

1. Speak directly to the person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
2. Offer to shake hands when introduced. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting. Be prepared to shake a closed fist.
3. Always identify yourself and others who may be with you when meeting someone with a visual disability. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking. When dining with a friend who has a visual disability, offer to read the menu and ask if you can describe what is on his or her plate.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen or ask for instructions.

5. Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder. Do not ask intrusive questions about the person's body or equipment when first meeting the person
6. Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair. Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their chairs as extensions of their bodies. And so do people with guide dogs and help dogs. Never distract a service animal (by petting, feeding whistling or calling a name) without the owner's permission.



7. Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. Don't assume that a person with a speech disability has a cognitive disability. Do not try to complete a sentence for the person.
8. Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches.

9. Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get his or her attention. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking. If a person is wearing a hearing aid, don't assume that they have the ability to discriminate your speaking voice. Never shout to a person. Just speak in a normal tone of voice.

10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "see you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.

11. Use people-first language: Refer to the individual as a person with a disability, rather than a disabled person.

Student Disabilities Services

77 Massachusetts Avenue, 7-145
Cambridge, MA 02139
Phone: 617-253-1674
Email: sds-www@mit.edu
Web: <http://mit.edu/uaap/sds>

Office of Undergraduate
Advising and Academic
Programming 

Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities



Adapted from:
National Center for Access Unlimited
155 North Wacker Drive – Suite 315
Chicago, IL 60606

Special Thanks to:
Allison Thompkins of MIT
PhD 2011