

Communication Tips for People with Disabilities

GENERAL INFORMATION

- A warm smile is a wonderful way to begin a conversation.
- Touch is a very effective communicator of love, concern and understanding.
- Use "people-first" language when referring to someone with a disability. "He is a boy with autism, rather than he's an autistic boy".
- Always speak directly to the person with the disability. Do not speak to the interpreter or aid as a 'go-between'.
- Don't be afraid to use the words "see", "look", "walk" or "listen". People with disabilities are comfortable with these words.
- Don't assume that people with speech, sight or hearing impairments have intellectual impairments.
- Raising your voice to a blind person or someone in a wheelchair or who has Down Syndrome is unnecessary. Only a person with a hearing loss has a hearing loss!
- Avoid words that are judgmental or that lead to pity or sympathy; rather use words that reflect respect and acceptance.
- Talk to people with disabilities as equals. After all, they are.
- Do not have a conversation with others as if the person with a disability were not present. Allow opportunity for mutual interaction.
- Do not give excessive praise or attention to a person with a disability. It feels patronizing and makes them uncomfortable.

BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

- When greeting someone with a visual impairment, identify yourself.
- When having a conversation in a group, identify people by name when speaking.
- If guiding someone, give verbal descriptions and clues as to what is ahead. Alert person to doors, curbs, steps and other objects.
- Let person know when you are leaving.

DEAF AND HEARING IMPAIRED

- Compensate for loss of hearing by using the senses of touch and sight. This will enhance your communication. Use physical and visual examples as you explain directions.
- Body language and facial expressions are also communication. While being careful not to over-exaggerate, being animated can help get your point across.
- Before speaking, touch the person on the elbow to get their attention.
- Speak clearly and at a moderate pace, making sure that the person can easily see your face and watch your mouth as you speak.
- Don't let someone interrupt a person who is deaf and conversing with you.

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES/LEARNING DISABILITIES AND ADD/ADHD

- When giving instructions, give one step at a time before moving on.
- Make eye contact while giving instruction.
- Repeat instruction as needed, using the same words and phrases.
- Limit choices.
- To aid with transitions, provide reminders ahead of time.
- Use normal tone of voice. Speak to an adult as an adult, not as a child. Never use "childish" vocabulary.

AUTISTIC AND SENSORY-SENSITIVE

- To help a child focus better, remove nonessential distractions when possible. Having a plain wall behind you as you tell the story, for instance, may help.
- Allowing the child to have a favorite 'sensory toy' may calm a child and aid in their focus.
- Understanding that just because a person with autism does not make eye contact with you, does not mean they are not listening to you.

SPEECH IMPAIRMENTS

- Give your full attention to a person who has difficulty speaking.
- Don't answer for them or finish their sentences. Don't let your body language send that message either.
- You may want to ask questions that require a short answer or a nod or shake of the head.
- Don't say you understand what a person is saying when you don't; simply ask them to repeat it.
- When speech is really difficult, listen for key words that will shed some light on what is trying to be communicated.
- Is there another way of communicating, such as writing or a communication device?

MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

- When visiting with a person seated in a wheelchair for any length of time, get down on their eye level. This saves them from a stiff neck.
- Always ask a person if they would like or are in need of assistance before you help. If directions are given, follow them implicitly.

MENTAL ILLNESS

- When unusual behavior occurs, try to respond with a calm, normal voice. Remain supportive.
- Respect their right to not speak when they're experiencing difficulties.

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