

# Changing the Culture: Information and Experience for the Disability Resource Mentor

*A Guide to Language and Interactions That Are Inclusive And Respectful of Persons with Disability*

Put the person, not the disability, FIRST. Say "person with a disability" or "student who is deaf" when the disability is relevant to the conversation.

Generally it is not necessary to mention the disability when speaking about a person; i.e. "the artist gave an exhibition" rather than "the artist with a disability gave..."

Avoid categories such as "the blind" but rather say "students who are blind"

*Describe assistive devices as useful tools for the individual, not as extensions..."uses a wheelchair" is always preferable to "wheelchair bound" or "confined to crutches."*

Avoid emotional or degrading terms – NEVER SAY "afflicted with," "victim of," "suffers from," "pitiful," "cripple," "deformed," etc.

## *Distinguish between Disabilities and Handicaps:*

Disability applies to a person's functional limitation.	Handicap is a barrier in the environment
A person uses a hearing aid because of a disability	a handicap is when there is no relay system available in telephone network
A person uses a wheelchair because of a disability	A handicap is when the person faces stairs with no adjoining elevator and cannot go up or down a floor
A person uses extended time on an exam because of a reading/decoding disability	A handicap is when time to complete a task is so constricted that the person cannot demonstrate understanding of material.

Most people think of themselves as normal: therefore it is more appropriate use "non-disabled" and "disabled" when discussing groups of people.

*Adjectives are not nouns: "epileptic" describes an event, but a person has epilepsy or "seizure disorder." "People who are disabled" is preferable to "the disabled."*

**Avoid pity:** A person who uses a wheelchair is not a "wheelchair victim" (as one woman stated "I am not a wheelchair victim; wheelchair victims are the people I bump into with my footrest at the supermarket.")

Common Expressions such as "See you later" or "I've got to run" or "I heard that..." are not offensive to people with disabilities. Don't feel uncomfortable when they enter your conversation.

It's OK to offer to help someone with a disability, but wait until the offer is accepted and instructions are given before proceeding.

*Just as you would not touch or lean on a person, it is not polite to touch or lean on a person's wheelchair or crutches, unless you have their permission. NEVER pat a person on the head.*

**With Deaf or Hard of Hearing People:**

To get the person's attention, touch her lightly, wave your hand or use some other visual sign. If an interpreter is being used, speak to the person NOT the interpreter. Never say "Ask her to tell me about her experience." Rather, say "Tell me about your experience."

If the person is lip-reading, look directly at him, speak slowly and clearly, but do not exaggerate lip movements, and do not speak loudly. Speak expressively, because the person will use facial expression, gestures and body language to help to understand.

Keep food and hands (and moustaches, too) away from your mouth when speaking. Feel free to use written notes. Even the best lipreader will pick up less than half the message with vision alone.

**Treat people with disabilities as you would treat everyone else.**

Adults should be treated as adults. Avoid the hero concept ("he's so amazing"); likewise avoid the pitiful concept ("there but for the grace of God go I")

**Relate to the person first, not the disability....**

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(parts of this handout are adapted from a brochure entitled "Handicapping Language: A Guide for Journalists and the Public," Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services, June 1992)