



A GENERAL GUIDE TO RELATING TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Scripture: “...for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” I Samuel 16:7

It is estimated that 54 million people in the United States have a disability. Many people are uncomfortable around those with disabilities. Some believe that people with disabilities are “second-class citizens” and should be feared, ignored, or pitied.

The first step in relating to people with disabilities is to check your attitude. Are you afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing? Do you see the disability and not the person?

People with disabilities are, first and foremost, PEOPLE. They may look different – they may behave differently – but they are not different in God’s eyes.

Here are some general communication tips for interacting with a person who has a disability:

- ❖ Talk directly to the person – not through his/her companions or family members. Many times people will completely ignore the person with a disability and talk about them as if they were not present. If a person cannot communicate with you, smile and speak to that person anyway.
- ❖ Show the individual the same dignity, respect and consideration that you would wish for yourself.
- ❖ Do not assume a person needs assistance – ask first. It is important to get instructions before you help – don’t assume you know what is needed.
- ❖ If a person is small in stature or in a wheelchair, get down on his/her level. Pull up a chair so you can be eye level when carrying on a conversation. Do not lean on a person’s wheelchair.
- ❖ If a person has difficulty speaking, be patient, listen closely, and allow the person enough time to finish. Do not finish sentences for him/her. If you cannot understand what the person is saying, don’t nod your head as if you heard every word, because they will know you aren’t being honest! It is not offensive to ask the person to repeat what was said because you didn’t understand it the first time.

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- ❖ Treat adults with disabilities like adults – not like children.
- ❖ Most people with disabilities want to serve as well as be served and enjoy the opportunity to help others.
- ❖ Unless the person brings up the subject, it is best not to ask personal questions about his or her disability until you have become friends.
- ❖ Be patient and considerate if it takes a person with a disability a long time to get from one place to another or to accomplish something.
- ❖ Don't shout or speak loudly in a person's ear if they have hearing impairment. Speak slowly and directly to the person. Your facial expressions and gestures can help in understanding.
- ❖ Guide dogs are not to be petted or distracted while they are working.
- ❖ When greeting persons with visual impairment, tell them your name and where you are. If asked to assist in walking, let the person take your arm and let them know when they are coming to steps or turning corners.
- ❖ Use people-first language, such as:
 - Person with intellectual disabilities* instead of "Mentally retarded"
 - Person with a disability* instead of "Handicapped (or crippled)"
 - Person with visual impairment* instead of "Blind"
 - Person with hearing impairment* instead of "Deaf (or deaf and dumb)"
 - "Jane" uses a wheelchair* instead of "Wheelchair-bound"
- ❖ When a person with a disability accomplishes normal tasks, avoid giving excessive praise.
- ❖ Relax! What do you say when you meet a person with a disability?
"Hello!"

A key to feeling comfortable around people with disabilities is to take the time to get to know the person and the family and to become educated about the disability. Soon you will be able to see the person – not the disability.