

# **on Language**

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## **Communicating with People with Disabilities**

These recommendations have been adapted from many sources as a public service by United Cerebral Palsy Associates, Inc. (UCPA). I think they are important to keep in mind when communicating with people with disabilities, so I'm sharing them with you:

1. Speak directly to the person who is disabled rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
2. Offer to shake hands when introduced. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands, and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
3. Always identify yourself and others who may be with you when you meet someone with a visual disability. When you are conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking. When you dine with a friend or co-worker who has a visual disability, ask whether you can describe what is on his or her plate.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then, listen or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by their first names only if you are extending the same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
6. Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair. Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their chairs as extensions of their bodies, just as people with guide dogs and help dogs treat their dogs. Never distract a work animal from its job without the owner's permission.
7. Listen attentively when you talk with a person who has difficulty speaking, and wait for him or her to finish. If necessary, ask questions that require short answers or a nod. Never pretend to understand; instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
8. Place yourself at eye level when you speak with someone in a wheelchair.
9. Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand gently to get his or her attention. Look directly at the person, and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish whether the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep your hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when you speak. Never shout at the person. Just speak in your normal tone of voice. Also, if the person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that he or she has the ability to discriminate your speaking voice.
10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions that seem to relate to a person's disability, such as "Did you hear about this?" or "See you later."

If you are interested in learning more about this subject, Irene M. Ward & Associates, in Columbus, Ohio, offers many informative videos and other training resources covering empowerment, disability rights, and inclusion in the community for people with disabilities. You can contact them at (614) 889-0888 or visit their Web site at <http://www.ireneward.com>. ❖