

## Disability etiquette: Dos and don'ts

This quick guide provides some best practice tips for conversations about disability.



- Every person with a disability has an individual experience of how their impairment affects them. Therefore, don't make assumptions about how they want to be treated even if they have the same type of impairment as someone you have met before. **Just ASK!**
- Many people with disabilities live and work independently while others may require assistance. Making reasonable adjustments to enable participation is a legal requirement. Don't just assume a situation requires an adjustment, but equally be ready to discuss and provide it. **Just ASK!**
- Don't move or touch a person's mobility aid such as a wheelchair or cane unless asked to do so. If you're in any doubt... **Just ASK!**
- People with disabilities will prefer honesty and a genuine respect for their dignity, preferences and individuality. So if you're worried about how to behave or which language to use... **Just ASK!**



- Speak directly to a person with a disability and not their personal assistant, companion or interpreter.
- Position yourself at eye level when speaking with a person who is using a wheelchair, or of short stature. This prevents a person straining their neck or being talked down to. If possible find somewhere to sit rather than hunker down. That way it's comfortable for everyone.



- Identify yourself when speaking to someone with a visual impairment. Remember to inform the person if you are moving away.
- If needed, support a person with a visual impairment to orient themselves within a space, and audio describe any printed information, or non-auditory communication such as videos, role play or images. Don't leave things on the floor which could create a trip hazard.



- Approach someone with a hearing impairment from the side or in front so as not to startle them.
- Ask someone with a hearing impairment what their preferred method of communication is eg sign language or lip reading.
- When communicating with a person with a hearing impairment, maintain eye contact and speak clearly. Don't hold anything in front of your lips or use over-exaggerated expressions.
- If a sign language interpreter is present allow time for interpretation.



- Feel free to ask a person who has a speech difficulty to repeat themselves. They will be used to this and will appreciate that you value their contributions and ideas. Don't guess or nod comprehension when you have not understood what has been said.
- Speak clearly and in short sentences when communicating with a person with a learning disability. Don't be afraid to repeat or rephrase things to help give clarity. Don't be patronising, use a childish voice or expressions or exaggerate.

## Language dos and don'ts

The tips below on words or phrases to avoid and possible alternatives demonstrate our values. It is not about using politically correct language (that is covered on the **Quick guide on terminology**), it is about showing respect and maintaining dignity towards those with whom we work.

Avoid	Suggested alternative
The term 'suffer' – for example 'he suffers from epilepsy'.	'Has' or 'experiences' – for example 'he has epilepsy', as this is non-judgmental.
The term 'problem' – for example 'he has a mental health problem'.	'Difficulty' or 'challenge'. In this particular example it may be best to say 'he has a mental illness' or 'he has mild depression'.
The word 'only' can imply judgement if you're not careful – for example 'she can only sit on a till'.	Something like 'putting her solely on the till is the most effective use of her skills and abilities'.
Don't describe a person with a disability in terms of their condition – for example 'she is a diabetic'.	They are a person first. If you have to use a descriptive then say 'she has diabetes'.
Avoid 'mental handicap' as this is now considered offensive.	'Learning disability' is the term now used to describe a condition which results in an impaired intellectual ability.
Avoid terms such as 'wheelchair bound' or 'housebound' as these are judgmental.	Say 'uses a wheelchair' or 'doesn't leave the house' as these are factual.
'Crippled with' is still used to describe the effect of a disabling condition but not always appropriate.	Use phrases such as 'walks with sticks', 'uses a wheelchair' or 'has a condition which affects his mobility'.
Leaning on someone's wheelchair is imposing upon their personal space.	There isn't an alternative – just don't do it!

We would encourage you to talk to your colleagues about disability-related language and raise concerns if you have them. It's good to discuss any concerns rather than just guess.

### Quick links

- Differing Abilities have produced a great interactive etiquette quiz to help you make the best choice when meeting someone with a disability. [www.understandingdisability.org/Etiquette](http://www.understandingdisability.org/Etiquette)
- This is a short video from the D.C. Office of Disability Rights, discussing general rules of etiquette for interacting with people with disabilities. Watch it, it's hilarious! [www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/etiquette-interacting-with-people-with-disabilities](http://www.respectability.org/inclusion-toolkits/etiquette-interacting-with-people-with-disabilities)

#### A couple of context specific guides on terminology and etiquette:

- **England Athletics Factsheet on Disability Terminology:** a concise guide to terminology in sports
- **CBM Disability Inclusive Development Toolkit:** this toolkit includes a helpful section on language and communication (1.3) in the international development context