



**Independent Living
Centre Kingston**
Promoting a new perspective on disability

Interacting with Persons with Disabilities

General suggestions and guidelines for interacting with people with disabilities

1. Treat people who have disabilities with the same dignity and respect you would give people without disabilities.
2. Offer help but wait until it is accepted before giving it. Offering assistance to someone is only polite behavior. Giving help before it is accepted is rude. It can sometimes be unsafe, as when you grab the arm of someone using a crutch and the person loses his/her balance.
3. Offer to shake hands when introduced to people with limited hand use, an artificial limb, etc., for they can usually shake hands and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
4. Don't lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair. It is an extension of his/her personal space. Never patronize someone in a wheelchair by patting him/her on the head or shoulder.
5. Listen attentively when talking with someone who has difficulty speaking and wait for him/her to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or shake of the head.
6. Talk directly to the person with the disability, not to someone accompanying him or her. To ignore a person's existence in a group is very insensitive and it is always rude for two people to discuss a third person who is also present. For example, if a deaf person is with an interpreter, speak directly to the deaf person, the interpreter will interpret what you are saying to him/her.
7. Treat a person with a disability as a healthy person. Because an individual has a functional limitation does not mean that the individual is sick. Many disabilities have no accompanying health problems.
8. Most people with disabilities will ask for assistance if they need it. They will often try to do as much as they can on their own and assistance is not always required. Offer assistance if you wish but do not insist on helping.
9. When talking to a person in a wheelchair, if conversation continues for more than a few minutes, pull up a chair. Communication may be enhanced and neck strain alleviated.
10. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "see you later" or "did you hear about that?" that may relate to a person's disability.
11. When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, be sure to review the route the person will travel in the context of elevators, ground level access, etc.
12. When a person transfers out of a wheelchair to a chair, car, etc., do not move the wheelchair out of reaching distance. Be aware of the wheelchair user's capabilities. Some can walk with the aid of walkers or crutches and use wheelchairs only some of the time in order to conserve energy and move about more quickly.
13. If you have difficulty understanding someone, don't pretend that you do understand. Repeat as much as you understand and the person's reactions will give you clues.

These are excerpts from the following two sources: "Ten Commandments for Communicating with People with Disabilities", The New York Times, June 7, 1993, and a pamphlet from the *Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute on Attitudinal, Legal and Leisure Barriers*, Washington, D.C. Additional observations have been added.