



COMPUTER SUPPORT STAFF TIPS FOR DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

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Introduction

Your attitude can make a big difference

One of the most difficult barriers people with disabilities face is negative attitudes and perceptions of other people. Sometimes those attitudes are deep-rooted prejudices, based in ignorance and fear. Sometimes they are just unconscious misconceptions that result in impolite or thoughtless acts by otherwise well-meaning people. In either case, they form an obstacle to acceptance and full participation in society for people with disabilities. The most insidious aspect of negative social attitudes is that persons with disabilities may actually integrate that perception into their self-image.

This pamphlet is not a list of strict rules and regulations. It's an attempt to foster understanding, clear up misperceptions and help you relate as a service provider, and as a person, to people with disabilities. Some support staff are part of an office designed to support the students with disabilities. Others are computer, technical staff with no training and little background working with people with disabilities and may feel unprepared to relate to these students. Disability is often perceived as a yes-or-no proposition. You either are disabled or you're not. The truth is that disability is a continuum. At one end are perfect people --not many of those around-- and at the other end are people with severe impairments. Most of us fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, but, we're all people and we all want to be treated with respect. You will be aware that the current "correct" way to talk about someone who has a disability not as a disabled person but as a person with a disability. The point is to view ourselves and others as persons first and as being able-bodied, impaired, disabled or whatever as a secondary characteristic.

Tips on dealing with people with disabilities

General tips

These first comments are general and will relate to most situations and all disability categories. Below will be information related to more specific disability types and concrete technologies to be supported.

- **DON'T ASSUME** a person with a disability needs your help. Ask before doing anything as it may be perceived as interfering rather than helping.
- **MAKE EYE** contact and talk directly to the person, not through the person's companion.
- **AVOID ACTIONS** and words that suggest the person should be treated differently. It's OK to invite a person in a wheelchair to go for a walk or to ask a blind person if he sees what you mean. These remarks are intended to be general comments and not necessarily meant literally.

TREAT PEOPLE with disabilities with the same respect and consideration that you have for everyone else.

Some Helpful tips for specific disability types

Visual Impairments

- **BE DESCRIPTIVE.** You may have to help orient people with visual impairments, and let them know what's coming up. If they are walking tell them if they have to step up or step down, let them know if the door is to their right or left, and warn them of possible hazards.
- **YOU DON'T** have to talk loudly to people with visual impairments. Most of them hear just fine.
- **OFFER TO READ** written information for a person with a visual impairment when appropriate.
- **IF YOU** are asked to guide a person with a visual impairment, offer him your arm, instead of grabbing his arm as the person holding your elbow will sense when you turn, step up or step down.
- Asking for the name of someone with a visual impairment and call them by name when talking to them.
- At the point you start talking to someone else, help the first person know you are no longer talking to them
- When walking away from a discussion with a student who is blind, instead of quietly vanishing, let them know you are leaving

Some people with a visual impairment may still have some functional vision. Others may have no light perception. Some adjust better to their disabilities than others. Each person is an individual.

Speech Impairments

- LISTEN PATIENTLY. If the person has trouble getting words, don't complete sentences for him or her unless he looks to you for help
- Politely asking people with the speech impairment to repeat themselves is acceptable
- Do not express frustration as the person already feels frustrated without your making it worse.
- DON'T PRETEND you understand what the person with a speech disability says just to be polite.
- ASK THE PERSON to write a word if you're not sure of what he is saying. This may be extremely important when dealing with technical information where clear, accurate communication can be crucial.

Hearing Impairments

- When you talk with persons with hearing impairments, face them so they can see your lips. Someone with limited hearing may depend on your lips to help them interpret what they hear. For those who have no hearing, they may be lip readers and your facing them is basic.
- SLOW the rate at which you speak when talking to a person with a hearing impairment.
- Pronounce your words distinctly.
- INCREASE THE LEVEL of your voice, but shouting is not necessary. Distinctness is as important or more important than voice volume.
- If the person is having trouble understanding you, never make the mistake of assuming that their problem is a mental processing problem.
- COMMUNICATE BY WRITING if necessary.
- If there is an interpreter with you, still face and talk to the person who is deaf and do not direct your comments at the interpreter.

