Communicating Effectively
WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE A DISABILITY

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NDCPD
Minot State University
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Introduction

A lot of progress has been made toward breaking down barriers in employment, education, and accessibility, but actual communication and interaction with people with disabilities still needs attention. Many people are afraid of accidentally saying something that will offend a person with a disability, so they say nothing and avoid contact. In this publication you will find suggestions that will help educate people about communicating with people with disabilities.

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Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities

1. When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.

2. When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.

3. When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.

4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.

5. Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first name only when extending the same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.

6. Do not lean on or hang on to a person’s wheelchair. This is similar to leaning or hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.

7. Listen attentively when you’re talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.

8. When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.

9. To get the attention of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do lip read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, food and drinks away from your mouth when speaking.

10. Relax. Don’t be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as “See you later,” or “Did you hear about that?” that seems to relate to a person’s disability. Don’t be afraid to ask questions when you’re unsure of what to do.

The Ten Commandments were adapted from many sources as a public service by United Cerebral Palsy Associates, Inc. Their version of the Ten Commandments was updated by Irene M. Ward & Associates (Columbus, Ohio) as a public service to provide the most current language possible for its video of Communicating With People With Disabilities.
Disability Specific Tips

People who have a visual impairment

- Speak to the person when you approach him or her and don’t raise your voice.
- Identify yourself by telling them who you are. When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the person with whom you are speaking.
- Don’t play with a service animal or distract it unless you ask the owner’s permission first.
- Let the person know when you are leaving.
- Don’t try to lead the person without asking permission first. Then, simply let the person hold your arm and let him or her control his or her own movements.
- Be descriptive when giving directions; verbally give the person information that is visually obvious to people who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many steps.

People who have a hearing impairment

- Make sure you get the person’s attention before you begin to speak. Tap the person on the shoulder if they are not facing you.
- Always look directly at the person and try to keep your face in the light away from shadows. Speak clearly in a normal tone of voice and avoid chewing gum or smoking while you talk. Try to use short, simple sentences.
- When the person is using a sign language interpreter, don’t speak to the interpreter. Always speak directly to the person.
- If you call a person who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
- If you do not have a Text Telephone (TTY), dial 711 to reach the national telecommunications relay service. This service can facilitate the call between you and a person who uses a TTY.
People with mobility impairments
- Try to place yourself at eye level with the person by pulling up a chair or leaning forward.
- Don’t lean on the wheelchair or other assistive device.
- Do not be condescending to a person in a wheelchair by treating them childishly, patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Don’t assume a person in a wheelchair needs assistance; ask first.
- If a person is having a problem with opening a door, offer to assist.
- When calling a person, let the phone ring long enough to allow him or her to reach the phone.

People with speech impairments
- If you do not understand something a person says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the person to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Take as much time as necessary to communicate and be patient.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate and pay extra attention to help you understand what the person is saying.
- Don’t attempt to help the person by finishing their sentences. Let the person speak for themselves.
- After trying to understand the person repeatedly, without success, ask the person if it is ok to communicate through writing as an alternative.

People with cognitive disabilities
- Move from a public area with lots of distractions to a quieter, more private area.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing. People with cognitive disabilities have limited reading/learning skills.
- When possible, ask questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no”.
- Use short phrases and sentences. Avoid complex words.
- Allow 15-20 seconds (sometimes even more) for the person to process and respond to information.
- In a non-patronizing way and without over assisting, ask the person if you can help with filling out forms or explaining written instructions. Wait for the person to give you permission to assist. Let the person have extra time for decision making.
- Be patient, flexible, and supportive. Take your time communicating so that everyone understands each other.

Remember...RELAX!
- Treat the person with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- Listen to the person.
- Ask if and how you might be of assistance.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.
People First Language

It takes a little practice to comfortably and easily use people first language, but your attention to this detail is respectful to people with disabilities. People first language places emphasis on the person before the descriptive disability. Some individuals have their own preferences. If you are not sure what words to use, ask.

Examples of People First Language

**BY KATHIE SNOW; VISIT WWW.DISABILITYISNATURAL.COM TO SEE THE COMPLETE ARTICLE**

Remember: a disability descriptor is simply a medical diagnosis. People First Language respectfully puts the person before the disability. A person with a disability is more like people without disabilities than different.

**SAY:**
- People with disabilities.
- He has a cognitive disability/diagnosis.
- She has autism (or a diagnosis of...).
- He has Down syndrome (or a diagnosis of...).
- She has a learning disability (diagnosis).
- He has a physical disability (diagnosis).
- She has a mental health condition/diagnosis.
- He uses a wheelchair/mobility chair.
- She receives special ed services.
- He has a developmental delay.
- Children without disabilities.
- Communicates with her eyes/device/etc.
- People we serve
- Congenital disability
- Brain injury
- Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.
- She needs... or she uses...

**INSTEAD OF:**
- The handicapped or disabled.
- He's mentally retarded.
- She's autistic.
- He's Down's; a mongoloid.
- She's learning disabled.
- He's a quadriplegic/is crippled.
- She's emotionally disturbed/mentally ill.
- He's confined to/is wheelchair bound.
- She's in special ed; a SPED kid.
- He's developmentally delayed.
- Normal or healthy kids.
- Is non-verbal.
- Client, consumer, recipient, etc.
- Birth defect
- Brain damaged
- Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.
- She has problems with/has special needs.

*Keep thinking—there are many other descriptors we need to change!

Excerpted from Kathie’s People First Language article, available at www.disabilityisnatural.com.

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Workplace Strategies

Employers who include disability-friendly strategies in the workplace enrich and enhance organizational benefits. Such benefits include diversity leadership, innovation, increase in overall morale, and the ability to cast a wider recruiting net. There are several disability-friendly strategies for the workplace:

- Make a corporate commitment to include people with disabilities in your organization. This commitment begins with top management and permeates the organization.

- Dispel myths about people with disabilities through organizational training at all levels. Some myths include lack of productivity, costs of accommodations, and concerns about potential litigation. This education will enable personnel to make informed decisions about disability employment.

- Provide continuous education about disabilities, so personnel can use up-to-date information to resolve everyday workplace situations.

- Form a disability support group and discuss disability perspectives. Through this support group, all employees can work to their fullest potential.

- Make sure all facilities and services are accessible to all employees.

- Provide reasonable accommodations for applicants and workers with disabilities so they can demonstrate their abilities.

- Let other community organizations know that your organization is disability friendly.

- Keep disability organizations and agencies informed about potential job openings so they can refer qualified applicants.

- Take advantage of the strengths of having a diverse workforce.

- Hire people with disabilities.

- Provide training and advancement opportunities to workers with disabilities.

- Promote qualified workers with disabilities to upper management positions.

- Employers who are committed to making a difference in the disability employment area will encourage staff to volunteer in the community so they can have a positive influence on future workers with disabilities.
Information compiled from the following sources:

Disability Etiquette
North Dakota Department of Human Services

Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities. United Spinal Association
www.unitedspinal.org

Disability Etiquette Tips. DBTAC Rocky Mountain ADA Center
www.rockymountainada.org

Disability Etiquette. United Cerebral Palsy
ucp.org/resources/disability-etiquette

People First Language
Disability is Natural. Kathie Snow (2016)
www.disabilityisnatural.com

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