

Quick Tips: Disability Etiquette

1 Person First. Get to know the person first. Human nature is to notice differences, but disability does not define a person. It is just part of who they are. Most people have adapted to their disability and are comfortable with it.

- Don't let your fear of saying something "wrong" prevent you from getting to know someone.
- Just say "hello" and engage in conversation like you would with any other person.
- If you make a mistake, it's okay! Don't give up! People with disabilities are durable!

2 Language. The words we use are powerful and can convey the attitudes we have toward people with disabilities. Even a slight change in a phrase can alter the tone and communicate a very different meaning. Some people with disabilities prefer 'person-first language' and others prefer 'identify-first language' while some don't have a preference at all.

People-first language is when the person comes before the disability in the description. This emphasizes the value of the individual by recognizing them as a person first instead of focusing on their condition. Some examples include a person who uses a wheelchair (versus wheelchair bound) and a person who has cancer (versus a cancer victim).

Identity-first language is when the disability comes before the person in the description. For example, some adults with autism prefer to say that they are "autistic" rather than saying that they "have autism." The thought behind this is that it's not possible to affirm the worth of an autistic person without recognizing his or her identity as an autistic person. That said, there is not universal agreement on this terminology, particularly among parents of children with autism.

Both approaches want to accentuate the value and worth of the individual. The best thing to do is listen to the language that the individual is using and adopt the same terminology. The most important thing to remember is to be inclusive and respectful with the words you use.

3 Offering Assistance. It is okay to ask someone with a disability if they would like assistance. Simply say, 'Can I help you?' then wait for them to answer. If the answer is yes, ask how they would like your assistance and respond according to their guidance. If they say no, respect their decision and let them do their own thing! Never start helping (e.g. pushing a wheelchair up a hill) without asking for and receiving the person's permission. Also, it's okay to decline a request for assistance if you're not comfortable with it or are not able to, or don't have the time to comply.

4 Diversity within Disability. No two people with a disability are the same. Each person is unique with unique preferences, skills, abilities, interests, desires, cultures and backgrounds.

5 Talk to Adults like Adults. Use the same tone of voice as you would with any adult and avoid terms of endearment such as honey or sweetheart. Don't patronize. For example, don't pat a person who uses a wheelchair or a little person on the head.

6 Don't Forget the Golden Rule. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!