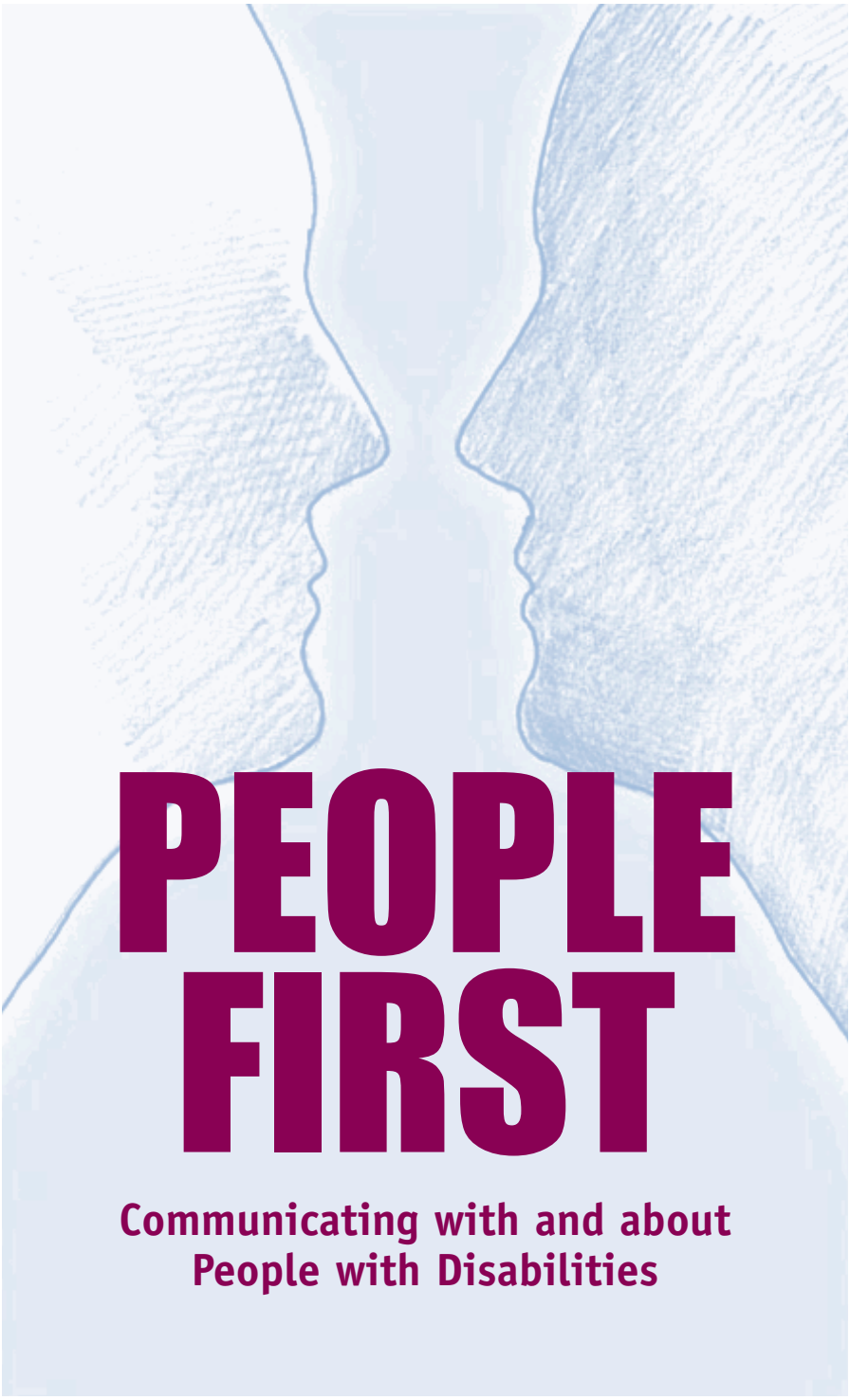


PEOPLE FIRST

Communicating with and about People with Disabilities

You notice a person who is blind and needs help. How do you make your presence known? What assistance do you offer?

