

INTERACTING,  
ETIQUETTE, & IDEAS  
FOR THE USE OF  
"PEOPLE FIRST"  
LANGUAGE

# Think Before You Speak



## Think Before You Speak

**People with disabilities are people first, people who happen to have disabilities.**

Just as a person may be short or tall, or have dark or light skin, a disability is just one part of what makes up an individual. Whenever possible, avoid labeling a person with a disability, and instead simply use the person's name. This way, you acknowledge that they are, indeed, people first.

People with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else—the right to fall in love, marry, hold down a job, acquire an education, etc. Above all, they have a right to self-esteem. To ensure these rights, people with disabilities should be referred to in terms that acknowledge the ability, merit, and dignity of the individual, rather than focusing on a disability. By making an effort to become sensitive to, and aware of, the language we use, we create an atmosphere of mutual respect. This brochure will give you some ideas for using "People First" language.

If you saw a person using a wheelchair unable to negotiate the stairs of a building, would you say:

"There is a disabled person unable to find a ramp"

or would you say: "There is a person using a wheelchair who is handicapped by an inaccessible building"?

## I am a person first and I have a disability

When you deal with me  
treat me just as you would any other person—  
with respect and courtesy.  
Please look me in the eye,  
and speak directly to me, not to my companion.  
I am used to living with my disability  
but I appreciate your help when I need it.  
If I have trouble seeing or hearing or moving easily  
please remember that it is my eyes  
or ears or muscles that do not work  
as well as yours.  
Beyond that, I have the same  
needs and wants,  
hopes and desires  
as you do.  
I have problems and fears, just like you  
but I also have strengths  
that sometimes even I don't recognize.  
I need to talk to you about those abilities  
and I need you to listen.  
But most of all, I need you to remember—  
I am a person first!

—author unknown

## LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

- ☞ Speak of the person first, then the disability.
- ☞ Emphasize abilities, not limitations.  
"He uses a wheelchair," instead of "He is wheelchair-bound."
- ☞ Understand that although a disability may have been caused by a disease, the disability itself is not a disease and is not contagious.
- ☞ Don't label people as part of a disability group—say "people with disabilities" not "the disabled."
- ☞ Don't patronize or give excessive praise or attention.
- ☞ Don't say, "Isn't it wonderful how he has overcome his disability?"  
People live with a disability—they have to overcome attitudinal, social, architectural, education, transportation, and employment barriers—not the disability.
- ☞ Be aware that choice and independence are important. Ask a person with a disability if s/he wants assistance before you help. Your help may not be wanted or needed.
- ☞ Treat adults with disabilities as adults. Call the person by his or her first name only when extending that familiarity to all others present. Make eye contact and speak directly to the person, not a companion or interpreter. Do not give the person a nickname s/he does not usually use; say "Bill," not "Billy."
- ☞ Be aware of the distinction between *disability* and *handicap*:  
A *disability* is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, hear, talk, learn, etc.  
A *handicap* is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person. Use handicap to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.
- ☞ Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person to get things said or done.

# Think Before You Speak

## Interacting & Etiquette

### PEOPLE WHO USE WHEELCHAIRS

- Always ask the person using the wheelchair if he or she would like assistance before you help.
- Don't lean on a person's wheelchair. It is part of their personal space.
- Don't discourage children from asking questions about the person or why they use a wheelchair.
- If the conversation lasts more than a few minutes, sit or kneel to get to eye level.



