

**GUIDE TO ETIQUETTE AND BEHAVIOR FOR COMMUNICATING  
AND WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES  
AT THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION**



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**This pamphlet is designed to assist you in your communications and behavior when working with individuals with disabilities. These suggestions are only guidelines that may need to be modified based on the situation or feedback from the person with a disability.**

- When relating to a person with a disability be yourself and relax. If you are not sure of what to do, how to do it, what language or terminology to utilize, what assistance to offer, or whether assistance should be offered, ask the person with the disability.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions. Let them guide you and do not insist or take it personal if the person turns down your offer to assist.
- Be respectful of the fact that the person with the disability may desire to be independent and has the right to refuse your assistance.
- If you do not feel comfortable with the assistance requested of you or do not understand what is being required of you be honest and let the person with the disability know your discomfort.
- Do not be overly concerned about your usage of common and accepted expressions such as “See you later,” or “Did you hear about that?”
- When introduced to a person with a disability, offer to shake hands. It is appropriate to shake hands with individuals who have limited hand use or who wear a artificial limb. It is also acceptable to shake hands with the left hand.

#### **DISABILITY – BLIND AND/OR LOW VISION:**

- When meeting an individual that is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you.
- If you have met before, remind them of the circumstance; they do not have visual clues to jog their memories.
- If the conversation is taking place with a group, identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- Provide verbal information that is visually available to those who can see.
- Speak in a normal tone, do not shout.
- Indicate in advance when you move from one place to another and let it be known when the conversation is over.
- Lead a person who is blind only after they have accepted your offer to lead them.
- When leading do not hold on to them, allow them to hold on to your arm, giving them control and command of their own movements. Allow them to set the pace.
- Inform them of all new items you add to their environment, their location and any items you remove.

#### ***Good Service Dog Etiquette:***

- Any animal accompanying a person with a disability is a “Service Animal” that is working and not a pet.

- Do not touch the Service Animal or the person it assists without permission.
- Do not make noises at the Service Animal, for it may distract the animal from performing its job.
- Do not feed the Service Animal, for it might disrupt its schedule.
- Do not be offended if the person does not discuss their disability and the assistance the Service Animal provides.
- Be respectful of the relationship the person has with his/her Service Animal and the desire not to be under a “spot light.”

### **DISABILITY – DEAF AND/OR HARD OF HEARING:**

- When communicating with a person who is deaf inquire of them as to the best method of communication.
- If an interpreter is present, speak to the person who is deaf and not the interpreter.
- Look directly at the person; speak clearly and slowly, in your normal tone of voice to determine if the person can read your lips.
- If they can read your lips, speak in short sentences.
- Avoid blocking their view of your face and keep your hands or other obstructions away from your mouth.
- Ensure that the lighting in the room is good.
- Obtain their attention prior to commencing the conversation.
- If the person is using hearing aids, avoid large, open and noisy surroundings.
- It is appropriate to tap a person who is deaf on the shoulder or to wave your hand to get their attention.
- Be patient with yourself and the person who is deaf or hearing impaired.

### **DISABILITY – USES WHEELCHAIR OR ELECTRIC SCOOTER:**

- Because of the wide range of physical abilities among the persons who use wheelchairs the assistance required varies.
- Some may not use a wheelchair exclusively; they may require the assistance of canes, leg braces and at times no assistive device for short periods.
- Assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, canes are not toys for you to use when not being used by the person with the disability.
- Do not remove a wheelchair, crutches, or other mobility assistive device from the reach of the person who uses them.

- Do not take for granted that a person in a wheelchair wants assistance.
- If you offer assistance, wait for the offer to be accepted. Do not push a wheelchair until the occupant tells you to do so.
- Know your own limitations and do not attempt to push a wheelchair up or down a step, or a curb if you have any physical limitations yourself.
- Do not invade the space of the person occupying a wheelchair by leaning on it while talking.
- When in conversation with someone in a wheelchair, give them a comfortable view of yourself; avoid making them look up for long periods of time.

### **DISABILITY – CONDITIONS WHICH CAUSE DIFFICULTY WITH SPEECH:**

- Listen attentively, be patient and do not correct the person or complete his/her sentences.
- If you do not understand what the person is saying, it is appropriate to bring it to their attention.
- Do not pretend to understand them when you do not. Repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- If it is a stressful situation, stay calm. It is not unusual for the person's speech to become difficult to understand under stress.
- If you are in an area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private area.

**Remember to give people with disabilities the respect you would like to receive. It is best to emphasize their abilities and not their disabilities. Appreciate what the person can do and the diversity they bring to the Foundation. If you need further assistance or information contact the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs.**