

The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities

1. Speak directly to the person with the disability rather than a friend or caregiver who is with them.
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 meeting someone with a visual disability. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking. When dining with a friend who has a visual disability, ask if 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 when extending that 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. And so do people with guide dogs and help dogs. Never distract a work animal from their job without the owner's permission.
7. Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
8. Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches.
9. Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get his or her attention. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively. Never shout to a person. Just speak in a normal tone of voice.
10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seems to relate to a person's disability.

The Ten Commandments were adapted from many sources as a public service by United Cerebral Palsy Associates, Inc. (UCPA), UCPA's version of the Ten Commandments was updated by Irene M. Ward & Associates (Columbus, Ohio), also as a public service, and to provide the most current language possible for its video entitled, The Ten Commandments of Communicating With People With Disabilities

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