You meet someone who uses a wheelchair. Where should you stand while talking?

You have a question for a person with a disability, who is with a friend. To whom should you address the question?

We all find ourselves in situations in which we don't know what to say or do. We may meet someone who moves or acts differently, and wonder how we should react. When interacting with people with disabilities, its important to remember that they are people first. They want to be appreciated, respected and productive.

Recent changes in civil rights laws have helped people with disabilities pursue employment, recreation and education opportunities in the mainstream of community life.

As a result, attitudes toward people with disabilities have also begun to change. This is a start toward creating a truly integrated society; one in which people of all abilities live and work together.

Communicating with People with Disabilities

1. If you offer assistance to a person with a disability, wait until the offer is accepted and then listen to or ask for instructions.

If you are asked to assist a person who uses a wheelchair up or down a curb, ask if the person prefers to be facing forward or backward. Hold the push handles securely and keep the chair tilted back when ascending or descending.

When guiding a person who has a visual impairment, walk alongside and slightly ahead. Let the person hold your arm so your body's motion lets the person know what to expect. On stairs, guide the person's hand to the bannister or handrail. When seating, place the person's hand on the back of the chair or arm. Avoid escalators and revolving doors, which may be disorienting and dangerous. Never distract a "seeing eye" or service dog.

2. **When speaking for a length of time to a person who uses a wheelchair or crutches, place yourself at eye level with that person.**

   It's not polite to talk down to that person.

3. **When talking to a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.**

4. **When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands.**

   A person with limited hand use or who wears an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is also an acceptable greeting.

5. **When meeting or speaking to someone who is visually impaired, always identify yourself before speaking.**

   When in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking, as well as yourself.

6. **Treat adults as adults.**

   Address people with disabilities by their first names only after they have given permission or when extending the same familiarity to others. Also, never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.

7. **Avoid leaning on or hanging onto a person's wheelchair.**

   It's similar to leaning or hanging onto a person. The chair is part of the personal space of the person who uses it.

8. **Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking.**

   Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for that person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod or shake of the head. Don't pretend to understand if you are having difficulty. Instead, repeat what you understand, and allow the person to elaborate.

9. **To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand.**

   Look directly at the person, and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. For those people who do read lips, place yourself in their direct view and keep hands and food away from your mouth when speaking.

   If a person has a hearing impairment, avoid shouting. Hearing aids make sound louder not clearer.

10. **Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted common phrases, such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about that?," that seem to relate to a person's disability.** Chances are the person will understand.

Communicating About People with Disabilities

"Handicapped man confined to a wheelchair..."
"A girl stricken with cerebral palsy..."

The use of negative words can create incorrect perceptions of people with disabilities. Such negative attitudes are often the most difficult barriers for people with disabilities to overcome. Even the word "handicap" is considered unacceptable by most people with disabilities because of the word's origin. "Handicap" is derived from "cap in hand," a phrase associated with beggars.

When describing a person with a disability, refer to the person first. Rather than saying or writing "blind man" or "afflicted with blindness" refer to "a person with visual impairment or "a person who is blind."

This also applies when you are describing a group of people with disabilities. Do not label a group of individuals as "The disabled"; which puts the focus on their disabilities. "People with disabilities" or "individuals who use wheelchairs" places **people first**.

Use respectful and descriptive words. Examples of acceptable descriptions include "a person who is..." , "a person with a..." or "person who has..."

- Blind/visual impairment/blindness;
- cerebral palsy;
- communication disorder/speech impairment;
- deaf/deafness;
- developmental disability;
- disability;
- epilepsy;
- hearing impairment;
- paraplegia;
- psychiatric disability;
- seizure disorder;
- inability to speak; and,
- wheelchair-user

Try to avoid words and descriptions that have become outdated, inappropriate and do not put the person first:

"Afflicted" is a negative term suggesting hopelessness.

"Confined to a wheelchair." People are not imprisoned in wheelchairs. Individuals use wheelchairs to move about.

