



Enhancing your Interactions with People with Disabilities

Focus on People First

As a leading agency serving people with developmental disabilities, MARC is dedicated to empowering people with disabilities in becoming full participants in our society.

We can all make this goal a reality by using language that reflects our respect for people with disabilities. While the language you use is important, it is equally important that you demonstrate your respect for people with disabilities through your behavior.

The most important thing to remember when you interact with people with disabilities is that they are people. Their disability is just one of the many characteristics they have. People with disabilities have the same needs we all do: first and foremost among them is to be treated with dignity and respect.

When you interact with people with disabilities, focus on their abilities, not their disabilities. People with disabilities are unique individuals who have a wealth of knowledge, skills, talents, interests, and experiences that add tremendous diversity, resourcefulness, and creative energy to our society.

Remember, people with disabilities may do things in different ways than people without disabilities but they can achieve the same outcomes.

General Disability Awareness Tips

Practice the Golden Rule

Treat everyone as you would like to be treated. Think of the person first, not their disability. Don't shy away from people with disabilities - relax and be yourself!

Always Ask Before Giving Assistance

Just because a person has a disability, don't assume they need or want your assistance. Never help someone without first asking them.

One woman recalls: "When I walked on crutches, I was once knocked down by two little old ladies who were going to 'help' me walk on an icy sidewalk. Without asking, they came up, grabbed me, threw me off balance, and down I went!"

Think Before You Speak

Avoid using labels when you speak - they are offensive to everyone, including people with disabilities. Always use people first language when writing about or speaking to people with disabilities. Examples of people first language are included on the front panel of this brochure.

Avoid Showing Pity or Being Patronizing

People with disabilities aren't victims. As a person in a wheelchair said, "I am not a wheelchair victim. Wheelchair victims are the people I run into with my footrest at the supermarket."

When you talk to a person with a disability, don't use pet names, such as "honey". It is also very disrespectful to pat people with disabilities on the head or talk down to them as though they were children.

Interacting with People with Disabilities

When you interact with people with disabilities, talk directly to them, not to their companions, aides, or interpreters.

Here are some ways to interact with people with specific types of disabilities:

- When you interact with someone who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, remember that some individuals may be able to hear, some may be able to lip read, while others prefer to use sign language or assistive technology. Ask them how they prefer to communicate.
- When you interact with someone who is blind or visually impaired, always introduce yourself and let them know when you are leaving. You may offer your arm or elbow as a guide if they request assistance but never push, pull or grab the individual. Don't pet or distract a guide dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety and is always working - it is not a pet!!
- When you interact with someone who uses a wheelchair, do not push, lean on, or hold the person's wheelchair. Try to put yourself at eye level when talking with someone in a wheelchair.
- When you interact with someone with a cognitive disability, speak to the person in clear, simple sentences. Be patient with them and give them time to communicate with you.
- When you interact with someone with a speech impairment, allow them as much time as they need to communicate. Be respectful and avoid trying to finish their sentences.

People First Language

Always use positive, people first language that empowers rather than marginalizes people with disabilities. Here are some examples of offensive language and language that should be used:

Offensive	Preferred
Birth defect	Person who is disabled since birth, born with a congenital disability
Cerebral palsied	Person who has cerebral palsy
Cripple	Person who needs mobility assistance
Deaf and dumb, deaf mute	Person who is deaf and does not speak
Deformed	Person who has a physical disability
Emotionally disturbed	Person with an emotional disability
Handicapped	Person with a disability
Hunchbacked	Person with a spinal curvature
Insane, deranged, deviant	Person with a mental illness
Midget, dwarf	Person who is small in stature
Mongoloid	Person who has Down Syndrome
Normal	Non-disabled, able-bodied
Retarded	Person with a cognitive disability
Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair

Disability Awareness of People with Developmental / Intellectual Disabilities

1. **Avoid the term mental retardation.** People with this disability prefer the term “developmental disability.” (Mental retardation is *one type* of developmental disability.)
2. **People with developmental disabilities are not “eternal children.”** These adults should be treated and spoken to in the same fashion as other adults.
3. **Like everyone else, people with developmental disabilities are extremely diverse in their capabilities and interests.** Avoid stereotypes (such as the

assumption that all people with developmental disabilities enjoy doing jobs that are repetitive, or want to work in fast food or supermarkets).

4. **Many people with developmental disabilities can read and write.** Don't assume that the person does not have academic skills, such as reading, writing, and the ability to do mathematics. While an individual's disability may significantly impact these areas, many people have at least some level of these academic skills.
5. **Even if a person's academic skills are limited, he/she still has much to share and contribute.** A lack of academic skills does not mean that people don't have ideas and thoughts which are of value. Provide opportunities for people with limited academic skills to contribute verbally, and take what they have to say seriously. Ensure that people who have difficulties reading or writing have equal access to written materials (for example, by taping them, or having someone review the materials with them orally).
6. **Giving instructions.** People with developmental disabilities can understand directions if you take your time and are patient in giving the instructions. When giving instructions, proceed slowly, and ask the person to summarize the information to ensure that it has been understood. You also may have to repeat yourself when providing instructions, in order for the individual to take in all the information you are giving them.
7. **Don't defer to the staff person or caregiver.** When a person with a developmental disability is accompanied by another person such as a staff person, caregiver, or family member, don't defer questions and comments to them. Speak directly to the person with the disability, and allow the person to speak for him/herself.
8. **People with developmental disabilities may be anxious to please.** During an interview, the person may tell you what she thinks you want to hear. In certain situations, such as a doctor's examination, it can have grave consequences if your interview technique is not effective. Questions should be phrased in a neutral way to elicit accurate information. Verify responses by repeating each question in a different way.

MARC provides day services in 5 centers in Dane County that include personal care, education, vocational training, recreation, social interaction and integration, nutrition, and sensory stimulation. Traditional PT, OT, and SLP services are also available. Our supported employment and production services offer individuals with developmental disabilities an opportunity to earn a paycheck while enjoying the pride, camaraderie and sense of accomplishment that comes with having a job. Currently MARC supports nearly 200 adults at more than 130 community job sites. Call us for a tour!

Note: Much of this material is adapted from "Interacting with People with Disabilities - An Etiquette Handbook", published by the Region VI Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program, Hot Springs, AR as well as the United Spinal Association Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities. <http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf>

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