

## Disability Etiquette

If you have not had many interactions with persons with disabilities, you may not know exactly how to act. For example, you may ask yourself “how do I talk to someone in a wheelchair?” or “how do I interact with someone who is blind or deaf?” This page provides some guidelines to ensure respectful and equal treatment of people with disabilities.

### Things to remember

- Individuals with disabilities are people!
- Individuals with disabilities are whole people!
- They expect to be treated with the same dignity and respect that you do.
- Just because someone has a disability does not mean he/she is disabled.

### Disability Etiquette in general

- Remember, he/she is a person, NOT a disability.
- Never patronize the person by patting the person on the head or back.
- Offer to shake their hand, even if it appears as if they have limited use of their arms or have an artificial limb. Simply the gesture will help the person feel accepted and create a warmer environment for communication.
- For those who cannot shake hands, lightly touch the individual on the shoulder or arm to welcome their presence.
- Look at and speak directly to the person, not through a companion, care-taker, or interpreter.
- Treat adults as adults.
- Don't apologize if you use an expression such as “I gotta run” or “See you later” that relates to the person's disability. These expressions are part of everyday language and it is likely the apology will be more offensive than the expression.
- Don't pet or feed service animals or guide dogs as they are working.
- When giving directions, make sure you consider things such as the weather, locations of ramps/curb-cuts, and other physical obstacles that may hinder travel for individuals with disabilities.

### Speech Disability Etiquette

- Never assume....many people mistakenly identify these individuals as having an intellectual disability or psychiatric condition Make sure to be patient in finding out which communication method works best for the person.
- Be 100 percent attentive when conversing with an individual who has difficulty

- speaking.
- If you are in a noisy and/or crowded environment, don't panic. Just try and move to a quieter location to talk.
- Let the person complete their own sentences. Be patient and do not try to speak for the person. Do not pretend to understand; instead, tell the person what you do understand and allow the person to respond.
- Do not be corrective, but rather, encouraging.
- When necessary, it's OK to ask short questions that require short answers.

### **Wheelchair Etiquette**

- Things to Remember
  - Individual who use wheelchairs may require different degrees of assistance.
  - Some who use wheelchairs may also use canes or other assistive devices and may not need his/her wheelchair all the time.
- Do not automatically assist the individual without permission. It is ok to offer assistance. However, if the offer is not accepted, respect his/her request!
- If you will be speaking with an individual in a wheelchair for more than a couple minutes, find a place where you can sit down to give the individual a more comfortable viewing angle.
- A person's wheelchair is part of his/her own personal space. Never move, lean on, rock, or touch his/her wheelchair without permission. In addition to being rude, it can be dangerous.
- Do not assume that having to use a wheelchair is a tragedy. Wheelchairs can be a means of freedom to fully engage in life.

### **Hearing Disability Etiquette**

- Do not shout at a hearing impaired person unless they request you to. Just speak in a normal tone but make sure your lips are visible.
- Keep conversations clear and find a quiet location to communicate.
- If you are asked to repeat yourself, answering "nothing, it's not important" implies the person is not worth repeating yourself for. It is demeaning; be patient and comply.
- Show consideration by facing the light source and keeping things (such as cigarettes or your hands) away from you mouth while speaking.

### **Visual Disability Etiquette**

- When meeting someone with a visual disability, identify yourself and others with

you (e.g. "Jane is on my left and Jack is on my right."). Continue to identify the person with whom you are speaking.

- If you go out to dinner with an acquaintance with a visual disability, ask if you can describe what is on the menu and what is on his/her plate.
- When walking with someone with a visual impairment, offer the person your arm for guidance. They will likely keep a half-step behind to anticipate curbs and steps.

## Words and phrases guidelines

### Disability vs. Handicap

- A **disability** is a condition caused by such things as an accident or trauma, disease, or genetics that limits a person's vision, hearing, speech, mobility, or mental function.
- A **handicap** is a constraint imposed upon a person, regardless of that person's ability or disability. These constraints can be physical or attitudinal. For example, stairs and curbs are handicaps imposed on those who use wheelchairs.

Always remember that the **person** is not the **condition**. Keep all your speech person focused, not disability focused.

### Avoid terms which carry a negative connotation:

Abnormal, Afflicted, Confined, Crippled, Defective, Handicap, Invalid, Lame, Palsied, Retarded, Stricken, Sufferer, Victim, Withered.

Use empowering, individualized vocabulary; don't clump all people with one form of disability together with phrases like "the blind" or "the disabled." (EXCEPTION: Some people who are deaf or hard or hearing and, more recently, some individuals with autism prefer to use terms like "The Deaf" or "Autistics." If you're unsure, ask! It's more respectful than assuming anyone has a particular preference.

### Involvement Do's and Don'ts:

#### Do

- have written descriptions identifying what the person is to do
- learn where to find and recruit individuals with disabilities.
- train parish leaders, staff, and parishioners on how to make reasonable accommodations.
- make alternative forms available to those with visual disabilities.

## **Don't**

- ask if a person has a disability initially!!
- assume that if a person is disabled, he/she will be better suited for some other role, program, faith community, etc.
- assume reasonable accommodations will be expensive.
- assume your place of worship is accessible.

## **References**

Illinois Attorney General

<http://www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/rights/manualstyle.html>

Apparelyzed- Spinal Cord Injury Peer Support

<http://www.apparelyzed.com/etiquette.html>

Town Hall: Wheelchair Etiquette based on Ric Garren in Challenge Magazine

[http://www.wheelchairnet.org/WCN\\_TownHall/Docs/etiquette.html](http://www.wheelchairnet.org/WCN_TownHall/Docs/etiquette.html)

Disability Etiquette

[http://www.cityofsacramento.org/adaweb/learning\\_about\\_disabilities.htm](http://www.cityofsacramento.org/adaweb/learning_about_disabilities.htm)

**Date Modified: January 5, 2012**