Do’s and Don’ts of Interaction

Sometimes it can be confusing knowing what etiquette is appropriate when interacting with people who have disabilities. Here’s a guide of do’s and don’ts for everyday situations:

**Do:**

- **Offer to shake hands when introduced.** People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
- **Treat adults as adults.** Never patronize those with disabilities by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- **Look at and speak directly to the person with a disability,** rather than through their companion, interpreter, or personal care attendant.
- **Offer assistance with sensitivity and respect.** If the offer is accepted, listen to, or ask for instructions (ex: a person with a visual impairment should take your arm at or above the elbow so you can guide rather than propel the person.)
- **Provide information in alternate means.** Offer visual, spoken, and written instructions/materials.
- **Listen attentively when talking with a person with a speech impairment.** Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting. Ask short questions that require short answers. If you have difficulty following, repeat what you understand.
- **Sit down when talking to a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes to place yourself at eye level with them.**
- **Identify yourself and others who may be with you when greeting a person who is blind.** 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.
- **Be descriptive when talking to a person who is blind.** Say, “The computer is about three feet to your left,” rather than “The computer is over there.”
- **Tap a person with a hearing loss on the shoulder or wave your hand to get their attention.** Look directly at the person and speak clearly and slowly. Show consideration by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping your hands away from your mouth when speaking. Avoid eating or chewing gum while speaking. Written notes are fine for short conversations.

**Don’t:**

- **Touch or lean on a person’s wheelchair without permission.** The chair is a part of the body space of the person who uses it.
- **Pet or distract a service animal in any way while they are working.**
- **Become embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as “See you later” that seem to relate to a person’s disability.** Relax! People with disabilities use these expressions, too.
- **Insist on helping if your offer is declined.** Continuing to help implies you believe they can’t complete the task.
- **Shout at a person with a hearing loss.** It may lessen the person’s ability to understand.
- **Use derogatory terms** like “retard”, “cripple”, or other hurtful words, even if someone else uses them. Only refer to a person’s disability if it’s relevant to the conversation.

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