

Proper Wheelchair Etiquette

Before presenting the suggestions below, ask a volunteer to role-play a person in a wheelchair, then talk with or about them, breaking several of the etiquette suggestions below. Ask the group, and the subject, what made them uncomfortable, and what could be some possible alternatives.

Pass out this Proper Wheelchair Etiquette sheet. Have group look these suggestions over and discuss.

The following suggestions enable better communication with people who use wheelchairs:

1. The key concept? Focus on the person, not on his or her disability.
2. It is appropriate to shake hands with a person who has a disability, even if they have limited use of their hands or wear an artificial limb.
3. Always ask the person who uses a wheelchair if he or she would like assistance before you jump in to help. Your help may not be needed or wanted.
4. Don't hang or lean on a person's wheelchair. A wheelchair is part of his or her own personal or body space, so don't lean on it, rock it, etc.
5. Speak directly to the person who uses the wheelchair, not to someone who is nearby as if the wheelchair user did not exist.
6. If your conversation lasts more than a few minutes, consider sitting down, or lowering yourself to the same eye-level as the person who uses the wheelchair. It will keep both of you from getting a stiff neck!
7. Don't demean or patronize the person who uses a wheelchair by patting him or her on the head.
8. When giving directions, think about things like travel distance, location of curb-cuts and ramps, weather conditions and physical obstacles that may hinder travel for someone using a wheelchair.
9. Don't discourage children from asking questions, of a person who uses a wheelchair, about their wheelchair. Open communication helps overcome fearful or misleading attitudes.
10. When a person who uses a wheelchair "transfers" out of the wheelchair to a chair, pew, car, toilet or bed, do not move the wheelchair out of reach. If you think it would be best to move it for some reason, first ask the person who uses the wheelchair about the best option for them.
11. It is okay to use expressions like "running along" or "let's go for a walk" when speaking to person who uses a wheelchair. It is likely they express the idea of moving along in exactly the same way.
12. People who use wheelchairs have varying capabilities. Some people who use wheelchairs can walk with assistance or can walk on their own for short distances. They use wheelchairs because they allow them to conserve energy and to move about with greater efficiency.
13. Don't classify or think of people who use wheelchairs as "sick." Wheelchairs are used to help people adapt to or compensate for mobility impairments that result from many non-contagious health conditions, such as spinal cord injury, stroke, amputation, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, post-polio or heart disease.
14. Check your assumptions! Don't assume that using a wheelchair is a tragedy. Wheelchairs, when well fitted and suitably selected are actually a means of freedom that allows the user to move about independently and fully engage in life.
15. Don't pet guide dogs or other service animals...they are "on duty," that is, working.