Southeast Missouri State University
Disability Services

WORKING WITH STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Section IV: Disability Etiquette 101

- Offer assistance to a person with a disability but wait until your offer is accepted before you help. Listen to instructions the person may give.
- When giving directions to a person using a wheelchair, consider weather conditions, distance, and physical obstacles such as stairs, curbs, or steep hills.
- Use specific directions when directing a person with a visual impairment. If guidance is offered, allow that person to take your arm. This will enable you to guide rather than propel or lead the person.
- Be considerate of the extra time it may take for a person with a disability to get to a location or to get a task done.
- When planning events involving persons with disabilities, consider their needs before choosing a location. If insurmountable barriers exist, find another location or discuss the barriers with the person who is disabled beforehand.
- When talking to a person who has a disability, speak directly to that person, not through a companion. This includes sign language interpreters.
- Relax, don’t be embarrassed if you use common expressions such as “See you later” or “Gotta run,” that seem to relate to a person’s disability.
- To get the attention of a person who has a hearing problem, tap them on the shoulder or wave. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if they read lips. Not all people with hearing impairments can read lips. Those who do rely on facial expression and body language for understanding. Stay in the light and keep food, hands, and other objects away from your mouth. Shouting won’t help. Written notes will.
- When talking to a person using a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, place yourself at eye level with that person. This will spare both of you a sore neck. Leaning on a person’s wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on a person and is usually considered annoying and rude. The chair is a part of one’s body space.
- When greeting a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself and others. Remember to identify persons to whom you are speaking. Speak in a normal tone of voice and indicate when the conversation is over. Let them know when you move from one place to another.
- Give undivided attention when you talk to a person who has difficulty speaking. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting. Be patient; don’t speak for that person. When possible, ask short questions that require short answers. Repeat what you understand.
- Avoid attaching labels to people, whether they are disabled or not.
- When speaking about people with disabilities, portray them as they are in real life: as parents, employees, business owners, students, faculty, professionals, etc.
- Emphasize the uniqueness of all people rather than the differences. Your efforts can help to eliminate the “one of them vs. one of us” attitude toward people with disabilities.
- Use the word disability or accessibility rather than handicap.
- Place the person before the disability. Say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person,” and “student with a disability” rather than “disabled student.”
- Because a person is not a condition, avoid describing a person in such a manner. Don’t present someone as an “epileptic” or a “post-polio;” say a “person with epilepsy” or a “person who has had polio.”