"Crippled" implies someone who is pitiful and unable to do anything.

"Deaf and dumb" and "deaf-mute" are outdated terms once used to describe people who could neither hear nor speak. Many people who are deaf or hard of hearing can speak, and many people with speech impairments can hear.

"Gimp" once used to refer to someone who walked with a limp, is outdated and derogatory.

"Poor" describes a lack of money or someone to be pitied.

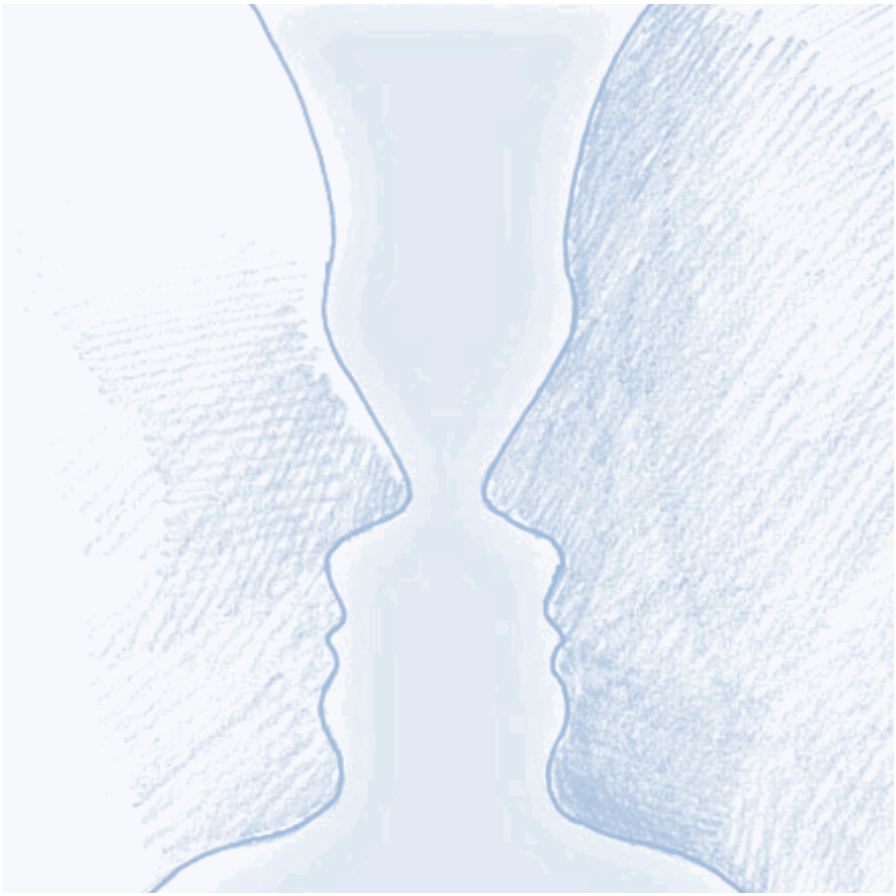
"Retard" and "retarded" are unacceptable terms. Certain disabilities may make people appear awkward. This does not mean the individual has an itellectual disability.

"Spastic." People should not be labeled because they lack coordination as a result of physical or neurological impairments.

"Suffering." To say that someone suffers from a disability implies that the disability causes constant pain. This is not always true.

"Unfortunate" implies unlucky or unsuccessful.

"Victim" is a person affected by an uncontrollable force or person. Individuals with disabilities are not helpless victims.



For more information about people with disabilities and wellness issues, contact the New York State Department of Health, Disability and Health Program at (518) 474-2018.

Adapted from "*Interacting with People with Disabilities,*" Indiana Governor's Planning Council for People with Disabilities; "*The Ten Commandments for Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities,*" United Cerebral Palsy; and materials from the New York State Commission on Quality of Care and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities.

This publication is part of "People First," a health promotion series for people with disabilities, their families, friends and health care providers.

State of New York
Department of Health

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10/08