People with Disabilities: 
A Communication Guide

Adapted from the Higher Education Access Program at the Center for Excellence in Disabilities at WVU in conjunction with the West Virginia University Extension Service

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Rules of Etiquette

The etiquette for interacting with people with disabilities is not complicated.

- Always introduce yourself.
- Make the person feel accepted or welcome. Simply greet them as you would anyone else.
- Always address the person. “Mr. Jones, would you like fries with that?”
- Offer your assistance. Be prepared for them to decline, so always wait for an answer.
- When talking with an individual who uses a wheelchair, sit on a chair as much as possible in order to maintain eye contact.
- Be courteous. Push in your chair when you rise from a table. This makes it easier to maneuver between tables.
- Always use patience.
- Be aware that some disabilities are “hidden” or “invisible.” A person who appears disoriented or confused, for instance, may have a learning, emotional or intellectual disability.

Working with people with disabilities

Remember to:

- Relax.
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual.
- Offer assistance, but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.
- Be open to working with a personal aid and/or interpreter.
- Treat everyone like your favorite grandparent, with respect and dignity.

Caring teen camp counselors work as mentors to younger youth in West Virginia 4-H Camps.

Inclusive programming benefits everyone! We're better together!
Invisible Disabilities

Invisible disabilities are those disabilities that are not readily seen but can sometimes or always limit daily activities for people who have them. These disabilities can vary from person to person and range from mild challenges to severe limitations. Common invisible disabilities include:

- ADHD
- Asthma
- Autism
- Dyslexia
- Hearing
- Intellectual & developmental
- Learning
- Stuttering
- Mental illness
- Vision

Ways to communicate:

- Ask before you help and approach carefully
- Speak in a normal tone of voice, clearly and directly
- Be respectful, understanding and patient
- Try to eliminate background noise.
- Use written notes.
- Encourage feedback.

Strategies for Inclusion

Communication is key. Only with communication are we able to create an inclusive atmosphere.

- People-first language
  - Make sure to put the person first, not the disability
  - Say “the PERSON/CHILD with a disability” not “disabled child”

- Avoid using labels
  - Labels are debilitating
  - Labels make people more aware of the difference

- Positively acknowledge differences
  - Find ways to celebrate/include differences when appropriate and possible

- Accessibility
  - Ensure that facilities are accessible to everyone
  - Be sure to provide reasonable accommodations

- Prior assessment
  - Assess participants’ needs before they arrive
  - Ask for as much information as possible on registration forms to ensure that you are prepared
    - Questions can include
      - Do you have any dietary restrictions?
      - Do you need special accommodations?

- Seek help
  - Do not be afraid to seek help
  - Contact your HR or diversity office for assistance

Allowing people with disabilities to lead or help lead groups is a benefit to all. Activities such as different versions of “rock-paper-scissors” allows everyone to participate.
People First Language

People First Language is a term that refers to the intentional effort to recognize the person first before the disability. Respect is an important character trait every person should possess. A great way to show respect to others is to not label them. “Treat others as you want to be treated” is the Golden Rule but we should strive for the Platinum Rule—“Treat others as they want to be treated.”

People First Language is an act of not describing a person with a disability. For example, saying “the special needs child” is not putting the person first – it’s putting a label first. When we define someone by their diagnosis – we are being disrespectful to that person. A better way to ensure you are putting the person first would be to say, “the child has a cognitive disability” or “the child has a physical disability.”

Examples of People First Language:

Instead of          Use

The disabled child.................The child has a disability
He is mentally challenged........He has a cognitive disability
She’s a down’s child .............She has Down’s Syndrome
She’s learning disabled.........She has a learning disability
He’s a dwarf/midget .............He is of short stature
He’s wheelchair bound ..........He uses a wheelchair
Special needs child ..........Child who needs assistance
                           with activities

Source:


How to interact with someone who has a service animal

You may have to interact with a person who uses a service animal. For example, a dog guide could be used by a blind person.

Remember:

- DO NOT pet or distract a service animal.
- Always get permission from the animal’s companion before interacting with the animal.
How to communicate with someone with mobile disabilities

Mobile disabilities include people with a wide range of mobile limitation. Range of motion can vary from the use of an object like a cane to the use of a wheelchair.

