Persons with Hearing Loss

If you need to attract the attention of a person with a hearing loss, touch him or her lightly on the shoulder or arm. When you speak to people with hearing loss, speak directly to them. With people who use sign language interpreters, speak to them, not to their interpreters. Face them so that they can see your lips. Slow your rate of speech, speak your words clearly, and increase your volume, if requested. Shouting usually doesn't help. Not all people with hearing loss can read lips. For those people, other forms of communication may be necessary. Some may offer to write messages back and forth. For some, American Sign Language (ASL) is their first language, and they may require a sign language interpreter to understand proceedings or join in a conversation.

Persons with Vision Loss

Be descriptive. Describe goings-on and surroundings, especially obstacles, to a blind person. You may need to help orient people with visual disabilities and let them know what's coming up. Be the assistant, not the director. If you're asked for assistance, let a blind person hold your arm as a guide. If they're walking, tell them when they have to step up or step down; let them know if the door is to their right or left; and warn them of possible hazards. You don't have to speak loudly to people with visual disabilities. Most of them can hear just fine. When appropriate, offer to read written information for a person with a visual disability. It's okay to ask blind people if they "see what you mean." If you're meeting a blind person, identify yourself. If you've met before, remind the person of the context because he or she won't have the visual cues to jog the memory.

Persons with Learning Disabilities

Don't assume the person isn't listening merely because you're not getting any verbal or visual feedback. Instead, ask whether they understand or agree. Don't assume you have to explain everything to people with learning disabilities. They don't necessarily have a problem with general comprehension. When necessary, offer to read written material aloud.

Persons with Hidden Disabilities

Not all disabilities are apparent. A person may have difficulty following a conversation, may not respond when you call or wave, or may say or do something that seems inappropriate. The person may have a hidden disability such as poor vision, a seizure disorder, a hearing loss, a learning disability, a brain injury, a mental disability, or a health condition. These are just a few of the many different types of hidden disabilities. Don't make assumptions about the person or the disability. Be open-minded.

THIS PAMPHLET IS THE CREATION AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ACCESS AND FAIRNESS ADVISORY COMMITTEE OF THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA. POINTS OF VIEW EXPRESSED HEREIN DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE OFFICIAL POSITIONS OR POLICIES OF THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA OR THE U.S. DISTRICT COURT FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

This publication and the Access and Fairness Advisory Committee's other publications are available here:

http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/program/access/publications.htm

United States District Court
Southern District of California

Disability Etiquette

Interacting With Persons With Disabilities

General Etiquette

People with disabilities prefer that you focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. Always emphasize the person first. Avoid the terms "handicapped," "physically challenged," and other similar references. The preferred usage is "people with disabilities" or "persons with disabilities." The term "disabled people," although used, may be offensive because this term defines people as disabled first and people second.

Language is powerful, but attitudes and behaviors are the most difficult barriers for people with disabilities to overcome.

Be Yourself

Treat peope with disabilities with the same respect and consideration that you have for everyone else. Treat each person as an individual, not as a disability. Don't assume that disability is all that person can talk about or be interested in. Engage in small talk the way you would with anyone. Use a normal voice when extending a verbal welcome. Don't raise your voice unless requested. As in any new situation, everyone will be more comfortable if you relax.

Helping

Don't automatically give assistance. Ask first if the person wants help. Follow the person's cues and ask if you are not sure. Assistance with doors, as long as you're clear of the path, is usually very much appreciated. If your offer of assistance is accepted, listen or ask for instructions. Don't be offended if someone refuses your offer. It's his or her choice to be as independent as possible.

Communication

People are considered to have communication disabilities when their ability to take in, give, or process information is limited. Talk directly to the person, not to an aide or interpreter. It's important to make eye contact. If you don't understand someone, ask the person to repeat. If the person doesn't understand you when you speak, try again. Sometimes it takes several attempts at listening or speaking for communication to be successful. Let the person know that your communication with him or her is worthwhile to you. When appropriate, offer to make public information available in alternative formats such as Braille, audiotape, large print, or web pages.

Environments

Be sensitive about the setting in which you're communicating. A noisy or dark environment, or many people talking at the same time, may make it difficult for people with vision, speech, hearing, or some other hidden disabilities to fully participate in a conversation. Be aware of clear paths of travel for people who are blind or use wheelchairs or other mobility aids. Realize that a person with chemical sensitivity may have a reaction to smoke, perfume, or toxins in the environment.

Socializing

Don't leave persons with disabilities out of a conversation or activity because you feel uncomfortable or fear that they will feel uncomfortable. Include them as you would anyone else. They know what they can do and what they want to do. Let it be their decision whether or not to participate.

Touching

You may gently touch people with disabilities to get their attention. Touch them when appropriate, such as when shaking hands in greeting or if they request your assistance. If you meet people with AIDS, shake their hands as you would with anyone else; you can't get AIDS by touching. Don't touch someone's cane, wheelchair, or other assistive device. It's a part of that person's personal space. If you're interested in a demonstration of someone's electronic aid, ask. Don't try to use such equipment unless invited to do so. Guide dogs and other service animals are working animals; don't pet or touch them without specific permission.

Persons with Specific Disabilities

Persons with Mobility Disabilities

A person in a wheelchair is a "wheelchair user" or a "person using a wheelchair." Talk directly to the person, not to an aide, and don't assume a companion is an aide. When having an extended conversation with someone in a wheelchair or scooter, try sitting or crouching down to his or her approximate height. It's okay to invite a person in a wheelchair to "go for a walk." Never touch or lean on a person's wheelchair unless you have permission—it's that person's personal space. Give a push only when asked. Enable people who use crutches, canes, walkers, wheelchairs, or scooters to keep their mobility aids within reach, unless they request otherwise. Be aware of what is and isn't accessible to people who use mobility aids such as wheelchairs and walkers. People who use wheelchairs may have a variety of disabilities. Some have use of their arms, and some don't. When you meet such a person, extend your hand to shake if that's what you normally do. A person who can't shake your hand will let you know, and he or she will appreciate being treated in a normal way.

Persons with Speech Disabilities

Listen patiently and carefully. Address persons with speech disabilities as you would anyone else in the same situation. Don't complete sentences for a person with a speech disability unless he or she specifically asks you for help. Don't pretend you understand what he or she says, just to be polite. Go to a quiet room if necessary. Don't let able-bodied people interrupt a person with a speech disability simply because they talk louder. If you don't understand what's said to you, ask the person to repeat it or to say it a different way. Keep good eye contact. If a person with a speech disability is using a trained speech interpreter or relayer, speak to and keep eye contact with the person, not the person interpreting what's being said. If the person uses an amplifier or other device, don't touch it, as that is part of his or her personal space.