Disability Etiquette
Focus on the Person, Not the Disability

joni&friends™

The Purpose of Disability Etiquette

Unlike etiquette for taking tea with the Queen of England, disability etiquette is full of exceptions. There are no hard-and-fast rules. But guidelines, like handrails on a staircase, give people a greater degree of confidence to step forward boldly. Uncertainty about norms and appropriate language may paralyze someone and prevent them from entering into a friendship with a person with a disability! These recommendations should not be seen as barriers that restrict, but guidelines that empower! This guide is far from exhaustive, but as you use good judgment and ask heartfelt questions, you will find friendship with a new circle of people.

People First

Begin by using "people-first language," putting the emphasis on the individual, not on the disability. It's a subtle difference but speaks volumes! For example, say, "the woman who is blind," rather than "the blind woman." A people-first focus also includes how we talk to people with disabilities. Talk directly with adults and children with disabilities, rather than "through" spouses or caregivers. Talk "with" and not "at" an individual using age-appropriate language and tone.

Like any relationship, time spent together builds trust and mutual understanding. The key is honoring the other person's preferences and reflecting God's heart for people of all abilities.

Engaging People with Particular Disabilities…

Visual Impairments
- Let the individual initiate a handshake or invite them to shake your hand. Otherwise they may be startled by an unexpected touch.
- Announce your arrival and departure, letting them know who you are until they can recognize your voice. Don't leave someone talking to themselves or force them to ask who they're talking to.
- When walking together, guide—don't pull. Allow them to hold on to your elbow or arm, rather than holding theirs. Or, put your hand on their shoulder. Ask them which side they prefer to be guided from.
- Don't assume! Ask, "How can I help you best?" Or, "May I help you across the street?"
- Communicate details such as approaching staircases, which side the handrail is on, and when you are nearing the last step.
- If they have a guide dog, do not touch or distract the dog unless you have permission. Guide dogs are often trained to be "on the clock" while wearing their harness.
- Vague statements such as "over there" or "right here" are not helpful. "To the left of your hand" or "right in front of you, waist high" are useful.
- Details matter, so ask if they'd like you to describe your surroundings, particularly the layout of the room, any upcoming obstacles and terrain, especially when moving onto grass, gravel, or a wet surface.

Ambulatory Impairments

- Be aware of the environment! Make sure wheelchair users have enough room to move freely.
- Treat their wheelchair as an extension of their body. It is not something to learn on, sit on, hang things on, or touch without asking.
- Do not assume that the individual needs you to push his or her wheelchair.
- Before helping someone out of a wheelchair, set the brake and turn off any power controllers.
- When speaking with someone in a wheelchair, be mindful of how high you are relative to their eye level. Standing further away, sitting in a chair next to them, or even kneeling can help alleviate neck stress.

Hearing Impairments

- Face the individual and speak at normal pace and pitch.
- Be sure the light accentuates your face and does not glare in the individual's eyes.
- Attract the individual's attention before trying to communicate.
- Use meaningful hand and body gestures.
- Remember, for those hard of hearing or fully deaf, language is largely a visual activity. If they can't see your mouth, they can't "hear" you!

Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Autism is a spectrum. If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism!
- Individuals with autism may be apprehensive about social interaction.
- Individuals with autism like predictable routines. Tell them how long the current activity will last and what is coming next.