Ways to communicate:

- Recognize that the aid the person uses is part of that person’s personal space.
- Talk directly to the person.
- Always ask before you move a person.
- Leave the wheelchair within easy reach.

In a group setting at camp or in a classroom, be sure to make room for a wheelchair at the table by moving chairs, or make sure youth at camp are given room to sit with their peers.

The ‘R’ Word

A cognitive disability is a medical diagnosis. People who have cognitive disabilities are just like you and me. Mental Retardation is a medical diagnosis just like cancer, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety and diabetes. People with cognitive disabilities have feelings and friends, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents who love them. When we freely use the term “retard” or “retarded” in our everyday language we often hurt people with disabilities and their loved ones.

Many youth/adults use the “r-word” to mean silly or stupid and are often not referring to people with cognitive or developmental disabilities. Regardless of how it is meant, it is a hurtful word. When you choose to use the “r-word” in public, regardless of how you mean it, you could be hurting someone around you. You never know who in the room has a family member or loved one with a cognitive or developmental disability.

Each individual has a right to feel like they belong to a group. For people to feel like they belong to a group, they need to feel included and respected. Hearing words that refer to their medical diagnosis can often lead young people and families to leave groups because they don’t feel like they belong. Mark Twain once said,

“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.”

Choose to be respectful and use the right word. The only “r-words” should be RESPECT and RESPONSIBILITY. As people of character, it is our responsibility to pledge to respect all individuals.

Source:

*Spread the Word to End the Word.* Web. 28 Feb. 2011.
<http://www.4-word.org>.

Creating Inclusive Materials

When creating materials keep the following guidelines in mind.

Print Materials

- Use one-inch margins.
- Avoid complicated fonts.
- Use large font size.
- Bound materials should have flexible binding.
- Use contrasting and saturated colors.
- Do not depend solely on color to convey information.
- Use paper with little glare.
- Use either an off-white or yellow paper.
- Make material available in Spanish.

Presentation Materials (PowerPoint, overheads, or slides)

- Display only one idea per visual.
- Simplify information.
- Limit the number of words on a slide.
- Use at least 20-point to 24-point typefaces.
- Use saturated, high contrast colors.
- Keep graphics simple.

How to communicate with someone with cognitive disabilities

Cognitive disabilities can be attributed to many sources including

- Brain injuries.
- Developmental or learning disabilities.

Ways to communicate:

- Be patient.
- Use precise language.
- Be prepared to give information more than once.
- Phrase questions to elicit accurate information.
- Give exact instructions.
- The person may prefer information provided in written or verbal form.

http://www.empowher.com
How to communicate with someone with speech disabilities

Speech disabilities are seldom related to intelligence. The person may have had a stroke or simply be hard of hearing.

Ways to communicate:
- Give your whole, unhurried attention.
- Be patient. Don’t speak for the person.
- Ask short questions that require short answers.
- Never pretend to understand.
- Use hand gestures and notes.

http://www.neuroaid.com

Creating Inclusive Materials

When creating materials keep the following guidelines in mind.

Videos
- Limit length (Online video clips should be kept to 3 minutes or less).
- Keep the clip to one primary focus or theme.
- Provide both visual and written information.
- Provide audio descriptions.
- Provide Closed Captioning and transcripts.

Web-based Materials
- Keep page layout simple.
- Use contrasting colors for easier reading.
- Do not depend solely on color to convey information.
- Text should be clear and uniform.
- Provide alternate text for images that convey information.
- Alternate text for images convey purpose not appearance.
- Clear navigation.
How to communicate with someone with a hearing disability

Hearing disabilities can range from mild hearing loss to profound deafness.

- Some may use hearing aids.
- Some may rely on sight.

Ways to communicate:

- Get their attention.
- Follow the person’s cues.
- Look directly at the person.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Try to eliminate background noise.
- Use written notes.
- Encourage feedback.

http://columban.org/7377/general-information/plannedgiving/donations-at-work/

How to communicate with someone with a visual disability

Visual disabilities include.

- A loss of central or peripheral vision.
- Limited vision even with correction (visual acuity).
- Total loss of vision.

Ways to communicate:

- Always identify yourself.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Allow the person to take your arm.
- Let the person know if you move.
- Use specific directions.

http://www.sasix.co.za/projects/reportback/VP-FS-AUG09-0001/