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COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES RELATING TO ABILITY

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN DISABILITIES AND HANDICAPS

The term “handicapped” is still used by the media today to refer to people with disabilities, but the word has a negative connotation for many people. Most social service agencies and disability publications have replaced this term with “person with a disability.” The term *handicap* describes a condition or barrier caused by society or the environment.

<i>A disability</i> applies to a person’s functional limitation.	<i>A handicap</i> is a barrier in the environment.
A disability applies to a person’s functional limitation.	A handicap is when there is no telephone system available that enables people with hearing disabilities to make calls.
A person uses a hearing aid because he or she is deaf or hard of hearing.	A handicap is when there is a stairway but no adjoining elevator so that a person with a physical disability cannot go up or down a floor.
A person uses a wheelchair because of a physical disability.	A handicap is when inadequate time is allowed to complete a task for a person to demonstrate understanding of material.

PERSON FIRST: PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The person precedes the disability, both figuratively and literally. It’s “persons with disabilities,” not “disabled persons,” and “person with cerebral palsy,” not “cerebral palsy victim.”

ADJECTIVES AREN'T NOUNS

Use an adjective as description, not as a category or group, i.e. “people who are disabled,” not “the disabled,” and “people who are blind,” not “the visually impaired.”

GERMANENESS

People with disabilities should be treated just like everyone else. You wouldn't mention the physical condition of an able-bodied person unless it was germane to what you were saying. Unless a person's disability is relevant, don't mention it.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

When introduced to a person with a disability, it is polite to shake hands. Most people with limited use of their hands, or artificial limbs, can shake hands. If you're unsure, let the other person make the first move. Always treat people with disabilities with the same respect you treat others. Speak to and look directly at the person instead of communicating through a companion who may be along. The presence of a physical disability does not mean the person has a cognitive disability as well.

Common expressions, such as "see you later" or "I've got to run along," are usually not insulting to those who can't see or run, so don't feel embarrassed if they happen to creep into your conversation. Don't be embarrassed to offer help to someone with a disability, but wait until the offer is accepted and instructions are given before proceeding.

SPEECH DISABILITIES

Ask questions that can be answered in few words or with a nod of the head. Don't pretend to understand when you don't. Repeat what you think the person said, and if all else fails, use written notes.

DEAFNESS

To get the attention of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, you may need to touch the person lightly, wave your hand or use some other physical sign. If the person is using an interpreter, speak directly to the person rather than the interpreter. If the person is lip-reading, look directly at him or her and speak slowly and clearly. Even the best lip-reader can pick up less than half of the words you speak. It is not necessary to exaggerate your lip movements or shout. Speak expressively, because the person will use facial expression, gestures and body language to help understand. Don't stand with a bright light behind you, and keep your hands away from your mouth when speaking. If you are having trouble communicating, consider using written notes.

BLINDNESS

When communicating with someone who is blind, identify yourself and introduce anyone else who is present. Before trying to shake hands, say something like, "Shall we shake hands?" or reach for the other person's extended hand. When offering seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat. If walking from one location to another, offer your arm as a guide, and alert the person to any obstacles such as steps, curbs or low arches. If dining, don't feel embarrassed to orient the person as to where the silverware and other items are. Let the person know when you are leaving.

AVOID CONDESCENDING LANGUAGE

Terms like physically challenged, special and differently-abled are patronizing. If appropriate and relevant, note that a person has a physical, sensory or mental disability and leave it at that. Also, people who do not have without disabilities should not be referred to as “normal” because of the inference that people with disabilities are abnormal.

AVOID PITY

People with disabilities aren’t “victims.” As one woman noted, “I’m not a wheelchair ‘victim.’

Wheelchair victims are the people I bump into with my footrest at the supermarket.” People with disabilities should not be labeled as impaired, nor should they be described as “inspirational” or “courageous” just because they have a disability.

PEOPLE IN WHEELCHAIRS OR ON CRUTCHES

Consider a person’s wheelchair part of the person. It’s not polite to touch or lean on the chair unless the person gives permission. Never pat a person in a wheelchair on the head. When talking to someone in a wheelchair or on crutches for more than a few minutes, sit or place yourself at the other person’s eye level.

Adapted from *Handicapping Language: A Guide for Journalists and the Public*, Illinois Department of Human Service’s Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), Springfield, IL, 800-843-6154 (V) or 800-447-6404 (TTY). Reprinted with permission from Leslie Ann Ramyk, NAEYC and DORS.