

Disability Etiquette Tips: How to be the Best Friend and Advocate

1. Use person-first language. When describing people with disabilities, put the person first. This means saying things like “person with a disability,” and not “disabled person.” A person is not defined by their condition.
2. Address the human being. If someone is blind, deaf, in a wheelchair, or has another disability, treat them like anyone else. When they’re talking, look at them. Speak to them. Even if they have an interpreter or can’t see you.
3. Be patient. If someone has trouble moving around, it doesn’t mean they want to be carried or pushed. If they have trouble speaking, don’t feel like you have to speak for them. Let people work through things and ask for help if they need it.
4. Don’t fake it. If you don’t understand something someone says or aren’t sure how to handle a situation...ask them! It’s okay to offer help. People can always say no. And it’s okay to repeat what you heard to make sure you understood correctly.
5. Lead, don’t drag. If leading someone with a vision or mobility impairment, offer an elbow or arm to hold onto for balance and guidance, but don’t pull or carry them.
6. Sticks and Stones. Don’t worry so much about using the wrong words, like saying “Did you see that?” to a blind person, or “He walked away” about someone in a wheelchair. These are everyday expressions and not offensive.
7. One-of-a-kind. No two people are the same. So, of course, this goes for people with disabilities, too. Don’t assume that what works for one person will work for all people with similar disabilities. Ask people about their preferences and needs. Treat them like individuals—like you would want to be treated.
8. Ask Questions; Answer Questions. A major part of the challenge in addressing stigma around disability is that people are still afraid to talk about it. Why?! Disability is an everyday part of life. 1 out of 4 people live with a disability at some point in their life. We shouldn’t run from it. In fact, we can’t!

Adapted from “Learn More About Disability” by the National Organization on Disability.