



Talking to someone with a disability is just like talking to anyone else. But occasionally, you might feel you are saying or doing the wrong thing. The following are some basic tips for spending time and communicating with individuals with disabilities, as compiled from helpful resources on the [United Cerebral Palsy](#) and the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association websites.

General etiquette guidelines

If you are having a conversation with someone with a disability, it's a good idea to:



Use the same tone with everyone you talk to. Talk to the individual with a disability the same way you would to someone without a disability.

If you are introduced to someone with a disability, shake hands as you normally would if the person is able; otherwise you may want to touch the person on the arm or shoulder to greet them. Note that it's inappropriate to excessively touch the person or their equipment (wheelchairs, canes, etc.). Grabbing or touching someone with a disability might hinder their movement, balance, or comfort.

Talk directly to the person with a disability; communicating about that person to their companion or assistant (if present) can be insulting.

If you're not sure what to do in a situation regarding someone with a disability (you feel you're in their way, you worry you aren't communicating in the best way, etc.), just ask.



If you make a mistake or say the wrong thing, apologize and move on.

Ask before providing help! Assuming someone can't complete a task on their own can be insulting. According to Tiffany Carlson, who wrote a piece for [HuffPost](#) on the subject, "We know when to ask for help. Just wait for us to speak up" (3).

Don't seek information about the person's disability unless they offer it. It is not their responsibility to educate you.

Be aware of the social implications of the language you use. For instance, saying that someone is an "inspiration" might not be the best idea, because, as Carlson says, this can "have a negative effect, reminding us how different people still think we are" (3).

Be friendly and patient! If someone asks for help, help in any way possible.

Focus on the individual, not on their disability.

Communicating with people with cognitive disabilities

If you're having a conversation with someone who has a cognitive disability, the following tips may be helpful:

Be specific without being overly simplistic.

Listen to the person's responses so that you can adjust your communication method if necessary.

Treat adults with cognitive disabilities as you would other adults.

Repeat yourself when necessary and allow time for the information to be processed.

Look for cues from the person, but don't assume they are trying to cut the conversation off if they look distracted. Some people with cognitive disabilities can appear distracted when they are truly listening intently to what you are saying.

Be flexible, patient, respectful, and supportive.

Communicating with people with speech disabilities

If you're having a conversation with someone who has a hearing or speech disability, you may want to:

Ensure that you have the person's attention before you start to speak (a wave or signal is a good way to establish that you'd like to speak with them).



Speak clearly and expressively, but do not exaggerate words.

Speak in a normal tone and at a normal volume unless they request that you speak louder or softer.

Ask them to repeat or write down sentences if you don't understand what they are trying to say to you. Don't pretend to understand if you really don't. According to Judith Lesner, whose son has speech differences, "If you explain you are having a hard time understanding him, he will not clutch at his heart and fall over in shock... you will not be embarrassing him or yourself by bringing it up. What is not OK is nodding your head with a blank look on your face pretending you are understanding what he is saying" (4).

Give the person your undivided attention and allow them time to respond to you. Lesner adds that, for her son with speech differences, "You have to be totally present... you have to pay close attention to be able to understand him" (4).

If you are hoping to obtain an answer to a question, try asking it in a way that is easily answered (with a brief answer or a nod). Don't oversimplify your speech in general, however, because that can be insulting.

Ask the person how they would prefer to communicate with you:

If the person has an interpreter, speak slowly so that he or she can keep up with what you are saying.

To help them read your lips (if applicable), face the light, keep your hands and other objects away from your mouth, and maintain eye contact.

Try using sign language if you both know some.

If they would like you to write words down for them, do it without speaking aloud so that they don't have to try to read the words and your lips at once.

Different people have different social and communication preferences, so it's always a good idea to ask them if you feel you're doing or saying the wrong thing.

Sources:

Disability Etiquette. (n.d.). Retrieved September 15, 2018, from <https://www.ucp.org/resource-guide/disability-etiquette/>



Interacting with People with Disabilities: Etiquette Tips and Guidelines

Judy Cohen, The Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association. (n.d.). *Disability Etiquette: Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities*[Brochure]. Author. Retrieved September 15, 2018, from [https://ada.osu.edu/designguidance/disability_ettiquite.pdf](https://ada.osu.edu/designguidance/disability_etiquite.pdf)

Carlson, Tiffany. (2013, July 15). How To Talk To A Person With Disabilities Without Sounding Like An A-Hole. Retrieved September 17, 2018, from

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/15/disability-etiquette_n_3600181.html

Lesner, J. (2017, July 10). 4 Tips on How to Talk to My Son With a Speech Difference.

Retrieved September 17, 2018, from

<https://themighty.com/2017/07/how-to-speak-to-my-son-hard-to-understand-cerebral-palsy/>