

# GUEST INTERACTION TIPS & DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

## WHY DISABILITY ETIQUETTE?

Unlike etiquette for taking tea with the Queen of England, disability etiquette is full of exceptions. There are no hard-and-fast rules, just simple guidelines that will give you a greater degree of confidence to step forward boldly to love and interact with individuals who have disabilities.

## LANGUAGE

When mentioning diagnosis, person-first language is still considered the etiquette standard by most people. Person-first language is putting the emphasis on the individual, not on the disability. It's a subtle difference but speaks volumes! The following are more helpful communication tips for interacting with your Honored Guest:

- Do not use “babytalk” when addressing someone with special needs. Use age-appropriate language.
- Speak directly to the person rather than to a companion, caregiver, parent, or sign language interpreter who may be present.
- Be patient and give the individual time to process and answer your question before asking again.

### Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

- Make sure that you face the individual who is deaf or hard-of-hearing when speaking. This will allow them to see your mouth movements and facial expressions.
- Let the person establish their preferred method of communication such as lip reading, sign language, note writing, etc.
- Don't over accentuate with your mouth or raise your voice. If the person uses sign language, the interpreter or signing caregiver will help to facilitate the interaction.

### Ambulatory Impairments (Wheelchairs)

- Treat the individual's wheelchair as an extension of their body. Be mindful not to lean, sit, hang things from, or touch their wheelchair without asking for permission first.
- Do not assume that the individual needs you to push his or her wheelchair.
- When speaking with someone in a wheelchair, be mindful of how high you are

relative to their eye level. Standing further away, sitting in a chair next to them, or even kneeling can help alleviate neck stress.

- Be aware of the environment. Make sure wheelchair users have enough room to move freely.

#### Autism Spectrum

- Autism is a spectrum. No two individuals with Autism are the same.
- Individuals with Autism may be apprehensive about social interaction. Stay positive.
- Those with Autism like predictable routines. Tell them how long the current activity will last and what is coming next.
- Sensory overload can cause people with Autism to want to remove themselves from different environments, it is not personal.

#### Visually Impaired

- Announce your arrival by saying “hello” and introducing yourself.
- It’s polite to let them know when you are departing. Don’t leave someone talking to themselves.
- Let the individual initiate a handshake or invite them to shake your hand. This helps to eliminate being startled by an unexpected touch.
- Details matter, so ask if they’d like you to describe the surroundings and be specific. Helpful details would be the layout of the room, any upcoming obstacles or different terrain, especially when moving onto grass, gravel, or a wet surface. Vague statements such as “over there” or “right here” are not helpful. Instead use clear, specific statements such as “to the left of your hand” or “right in front of you, around waist high” as these are more useful.

#### Cognitive or Intellectual Disabilities

- Keep communication simple and short.
- Speak directly to the person with a normal voice.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Use concrete specific language. Avoid idioms.
- Be patient, flexible, and supportive. You may need to repeat directions or questions.

Don’t let fear of saying something “wrong” prevent you from interacting with individuals who have disabilities. If you are unsure of what to say or do when you first meet someone, simply say “Hello” or “I’m glad to see you!” Remember a warm smile and eye contact conveys that you “see” them and that they are important to you and most importantly to Jesus Christ.

## GENERAL TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING

- When offering assistance to a person with a disability, wait until your help is accepted and then ask how you can best assist them.
- Address them just as you would any other person.
- It is acceptable to offer a handshake during introductions even if the other person has limited mobility in their hand or an artificial limb.
- Do not alter your voice or speak in a simplified, childish manner.
- If an interpreter is present, speak directly to the person and not their interpreter.
- Do not lean on anyone's wheelchair.
- When speaking with someone using a wheelchair, adjust your stance so that you are able to address them at eye level.
- Do not interact with service animals without asking first.
- If the person with whom you are speaking has a visual disability, make sure you identify yourself and any people who may be accompanying you.
- Be patient if the person with whom you are speaking has trouble understanding you. Do not get frustrated or raise your voice in an unpleasant way.
- Give Honored Guests time to think, process and respond to you. Do not repeat yourself over and over again if you do not receive a response right away.
- If an Honored Guest is non-verbal, do not avoid speaking to them or assume they are not able to communicate with you.

## PREVENTING & HANDLING UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATIONS

- If you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation, do not be afraid to ask for help!
- Some signs of overstimulation include: yelling, screaming, crying, extreme fidgeting, fearful looks and/or aggressive behavior. If this happens, redirect them to a quieter location such as the Sensory Area and if needed, find the Honored Guests' parent/caretaker.
- Maintain your composure and speak kindly at all times.