



How Being Polite Can Be Insensitive to People with Disabilities

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Growing up, we are taught that it is not polite to stare at someone with a disability. However, we are so paranoid that we will mess up and stare that we don't dare even look at the person. As a result, our well intended politeness inadvertently renders people with disabilities invisible. It is a tale of two extremes. Either people with disabilities are stared at or we don't look at them at all.

You have probably witnessed or experienced, first hand, a child pointing at someone with a disability and asking the adult they are with, "What's wrong with that person?" Typically the adult responds by grabbing the child's hand as quickly as possible and then gives a powerful "shhhh". Now the kid is scared half to death and we wonder where we get the message of how we are to treat people with disabilities.

So what could we do? Kids are curious so we should provide them with information and not frighten them. In as simple terms as possible, do your best to explain your perception of the situation. For example, you might say that the person is using a wheelchair because their legs are too week or they have cerebral palsy and their legs don't work like ours.

CHANGING OUR BEHAVIORS

Many of us are so afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing that we make the biggest mistake of all and say or do nothing, thus furthering the isolation that many people with disabilities experience. Here are a few suggestions that may improve the quality of our interactions.

Greet the person as you would any other person. We commonly greet one another with a handshake and just because someone has a disability should not deter us. In the event someone holds their left hand out to shake, follow their lead, as they may not have full use of their right hand. If the person is blind, wait for them to hold their hand out. If you are uncertain it is okay to wait and follow their lead.

Speak directly to the person with the disability. If the person uses an interpreter or aide, direct all of your conversation to the person, not to their interpreter or aide.

Do not speak louder or slower. If someone is blind there is no need to shout, remember, they are blind not deaf. This also applies to people with cognitive or developmental disabilities.

Refer to the disability only when it is relevant to the discussion.

Use of Common expressions. There is no need to worry if you use a common expression such as saying to a person who is blind, "see you later" or to someone who is a wheelchair user, "let's go for a walk".

Tell a person who is blind when you enter and exit a conversation.

Offer assistance but do not force help on anyone. Think "assist" not "insist".

Do not lean on or take control of a wheelchair without the owner's permission.

CHANGING LANGUAGE

One of the most important elements to keep in mind with our use of words is always keep the person first. In the list that follows you will notice that the person will always come before the descriptor. It is also best if you do not use the word "the" before descriptors, such as "the mentally ill or the deaf", etc...

You may wonder why it is so significant to place the person first; after all, doesn't it convey the same meaning? No, it does not.

Approximately 19% of the U.S. population has a disability (US Census Bureau, 2008). However, most disabilities are not obvious so you may not be aware of just how many people may be impacted by your words and action.

Most people are well intended and do not want to cause harm to anyone. Yet sometimes unknowingly our words and actions do just that. What we intend to be polite may end up being insensitive. We end up making lots of people invisible and the saddest part is that we think we are being nice.

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Outdated or Offensive	Acceptable and Appropriate
Disabled, Handicapped	Person with a disability
Retarded, Mentally ill	People with a developmental or cognitive disability
Hearing impaired	People who are deaf or hard of hearing
Visually impaired	People who are blind or partially sighted
Confined to a wheelchair, Crippled	Wheelchair user or person who uses a wheel chair, physically disabled
Midget	Little people, LP, person of short stature
Normal	People without a disability, non-disabled

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