



Disability Action in Islington

Guide to Disability Etiquette and Language

It is impossible to produce a definitive guide on disability language and etiquette. However, we hope that this guide will provide you with enough information to help you to feel confident and be competent in your interactions with disabled people. It has been produced in conjunction with local disabled people.

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Language

Whilst it is important to have a general understanding of words and phrases which give offence to disabled people, it is also interesting to note where these words come from and why they give offence. This list just provides a flavour and is not definitive.

- The term **the disabled** implies a homogeneous group separate from the rest of society.
- The term **the handicapped** is offensive to many disabled people because it has associations with 'cap in hand' and begging.
- Under the Social Model, the term **people with disabilities** is incorrect as we have impairments. We are people who are disabled by the environment, attitudes, stereotypes, etc.
- The term **Deaf and Dumb** is the granddaddy of all negative and offensive labels pinned on deaf and hard of hearing people. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, pronounced Deaf and hard of hearing people as "deaf and dumb" because he felt that deaf people were incapable of being taught, of learning, and of reasoned thinking. To his way of thinking, if a person could not use his/her voice in the same way as hearing people, then there was no way that this person could develop cognitive abilities.
- **Invalid** is an offensive word because this equates disability with illness and can be construed as 'not valid' or 'worthless'.
- **Wheelchair-bound** is also considered to be an offensive term as it suggests that a person is trapped by their wheelchair, when in fact a person's wheelchair represents freedom.

Language Guide

This is a general guide to appropriate and inappropriate language, but it is important to find out from the person you are speaking to how they prefer to refer to their impairment.

Do Say	Don't Say
Disabled people	The Disabled
Disabled people	People with disabilities
Disabled Person	Invalid
Impairments	Disabilities
Living with	Suffers from
Person with mental health issues	Mentally ill
People with learning difficulties	Mentally handicapped
Learning Difficulties	Learning Disabilities
D/deaf, deafened, hard of hearing (specify)	The deaf / Deaf and dumb
Blind/Visual Impairment (specify)	The Blind
Personal Assistant, Enabler, Support Worker	Carer
Access requirements	Special Needs
Accessible Toilet	Disabled Toilet
Blue Badge-holder parking	Disabled Parking
Wheelchair user	Wheelchair bound

General Etiquette and Common Courtesies

You will find that most of the following is common sense. However, we hope that the following lists provide you with greater confidence in your interactions with disabled people.

- Do not make assumptions about an individual's ability to do certain things. Disabled people develop their own methods of overcoming the everyday problems they encounter.
- Treat disabled people as you would treat any other person, i.e., as a woman, as a man, as a parent, as a worker.
- Do not be embarrassed if you use common expressions such as "see you later" or "Can I give you a hand?", then realise they may obliquely relate to a person's impairment.
- Do not assume that an offer of assistance will automatically be welcome. Offer it and wait until your offer is accepted. Even then, do not assume you know the best way of helping. Instead, listen to what the disabled person about their support needs.
- People are often tempted to address the disabled person's assistant (e.g. "Does he take sugar?"). This is insulting to the disabled person, so talk directly to them.
- Do relax, speak normally and stand in front to allow eye contact to be made, in the same way you would when talking to anyone else.

Specific Etiquette and Common Courtesies

People with mobility impairments

- When talking with a wheelchair user, either get a chair and sit down or ask if they prefer you to stand or crouch. If you do stand, do not tower over them so they get a stiff neck, but stand a little away so that you can have a conversation eye to eye, on an equal level.
- Prior to inviting wheelchair users to a building, obtain information about the access to that building. Provide the wheelchair user with the information, so that they can make a decision about whether or not the building will be accessible to them. If the building is not accessible you can then arrange for the meeting to take place in another location.
- A wheelchair is part of the body space of the person using it. Do not lean on it unless you would usually lean on the person themselves.
- If you wish to speak to the personal assistant of the wheelchair user, make sure that you do not place yourself in a position that excludes the disabled person from the conversation.
- In public places or offices, ensure that items are not left lying around on the floor. Make sure there are adequate spaces for people to get around and that access is safe for everyone.

People with visual impairments

- Identify yourself clearly, first of all, and introduce anyone else who is present and where he or she is placed in the room.
- Ask the person if they require any assistance and, if so, how best this should be provided.
- When offering a handshake, say something to indicate that you wish to shake hands.
- When meeting someone out of their home or in their workplace, ask what central point they are familiar with and arrange to meet them there. Please ensure you arrive at the agreed time.
- When offering a seat, speak the person through the process (e.g. chair on right, left, back of you, etc) and place the person's hand on the back or the arm of the chair, so that they are aware of the position of it.
- At the end of a conversation, do not just leave. Say when you wish to end a conversation or when you are moving away.
- If you are running a meeting or an event that visually impaired people will be attending, make sure that materials are prepared in advance in accessible formats so that everyone has the same access to the information available.
- Always say what you want, as gestures are useless communication tools to most visually impaired people.
- Always talk directly to the visually impaired person and not to his or her guide dog or support worker.
- Do not interact with the guide dog without prior agreement of the visually impaired person. These are working dogs and some people prefer that you do not pet them.

For further information: www.rnib.org.uk provides guidance on producing documents which are accessible to people who have visual impairment.