### PEOPLE WHO HAVE SPEECH DIFFICULTIES

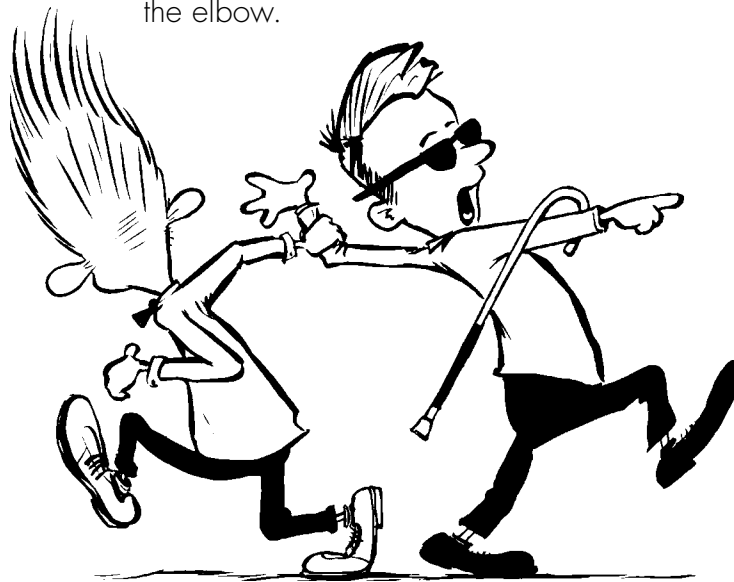
- Give whole, unhurried attention to the person.
- Keep your manner encouraging, rather than correcting.
- Rather than speak for the person, allow extra time and give help when needed.



- When necessary, ask questions that require short answers or a nod or shake of the head.
- Don't pretend to understand when you don't. Repeat what you do understand; the person's reaction will clue you in and guide you.
- Look for communication aids like pictures or symbols.

### PEOPLE WHO ARE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

- Ask the person if he or she wants help in getting about. When providing assistance, don't grab and start steering—allow the person to take your arm, bent at the elbow.



- Always identify yourself and any others who may be with you. For example, say "On my right is..."
- Use the person's name when starting a conversation to let him or her know where the conversation is directed. Let the person know when you need to leave.
- When offering a handshake, say, "Shall we shake hands?" If the person extends a hand first, take it or explain why you can't.
- When offering seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat.
- In handling money or other papers, identify each piece as you place it in the person's hand.

### PEOPLE WHO ARE HEARING IMPAIRED

- If necessary, get the person's attention with a wave of the hand or light tap on the shoulder.
- Don't be embarrassed about communication via paper and pencil.
- Speak clearly and slowly but without exaggerating. **Don't shout!** Use body language or facial expression to help.



- Try to maintain eye contact. Allow for a clear view of your face—the person may be lip reading. Don't speak directly into the ear.

#### How to Say It

**Say** person who has

**Instead of** afflicted or suffers from

**Say** person with

**Instead of** victim or stricken

**Say** a disability

**Instead of** disabled or handicapped

**Say** cerebral palsy

**Instead of** palsied, C.P., or spastic

**Say** retardation

**Instead of** retarded

**Say** seizure disorder

**Instead of** epileptic

**Say** seizures

**Instead of** fits

**Say** Down Syndrome

**Instead of** mongoloid

**Say** of short stature

**Instead of** dwarf or midget

**Say** without speech or nonverbal

**Instead of** mute or dumb

**Say** deaf or hearing impaired

**Instead of** hard of hearing

**Say** visually impaired

**Instead of** sightless

**Say** developmental delay

**Instead of** slow

**Say** emotional disorder or mental illness

**Instead of** crazy or insane

**Say** learning disability

**Instead of** learning disabled

**Say** non-disabled

**Instead of** normal or healthy

**Say** mobility impaired

**Instead of** lame

**Say** cleft lip

**Instead of** hare lip

**Say** congenital disability

**Instead of** birth defect

**Say** uses a wheelchair

**Instead of** confined to a wheelchair

**Say** non-ambulatory

**Instead of** wheelchair-bound

**Say** physical disability

**Instead of** crippled or lame

**Say** paralyzed

**Instead of** invalid or paralytic

**Say** has hemiplegia (one-sided paralysis)

**Instead of** hemiplegic

**Say** has quadriplegia (paralysis of four limbs)

**Instead of** quadriplegic

**Say** has paraplegia (lower body paralysis)

**Instead of** paraplegic

