



Disability Etiquette



Under Washington State Law, [RCW 49.60\(7\)](#) a disability means the presence of a sensory, mental or physical impairment that is (i) medically cognizable or diagnosable; or (ii) exists as a record or history; or (iii) is perceived to exist whether or not it exists in fact.

It is important to remember that each person is different and commonly-used etiquette rules do not apply to all persons with disabilities. If you are not sure about appropriate behaviors or words, the best policy is to ask the person with a disability with whom you are interacting.

GENERAL ETIQUETTE WHEN INTERACTING WITH PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES:

- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands even if the person has limited hand use or wears an artificial limb.
- For those who cannot shake hands, touch the person on the shoulder or arm to welcome and acknowledge their presence.
- Treat adults in a manner befitting adults. For example, call a person by his or her first name only when extending that familiarity to all others present.
- When talking with a person with a disability, look at and speak directly to the person rather than through a companion who may be along.
- Offer assistance. If the offer is accepted, listen to, or accept instructions.

PERSONS WHO HAVE A HEARING LOSS:

- Look directly at the person and speak clearly, naturally and slowly. Keep in mind that few people can read lips effectively.
- Do not shout at a person with a hearing loss. Written notes may help when needed.

- To get the attention of a person with a hearing loss, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Never throw things at the person.
- Show consideration by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping your hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when speaking.
- If an interpreter is present, speak directly to the person by maintaining eye contact with him/her, not the interpreter.

PERSONS IN WHEELCHAIRS:

- When talking with a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, sit down in a chair if possible.
- When giving directions, consider how distance, weather conditions, and physical obstacles such as stairs, curbs, and steep hills will affect the person's commute.
- Never patronize people using wheelchairs by patting them on the head.
- When addressing a person who uses a wheelchair, never lean on the person's wheelchair. The chair is part of the space that belongs to the person.

PERSONS WITH A VISUAL LOSS:

- Never pet a service animal without first getting the permission of the owner. The service animal is "working" and by petting it, you can distract it from its responsibilities to the owner.
- When greeting a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself and others who may be with you.
- When conversing in a group, give a vocal cue by announcing the name of the person to whom you are speaking.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice, indicate in advance when you will be moving from one place to another, and let it be known when the conversation is at an end.
- Do not shout at a person who is blind or visually impaired.
- Use specifics such as "left ten feet" when directing a person with a visual impairment.
- Allow a person with a visual impairment to take your arm (at or about the elbow). This will enable you to guide rather than propel or lead the person.

PERSONS WITH SPEECH DIFFICULTIES:

- Listen attentively when you're talking to a person who has a speech impairment.
- Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.
- Exercise patience rather than attempting to speak for a person with speech difficulty such as interrupting the person to finish their statement.
- When necessary, ask short questions that require short answers or a nod or shake of the head.
- Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so.