People with speech impairments

- Make eye contact and be especially attentive with a person who has difficulty speaking or who uses a communicator.
- Wait quietly and listen whilst the person talks.
- Resist the temptation to speak for the person, or to finish their sentences.
- Some people may prefer to be asked questions that require either a short answer, or a nod or shake of the head. Offer this option if it is appropriate to the situation or ask if they will write down words or phrases you are having difficulty understanding.
- Be sure you understand fully what the person means before making any assumptions.
- It can be helpful to say what you have understood and ask the person to confirm or clarify.
- If you don't understand what is being said, don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask the person to repeat it maybe several times.
- Don't make assumptions about the person's hearing or intellect just because he or she has difficulty speaking.
- If noisy, take account of this and, if possible, move to a quieter area.

People who are D/deaf or hard of hearing

- Some people who are Deaf and who are sign language users do not consider themselves to be disabled people. They consider themselves to be a linguistic minority, and will write 'Deaf' with a capital 'D'. British Sign Language (BSL) was recognised as an official UK language in 2004.
- If you are going to have a meeting with a Deaf person who is a BSL user, it is important to organise a qualified and registered BSL interpreter.
- Some people with hearing impairments are not BSL users. They might use a combination of lip reading / lip speakers or might wear hearing aids. It is therefore important to make sure you establish what their preferred method of communication is and ensure that this is made available.
- The usual etiquette for getting someone's attention is to tap them lightly on the arm, between the shoulder and the elbow. Flicking the lights is seen as acceptable within the community, at large meetings or conferences, but would not necessarily be perceived as acceptable for a hearing person to do this, particularly if it is a one-to-one or small meeting.
- Always speak directly to the person, never to a third party
- Speak in a natural, conversational tone. It is not necessary to speak loudly or to over-enunciate.
- Be aware that effective communication via written notes has limitation – BSL has a very different structure from English and Deaf people may therefore have limited literacy skills in English.

- Make direct eye contact. Natural facial expressions and gestures will provide important information to your conversation.
- When talking, do not allow your face and mouth to be obscured. Avoid holding things near your mouth, eating, smoking or waving your hands in front of your face - these things can be distracting.
- Bright and dark places can be a barrier to clear communication. Good lighting is important, but keep in mind the glare factor and do not stand in front of a bright window.
- Ensure that background noise is kept to a minimum.
- If a person is lip reading, speak clearly and slowly but do not exaggerate your speech. Be aware that lip reading has its limitations, as many words look the same on the lips, and even the best lip reader would only be able to lip read 50 - 60% of what is being said.
- If a word or phrase is not understood, rephrase by using different words with the same meaning.
- Changing the topic of conversation abruptly can cause confusion. Use transitional phrases between topics, such as 'let's talk about exams now'.

Working with Sign Language Interpreters

- If a person uses a BSL interpreter, address your comments and questions to the Deaf person, not the interpreter.
- Always speak in a natural, conversational tone. The interpreter will tell you if something needs to be repeated or if you need to slow down.
- Normally the interpreter sits opposite the Deaf person. Depending on the situation, however, the person will be able to advise on the best arrangement for effective communication.
- Interpreting is physically and mentally demanding, so plan for frequent breaks.
- It is useful to provide any written material to the interpreter in advance of a meeting so that they can familiarize themselves with details about the meeting.

People with Learning Difficulties

- Don't make assumptions.
- Position yourself at the same level.
- Position yourself so that the person can see your face.
- Keep your hands away from your face.
- Use as much Makaton as possible regardless of it reciprocation.
- Never shout.
- Use simple words and sentences.
- Always check information has been understood.
- Minimise background noise wherever possible.
- Don't use jargon.
- Don't talk too fast.
- Take time to listen and understand.
- Explain things very clearly.
- Speak to the person and not their support worker.
- Don't be afraid to ask people to repeat themselves. Tell them that you did not understand.
- Don't pretend that you have understood what was said when in fact you didn't.
- Don't assume that people will be able to find another point of advice. You might need to give some extra support.
- Go back over the information. Say the main points again.
- Use a variety of information support tools such as pictures. For example, draw a clock with time when arranging a meeting.

People with Assistance Dogs

'Assistance dog' means any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal trained to do work for the benefit of a disabled individual with an impairment that can be either obvious or hidden. For disabled people, assistance dogs can make possible the things that are sometimes taken for granted. Assistance dogs can do a range of work, from the obvious (like guiding a visually impaired person) to the more fundamental (like the accumulated benefit of helping someone establish structure and routine in their day). Assistance dogs are each trained to work in a unique way, depending on the needs of the owner.

Etiquette

In general

When you meet a person with an assistance dog, please remember that the dog is working, and that distractions to the dog have the potential to jeopardize the working assistance dog team.

A few specifics

- Always speak to the person first.
- Do not make distracting noises aimed at the assistance dog.
- Do not touch the assistance dog without asking permission, even if it approaches you first.
- Do not communicate with the dog using prolonged eye contact.
- Do not feed the assistance dog.
- Do not ask personal questions about the handler's disability or impairment, or intrude on his/her privacy.

- Don't be offended if the handler declines to chat about the assistance dog (although some owners don't mind talking about their dog if they have the time).
- Do not make assumptions about the handler's impairment, intelligence, feelings or capabilities.
- Remember that as long as an assistance dog is present in the workplace – it is working and on the job (even if the handler appears to be on a coffee break!) unless the handler informs you otherwise.