

Disability Etiquette: Tips for Young People with Disabilities

The following Disability Etiquette information is meant to give you some tips about vocabulary words that work and words to avoid using to describe yourself or someone else as well as tips for interacting with people with other types of disabilities.

Tip # 1: Words Can Hurt, Words Can Empower

Finding the words to describe ourselves, how we feel, how we look and how we move around in the world can help others view us in the same positive, hopeful way we view ourselves.

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first – to focus on the person, not the disability. Group descriptions, such as “the blind,” “the deaf” or “the disabled” are not empowering. It is important to use words that reflect individuality, equality or dignity – the person who is blind, the child who is deaf, the individual with a disability, for example.

Following are examples of words and phrases to describe persons with disabilities.

Words/Phrases That Work	Words/Phrases that Don't Work
Person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability	The retarded, retard; mentally retarded*
Person who is blind or visually impaired	The blind
Person without a disability	Able-bodied, normal, healthy
Person with a disability	The disabled; handicapped
Athlete or Athlete with a disability	Disabled athlete, handicapped athlete
Person who is deaf or hard of hearing	The deaf; deaf and dumb
Person who is an amputee, uses a prosthesis	Amputee, has a wooden leg, peg leg
Person with multiple sclerosis	Someone afflicted by MS
Person with cerebral palsy	A CP victim
Athlete or Athlete with cerebral palsy	CP Athlete
Person with epilepsy or a seizure disorder	An epileptic; person with fits

Person who has muscular dystrophy	Someone stricken by MD
Person who uses a wheelchair; wheelchair user	Person confined, bound or restricted to a wheelchair
Athlete who uses a wheelchair	Wheelchair athlete
Person who is unable to speak, person who uses synthetic speech	A mute
Person with a psychiatric disability	A crazy person
Person with a physical disability, person who is physically disabled	Person who is crippled, lame or deformed
Person who is successful, productive	Person who has overcome his/her disability; person who is courageous

*Special Olympics is encouraging young people around the world to take a stand and raise awareness of the dehumanizing and hurtful effects of the words “retard” or “retarded” and help encourage society to think before they speak. Visit www.r-word.org and make your pledge to not use the R-word.

It is not acceptable to use the term “retard” or “retarded” to refer to or describe any person with or without a disability, or a situation, object, etc. Also avoid using idiot, moron, stupid or dumb to describe any person. Use of the R-word, in particular, is offensive and demeaning to people with intellectual disabilities.

Describing the difference between Paralympic sport and the Special Olympics:

Paralympic sport is for athletes with a physical disability or visual impairment. Conversely, Special Olympics provides sport training and competition for athletes with an intellectual disability. There is no connection other than mutual support.

Tip #2: People using Mobility Aids

When speaking to a person in a wheelchair or on crutches for more than a few minutes, sit in a chair. Place yourself at that person's eye level to facilitate conversation.

Do not lean or hang on a person’s wheelchair, scooter, walker or crutches.

Be aware that some wheelchair users may choose to transfer themselves out of their wheelchairs. Enable people who use crutches, canes or wheelchairs to keep them within reach.

Tip #3: People with Speech Impairments

Give your whole attention when talking to a person who has speech impairment.

Do not pretend to understand if you do not. Try rephrasing what you wish to communicate, or ask the person to repeat what you do not understand.

Do not raise your voice. Most speech impaired persons can hear and understand.

Tip #4: People with Vision Impairments

When greeting a person with vision impairment always identify yourself and introduce anyone else who might be present.

If the person does not extend their hand to shake hands, verbally extend a welcome.

When offering seating, place the person's hand on the back or arm of the seat. A verbal cue is helpful as well.

Let the person know if you move, leave or need to end the conversation.

Tip #5: Service Animal Etiquette

Do not touch the service animal, or the person it assists, without permission. Do not make noises at the service animal; it may distract the animal from doing its job. Do not feed the service animal, it may disrupt their schedule. Do not be offended if the person does not feel like discussing their disability or the assistance the service animal provides.

Over 12,000 people with disabilities use the aid of service animals. Although the most familiar types of service animals are guide dogs used by people who are blind, service animals assist persons who have other disabilities as well. Many disabling conditions are invisible. Therefore, every person who is accompanied by a service animal may or may not "look" disabled. A service animal is not required to have any special certification. A service animal is not a pet.

Tip #6: People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

If you need to attract the attention of a person who is deaf or hearing impaired, touch them lightly on the shoulder.

If the person lip-reads, look directly at them. Speak clearly at a normal pace. Do not exaggerate your lip movements or shout. Speak expressively because the person will rely on your facial expressions, gestures and eye contact.

Place yourself in a light source and keep your hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.

Shouting does not help and can be detrimental. Only raise your voice when requested. Brief, concise written notes may be helpful.

Most people who are deaf use American Sign Language (ASL). People who are deaf may rely on an interpreter when interacting with hearing people.

Tip #7: Sign Language Interpreters Etiquette

When speaking with a person who is deaf and using an interpreter talk directly to the person, not his or her interpreter. Likewise when a person who is deaf is speaking to you look at the person not his or her interpreter.