

Effective Communication Practices to Support People with Disabilities

General Guidelines and Tips

- When talking to a person with a disability, look at and speak directly to that person, rather than their companion, aide, or sign language interpreter.
- Assume competence and independence. Treat adults as adults.
- Be considerate of people's service animals. Do not pet or play with the animal as this activity may unsettle the person and may interrupt the animal from doing its assistive duties.
- If you believe that an individual needs assistance, go ahead and offer the support, but wait for your offer to be accepted before you try to help. Respect the individual's preference.
- Respect an individual's personal space. Do not pat a person on the head or touch their wheelchair, scooter, or cane. People with disabilities consider their equipment part of their personal space.
- Some people prefer person first language such as, "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person." Say "people with disabilities" rather than "the disabled." Some people prefer identity first language such as, "autistic person" rather than "person with autism." For specific disabilities, saying "person with Tourette syndrome" or "person who has cerebral palsy" is usually a safe bet. Still, individuals do have their own preferences. If you are not sure what words to use, ask.
- Be prepared to communicate in different ways. Be aware that masks can make communication harder. If you are unsure, ask someone how they want to communicate.
- Listen carefully to what people are saying. Repeat back what you heard to ensure effective communication.
- When things change from what had been agreed upon or expected, check-in with the individual and ask before finalizing changes.
- Have a small dry-erase board for interactive conversations. This can be used to write out what you are saying or draw visuals to support your communication.
- A phone or tablet can be used to access communication apps.

- Not all disabilities are apparent. Don't make assumptions about the person or their disability. Be open minded and open to providing accommodations when asked.
- Relax. We all make mistakes. Offer an apology if you forget something or make an error. Be open to feedback.
- People with disabilities are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, problems and joys. While the disability is an integral part of who they are, it alone does not define them. Don't make them into disability heroes or victims. Treat them as individuals.

Best Practice for Disability Type

Person who has a hearing disability

People communicate in many ways. Some read lips and use speech; others use sign language. Others may choose to write or use a combination of these methods.



- Keep your hands away from your face, and use short, simple sentences.
- When talking, face the person. A quiet, well-lit room is most conducive to effective communication. If you are in front of the light source (e.g., a window) with your back to it, the glare may obscure your face and make it difficult for the person who is hard of hearing to speech read.
- Try to be expressive in your body language, gestures and facial expressions.
- Do not shout unless asked by the individual. Shouting distorts sounds through hearing aids and inhibits lip reading.
- When gathered as a group, speak one at a time. This is important if sign language interpreters are being used and also is helpful for someone with limited hearing who is trying to follow the conversation on their own.
- If you need to get the person's attention, wave your hand or lightly touch their shoulder.

Person who has sensory sensitivities

- Some people have difficulty understanding auditory information, especially when there is background noise. It is helpful to minimize non-essential sensory input to create a safer sensory environment and facilitate communication. These can be things as simple as closing doors to shut out background noise or finding environments to meet that are quiet.
- To accommodate sensory needs, use unscented detergents or shampoos, avoid wearing perfume, and make the environment as fragrance-free as possible.

- Tell or ask the person if you are about to touch them. Always approach them from the front.
- As soon as you notice someone becoming overwhelmed, stop the activity and provide time and space for them to recover. For example, invite the person to go to a quiet place or outside.
- Some people prefer not to make eye contact; do not force it.
- Using pictures and symbols may help facilitate communication and understanding.

Person who has a vision disability

- Be sure to identify yourself and others at the beginning of the conversation and announce when you are leaving.
- Identify yourself and ask permission before you make physical contact with a person who is blind. Tell them your name and your role if it's appropriate, such as, "vaccinator."
- If you are giving directions, give specific, non-visual information. Rather than say, "Go to your right when you reach the office supplies," which assumes the person knows where the office supplies are, say, "Walk forward to the end of this aisle and make a full right."
- If appropriate, ask the individual if they want assistance to reach their destination. Offer your arm as a guide just above the elbow and describe any obstacles in the path of travel. When arriving at the destination, tell the person that they are standing in front of the chair, the table, the doorway, etc. It is okay to ask if they would like you to place their arm on the back of a chair to identify a seat.
- When conversing in a group, give a vocal cue by announcing your name and the name of the person to whom you are speaking.

Person with an intellectual or developmental disability

- Use simple and clear language. Do not give more than one direction in a sentence. Be prepared to repeat yourself or use other words if needed.
- Be patient and allow time for the person to process the information before responding.
- People with intellectual disabilities may be anxious to please or to agree with what you say. Be sure they know they can refuse to do something or say they don't know what you mean.
- It may be helpful to offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the individual to accept the offer of assistance; do not "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- It may be helpful to repeat the main ideas you want the individual to take away from the conversation. Check understanding by asking, "What questions do you have?"

Person who has a speech disability

- Allow time for the person to speak, as they may need more time to respond to you.
- Avoid the urge to interrupt or complete a sentence for the person.
- Be aware that you may need to use a variety of communication methods such as writing notes or other technological options.
- If you are having difficulty understanding what someone is saying, ask the individual to repeat, rather than pretending to understand. Listen carefully and repeat back what you think you heard to ensure effective communication.

Person who has a mobility disability

- Always ask for permission before moving someone's wheelchair or assistive devices.
- It is courteous to position yourself at eye level and sit or kneel while talking with someone who uses a wheelchair. If sitting or kneeling is difficult, stand a little farther away to reduce the steep angle of the sightline.
- Allow time for people to physically move and adjust as needed.

Some material in this document was adapted from Autism Speaks, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), FEMA, National Autistic Society, Minnesota Department of Health, and United Spinal Association. For links to these resources and other materials, please visit the [OHA Accessibility and Public Health](#) web page.

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This document was developed through a partnership between OHA and the OHSU University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. For more resources to increase accessibility of COVID-19 vaccination, visit the OHA [Accessibility and Public Health](#) web page.