

Communication Tips: How to Communicate With People who have Disabilities

Taken from <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/dat-accessibility-skills.shtml#tips>

BASICS:

- Don't be afraid to make a mistake.
- Always BE RESPECTFUL.
- Don't make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do. Ask before giving assistance. If you offer help and the person says "no," don't insist. If the answer is "yes," ask how you can best help, and follow directions.
- If someone with a disability is accompanied by another individual, address the person with a disability directly rather than speaking through the other person.
- Treat adults as adults.
- Expect diversity of preferences and opinions.

SPECIFICS: Things to keep in mind when communicating....

...with People with Physical Disabilities



- Do not make assumptions about what a person can and cannot do.
 - Respect the individual's personal space: personal space includes a person's wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility aid. Never move someone's crutches, walker, cane, or other mobility aid without permission
 - Do not push a person's wheelchair or grab the arm of someone walking with difficulty without first asking if you can help.
 - When speaking for more than a few minutes to a person using a wheelchair, try to find a seat for yourself so that the two of you are at eye level.
 - When speaking with someone with a speech impairment, don't pretend to understand if you do not. Ask the person to repeat what was said.

...with People who are D/deaf or hard of hearing



- Ask the person how he or she prefers to communicate.
 - Before you start to speak, make sure you have the person's attention. A wave, a light touch on the shoulder, or other visual or tactile signals are appropriate ways to get their attention.
 - Speak in a clear, expressive manner. Do not over enunciate or exaggerate words.
 - Unless asked, do not raise your voice. Speak in a normal tone.
- Talk directly to the person who is Deaf or hard of hearing, not to the interpreter.
- If you are speaking through an interpreter, remember that the interpreter may lag a few words behind. Pause occasionally.
- To facilitate speech reading: face into the light, and keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth. Face the person directly and maintain eye contact. Don't turn your back or walk around while talking. If you look away, the person might assume the conversation is over.
- While you are writing a message for someone who is Deaf or hard of hearing, don't talk, since the person cannot read your note and your lips at the same time.
- If you don't understand something, ask the person to repeat it or write it down. The goal is communication; don't pretend to understand if you did not.

...with People with Cognitive Disabilities



- Treat adults with cognitive disabilities as adults.
 - When speaking to someone who has a cognitive disability, try to be alert to his or her responses so that you can adjust your method of communication if necessary.

For example, some people may benefit from simple, direct sentences or from supplementary visual forms of communication, such as gestures, diagrams, or demonstrations.

- Use language that is concrete rather than abstract.
- People with brain injuries may have short-term memory deficits and may repeat themselves or require information to be repeated.
- People with auditory perceptual problems may need to have direction repeated and may take notes to help them remember direction or the sequence of tasks. They may benefit from watching a task demonstrated.

- People with perceptual or “sensory overload” problems may become disoriented or confused if there is too much to absorb at once. Provide information gradually and clearly. Reduce background noise if possible.
- Don’t pretend to understand if you do not. Ask the person to repeat what was said.
- In conversation, people with cognitive disabilities may respond slowly, so give them time.

...with People with Visual Impairments



- **Speak directly to the visually impaired person, not through a companion or third party.** Visually impaired people can hear and respond for themselves.

- Identify yourself when you approach a person who is blind. If a new person approaches, introduce him or her. Not everyone recognizes voices or remembers them.

- Don’t shout. Most blind people have normal hearing. Speak

clearly and strongly if you know that an older visually impaired person also has a hearing problem.

- Identify yourself when entering a room and let the blind person know when you are leaving. Don’t leave a blind person talking to an empty room, or standing alone in empty space.
- It is appropriate to touch the person’s arm lightly when you speak so that he or she knows you are speaking to him or her.
- Face the person and speak directly to him or her. Use a normal tone of voice.
- Don’t assume that help is needed. Always ask before providing assistance.
- Never push, pull, or grab a blind person. This can be frightening and it’s often embarrassing
- If you are offering direction, be as specific as possible, and point out obstacles in the path of travel.
- Alert people who are blind or visually impaired to posted information.
- Never pet, talk to or otherwise distract a service dog unless the owner has given you permission.
- Don’t hesitate to use words like “see” and “look.”
- Don’t use hand signals or gestures.