



Disability Etiquette Guidelines

Introduction

Like everyone, people with disabilities expect and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. People with disabilities are not conditions or diseases and identifying people with disabilities solely by their disabilities is often perceived as offensive. For example, a person is **not** an “epileptic” but a “person who has epilepsy.” Hence, people with disabilities prefer to be referred to in person, print or broadcast media as people with disabilities.

A **disability** is a condition caused by an accident, trauma, genetics, or disease that may limit a person's mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function. Some people have more than one impairment. A **handicap** is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person, regardless of whether that person has a disability. For example, some people with disabilities use wheelchairs. Stairs, narrow doorways and curbs are handicaps imposed upon people with disabilities who use wheelchairs.

People with disabilities have a right to participate in all aspects of City programs, activities, and services. Please familiarize yourself with this document and help the City create a welcoming environment for people with disabilities.

Basic Points of Etiquette

1. Avoid asking personal questions about someone's disability. If you must ask, be sensitive and show respect. If the person declines to discuss it, do not probe.
2. Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to do or say something.
3. Ask before you help. Just because someone has a disability, do not assume he or she needs help. If the setting is accessible, people with disabilities can usually get around fine. Adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people. Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it, and if he or she does want help, ask how before you act. Be polite and patient when offering assistance, and **wait** until your offer is accepted. Listen or ask for specific instructions.
4. When planning a meeting or other event, try to anticipate specific accommodations a person with a disability might need. If a barrier cannot be avoided, let the person know ahead of time.
5. Do not make assumptions. People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Do not make decisions for them about participating in any activity. Depending on the situation, it could be discrimination to exclude people because of a presumption about their limitations.

When Speaking or Writing about Disability

1. Refer to a person's disability only when necessary and appropriate.
2. Put the person first.
 - Say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.”
 - Say “people with disabilities” rather than “the disabled.”
 - For specific disabilities, saying “person with Tourette syndrome” or “person who has cerebral palsy” is usually a safe bet.
 - Still, individuals have their own preferences. If you are not sure what words to do, then feel free to ask.
3. The following terms should be **avoided** in a disability context, because they are perceived as offensive and disempowering:

invalid	crippled
wheelchair-bound	victim
defect	suffers from
handicapped	a patient

 - For instance, say “person with AIDS” instead of “AIDS victim” or “person who suffers from AIDS.”
4. Avoid terms that imply that people with disabilities are overly courageous, brave, special, or superhuman. For example, many people with disabilities dislike jargon and euphemistic terms like “physically challenged” and “differently abled.”

When Meeting and Talking with a Person Who Has a Disability

1. A handshake is NOT a standard greeting for everyone. When in doubt, **ask** the person whether he or she would like to shake hands with you. A smile along with a spoken greeting is always appropriate.
2. Speak directly to the person with a disability, not just to the ones accompanying him or her.
3. Do not mention the person's disability, unless he or she talks about it or it is relevant to the conversation.
4. Treat adults as adults. Do not patronize or talk down to people with disabilities.
5. Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort.
6. Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase, or offer a pen and paper for the person to communicate by writing.
7. It is okay to use common expressions like “See you later” or “I'd better be running along.”
8. Relax. Anyone can make mistakes. Offer an apology if you forget some courtesy. Keep a sense of humor and a willingness to communicate.

When Meeting Someone Who Has a Disability that Affects Learning, Intelligence, or Brain Function

1. Keep your communication simple. Rephrase comments or questions for better clarity.
2. Stay focused on the person as he or she responds to you.
3. Allow the person time to tell or show you what he or she wants.

When Interacting with a Person Who Uses a Wheelchair

1. Do not push, lean on, or hold onto a person's wheelchair unless the person asks you to. The wheelchair is part of his or her personal space.
2. Try to put yourself at eye level when talking with someone in a wheelchair. Sit or kneel in front of the person.
3. Rearrange furniture or objects to accommodate a wheelchair before the person arrives.
4. Offer where accessible restrooms, telephones, and water fountains are located.
5. When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, consider distance, weather conditions, and physical obstacles (e.g. curbs, stairs, steep hills, etc.).

When Talking with a Person Who is Deaf or Uses a Hearing Aid

1. Let the person take the lead in establishing the communication mode, such as lip-reading, sign language, or writing notes.
2. Talk directly to the person, even when a sign language interpreter is present.
3. If the person lip-reads, face him or her directly. Speak clearly, with a moderate pace.
4. With some people, it may help to simplify your sentences and use more facial expressions and body language.
5. Many people who are Deaf communicate with sign language and consider themselves to be members of a cultural and linguistic minority group. They refer to themselves as Deaf with a capital "D," and may be offended by the term "hearing impaired." Others may not object to the term, but in general, it is safest to refer to people who have hearing loss but who communicate in spoken language as "hard of hearing" and to people with profound hearing loss as D/deaf.

When Talking to a Person with a Disability that Affects Speech

1. Pay attention, be patient, and wait for the person to complete a word or thought. Do not finish it for the person.
2. If you do not understand, then ask the person to repeat what is said. Tell the person what you heard and see if it is close to what he or she is saying.
3. Be prepared for various devices or techniques used to enhance or augment speech. Do not be afraid to communicate with someone who uses an alphabet board or a computer with synthesized speech.

Interacting with a Person Who is Blind or Has a Disability that Affects Vision

1. When greeting the person, identify yourself and introduce others who may be present.
2. Do not leave the person without excusing yourself first.
3. When asked to guide someone with a vision disability, never push or pull the person. Allow him or her to take your arm, then walk slightly ahead. Point out doors, stairs, or curbs, as you approach them.
4. As you enter a room with the person, describe the layout and location of furniture, etc.
5. Be specific when describing the location of objects. (e.g. "There is a chair three feet from you at eleven o'clock.")
6. Do not pet or distract a guide dog. The dog is responsible for its owner's safety and is working. It is not a pet.

Questions?

Contact ADA Programs Division at adaprograms@oaklandca.gov or (510) 238-5219.