerebral palsy person, Down's person, epileptic, or spastic
- Dwarf or midget
- Crazy, freak, maniac, lunatic, psycho, or nuts
- Learning disabled student, slow, or brain damaged
- Hearing impaired or deaf and dumb
- Blind as a bat or visually handicapped
- Mute, dumb, or speech impaired

(Adapted from Dr. Nathalie Whalen)

Individuals with Physical and Mobility Disabilities

- Don't touch or push a person's wheelchair or other equipment without asking for permission or if they need help first.
- Do not speak loudly or slowly to a person who uses a wheelchair unless they need you to do so in order to communicate.
- Don't assume that a person NEEDS help.
- Don't put your hand on or lean on a wheelchair

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