Mobility Impairments

- TRY SITTING or crouching down to the approximate height of people in wheelchairs or scooters when you talk to them.
- DON'T LEAN on a person's wheelchair unless you have his permission --it's his or her personal space. We all feel uncomfortable when someone "invades" our space.
- GIVE A PUSH to a wheelchair user only when asked.
- BE AWARE of what is accessible and not accessible to people in wheelchairs such as high desks at reception and similar counters.
- Be sure that there is at least one computer table with adjustable height, and be certain that it can be operated by someone in a wheelchair.
- Be aware of the location of computer switches and the ports for connecting external devices.

Upper body motor impairments

Some people with upper body motor impairments may have lower body impairments requiring their using a wheelchair. Others may have no significant mobility problems. Their upper impairments may cause severe problems in using a computer which comes to the issues for computer support staff.

Someone will have to explore which adaptive devices will compensate for their particular upper body impairment. Essentially, the problems relate to the effective use of the keyboard or mouse. There are:

- a variety of computer mouse types
- track balls
- switches,
- one-handed keyboards,
- onscreen keyboards
- word prediction
- Voice recognition.
- Don't assume that the device that you think you would prefer will fit the needs of a particular person.
- Listen to them and be patient while they explore the alternatives.

Learning and cognitive Disabilities

This is a broad and sweeping category. It covers so many different issues that it is almost confusing to lump them together like this. Some have trouble inverting letters on a page. Some have trouble following complex auditory information. Others invert and scramble numbers. Many have trouble organizing the content they are learning. Scrambling the information in unrelated order will hinder understanding and really be a problem for memory. Help organizing information can be crucial. Often counselors train them to underline information with different colors to help with organizing and later locating information. However, for those of us without the problems, we frequently lose patience and rush to judgments about their intelligence or their seriousness as students. Look for opportunities to expand your awareness and take time to count to 10 before becoming frustrated.

DON'T ASSUME the person is not listening just because you are getting no verbal or visual feedback. Ask him if he understands or agrees.

DON'T ASSUME you have to explain everything to people with learning disabilities. They do not necessarily have a problem with general comprehension.

OFFER TO READ written material as sometimes being able to both see and hear information reinforces that information for them

Ask them to help you understand precisely the nature of their struggles as that will make them more willing to see you as non-judgmental

People with learning and cognitive disabilities benefit from some specific adaptive technologies, but they just as frequently are helped by mainstream technologies used by everyone but which they can use to compensate for some of the effects of their specific disability.

Major commercial applications include:

- Dragon Naturally Speaking
- TextHelp
- Wynn
- Kurzweil 3000

Some of the mainstream products include:

- Spell checkers
- Calendars

- Organizing software
- Concept mapping software
- Inexpensive or free software to turn text into synthetic speech

Finding resources

If you are primarily a computer staff person for whom supporting people with disabilities is new, your campus will have a department that serves students with disabilities. Staff in that office can provide you personal help both about people with disabilities and about the adaptive computer applications that they use. You can also do an Internet search for disabilities and either adaptive or assistive technology.

If you can obtain funding, there are several conferences that focus on technology and disabilities:

<http://www.csun.edu/cod>

<http://www.colorado.edu/ATconference>

EASI: Equal Access to Software and Information provides live Webinars, (both free and fee-based), and online courses that cover a broad spectrum of related topics. Anyone taking 5 of the courses can earn the Certificate on Accessible Information Technology.

Train the Trainer

This course is the one which relates most directly to computer support staff. It is scheduled for August 2011, and here are its 8 lessons:

- Introduction to training users with disabilities on adaptive computer technology
- OVERVIEW OF PERSONAL COMPUTER HARDWARE AND OPERATING SYSTEM
- TECHNOLOGY FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED CONSUMERS
- TECHNOLOGY FOR PERSONS WITH HEARING RELATED DISABILITIES
- Reading Support Technology For Persons With Learning Disabilities
- Writing Support Technology For Persons With Learning Disabilities
- Training Users with Motor Impairments (Voice Recognition, Onscreen Keyboards, track ball, etc.)
- Providing Institution-wide Awareness of the Needs of Users With Disabilities

Train the Trainer syllabus is: <http://easi.cc/workshops/train.htm>

Note on Service Dogs

Many people with visual or other impairments use service dogs to help them compensate for their disabilities. These dogs are workers, not pets, and they have jobs to do. Always ask permission before you interact with someone's dog. Do not pet the dog or divert its attention from its work.

Besides the guide dogs to help someone with a visual disability, people with motor impairments use service dogs to help in a number of ways including objects dropped on the floor. Those with hearing impairments use them to alert them to unusual sounds including a door bell.