

This brochure is produced as a service of the Tennessee Disability Coalition, a statewide alliance of advocacy, planning, service provider and professional organizations committed to influencing society to *value, include, and support* people with disabilities.



TENNESSEE DISABILITY COALITION

480 Craighead St., Suite 200  
Nashville, TN 37204  
615-383-9442 (voice)  
615-292-7790 (tty/tdd)  
615-383-1176 (fax)  
coalition@tndisability.org

**The Coalition is a member of Community Shares, a funding federation supporting social justice and social change organizations in Tennessee.**

A MEMBER OF



## Disability Etiquette



## How to interact with people who have disabilities

### 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. Don't mention the person's disability, unless he or she talks about it or it is relevant to the conversation.
4. Treat adults as adults. Don't 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 him or her a pen and paper.
7. It is okay to use common expressions like "see you soon" 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 with 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 you are 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 to tell 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 (curbs, stairs, steep hills, etc.)

### 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 and with a moderate pace.
4. With some people, it may help to simplify your sentences and use more facial expressions and body language.

### When meeting 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. Ask the person to repeat what is said, if you do not understand. 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. Don't 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 sight or vision...

1. When greeting the person, identify yourself and introduce others who may be present.
2. Don't leave the person without excusing yourself first.
3. When asked to guide someone with a sight 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. (*Example: "There is a chair three feet from you at eleven o'clock."*)
6. 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.



### Basic Points of Etiquette...

1. Avoid asking personal questions about someone's disability. If you must ask, be sensitive and show respect. Do not probe, if the person declines to discuss it.
2. Be considerate of the extra time it might take for a person with a disability to do or say something.
3. 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. Be respectful of the rights of people with disabilities to use accessible parking spaces.

## Don't let fear and uncertainty keep you from getting to know people with disabilities

Fear of the unknown and lack of knowledge about how to act can lead to uneasiness when meeting a person who has a disability.

Remember: a person with a disability is a **person with feelings**. Treat him or her as **you** would want to be treated.

You can't always see someone's disability. If a person acts unusual or seems different, **just be yourself**. Let common sense and friendship break down any barriers you may encounter.

Following the guidelines in this brochure may help prevent uncomfortable situations.

For more detailed guidelines about referring to people with specific disabilities, see the Coalition's brochure:  
*Talking About Disability...A Guide to Using Appropriate Language.*