

Basic tips for communicating with people with disability

1. General

- Speak to a person with a disability as you would speak to anyone else.
- If a person with disability is accompanied by another person, you should still speak directly to the person with disability.
- Put the person before the label of disability. For example, use the term 'a person with disability' rather than 'a disabled person'.
- Avoid negative phrases such as 'suffers from', 'handicapped' and 'crippled'. Use the phrase 'people who use a wheelchair' rather than 'wheelchair bound'.
- If you think someone might need assistance, don't try to assume what it is they need. Ask the person if there is anything you can do to assist them. If they say no, simply accept this and move on. If they say yes, allow the person to tell you what they need.
- Avoid asking questions about a person's disability unless this is absolutely necessary for the service you are providing. People with disability are often treated as objects of curiosity and are subjected to intrusive and probing questions that other members of the public would never be subjected to. If you recognise the person before the label of disability that person may carry, these questions will become irrelevant.
- If necessary, move to a quiet space if the environment is noisy or distracting
- If you are asking a question, be patient and don't assume the person has not understood the question just because they don't respond straight away.

2. Communicating with people with a physical disability

- Remember that someone's personal space can include their wheelchair and crutches. Don't touch or push a person's wheelchair, and don't move their crutches or walking stick without their permission.
- When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair, try to find something to sit on to be at eye level with them.

3. Communicating with people with a vision impairment

- When you meet people who have a vision impairment, always address them by name and introduce yourself.
- Speak clearly and in a normal voice – there is no need to raise your voice.
- Remember that people with vision impairment can't rely on the same visual cues as people without a vision impairment. Make sure you verbalise any thoughts or feelings. When communicating by email, describe any images you include.
- If a person is accompanied by a guide dog, don't pat it, feed it or distract it while it's in a harness. A dog in a harness is working to support its owner.
- When you enter or leave a room, say something to make sure that the person who has a vision impairment won't be embarrassed by speaking to an empty space.

4. Communicating with people with a hearing impairment

- Gain the person's attention before speaking. Try a gentle tap on the shoulder, a wave or some other visual signal to get the person's attention.
- Face the person directly and maintain eye contact.
- Make sure your mouth is visible – don't cover it with your hand or any other object as you talk.
- Look directly at the person while speaking and don't speak too fast or too slow.
- Don't exaggerate your mouth movements – this will only make it more difficult to lip-read.
- Use short sentences.
- Keep your volume at a natural level – don't shout.

5. Communicating with people with an intellectual disability

- Make sure you have the person's attention before you start talking. Address them by their name or make eye contact.
- Assume competence. Don't assume that a person with Down syndrome can't communicate (or do other things). Low expectations are the biggest barrier faced by people with Down syndrome. Give people a chance to show just how capable they are!
- Speak in an age-appropriate tone and treat adults as adults.
- Always communicate and engage directly with the person with intellectual disability, not the person with them. Be patient and take their lead regarding whether the person with them helps them communicate.
- Know that every person is unique, with their individual personality, strengths and areas where they might need support. Ask if they need support and provide it according to their individual requirements.
- Keep your questions simple and your answers easy to understand.
- Remember that your body language is important because people with an intellectual disability often rely on visual cues.
- Be prepared to use visual information or to get visual information from people with an intellectual disability.
- Be specific and direct. Avoid talking using abstracts, acronyms, metaphors or puns.