



KINDNESS AND DISABILITY

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Kindness and Disability: How Are They Connected?

Society consistently portrays disability in a negative/disempowering manner. Our language represents prevalent ideas about disability:

- ✿ Pitiful
- ✿ Needy
- ✿ Abnormal
- ✿ Incapable
- ✿ Dependent

These words are rooted in bias and in our misconceptions about disability, reinforcing our fears, as well as lowering standards and expectations.

Kindness should not be reserved for one specific group, but rather accessible for ALL. ALL can only become a reality when the physical and attitudinal barriers that surround the disability community are removed. To achieve this, spaces need to be universally designed, which means an environment can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by ALL people, regardless of their age, size, ability, or disability. The ultimate way to spread kindness is to be inclusive, and not to single people out on the basis of disability through design, invasions of privacy, and assumptions of what people can or can't do.

How Kindness Can Help Us Redefine Disability

Kindness can promote inclusion and move us away from the separateness that looms over people with disabilities. Creating spaces where ALL people are welcome sends the message that disability is a natural part of life that can be celebrated. The disability experience is one of opportunity rather than dependency. Kindness gets us one step closer to a just world ... where people with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate fully in ALL aspects of life ... where communities are barrier-free and access is universal ... where discrimination is unthinkable.



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Kindness and Disability Scenarios

- ✿ Amy, a wheelchair-user, was asked to go to dinner with her friends. When she gets to the restaurant she realizes she cannot get in because there is no ramp in sight.
- ✿ Joshua is crossing the street with his guide dog. A stranger yells, “Do you need help?” Joshua responds, “No, thank you.” The stranger rushes across the street and helps anyway.
- ✿ A waitress is serving a couple with physical disabilities. The waitress comments, “You two are so inspirational.”
- ✿ Maria, a person with a speech disability, is shopping with her care attendant. The sales associate is only addressing the care attendant.
- ✿ Amanda, a child with Autism, enjoys school. However, none of her classmates want to be friends with her or work together in small group.
- ✿ Michael, a child with cerebral palsy, is frequently called names by children in school, such as freak, weirdo, cripple, etc.

Disability–Related Suggestions: The Do’s and Don’ts

Always ask before assuming or helping. Wait until the offer is accepted. Don’t be surprised or offended if the person would rather do the task by themselves. If you are uncertain how to assist, ask the one who needs assistance.

When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter.

Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people with disabilities by patting them on the head or shoulder.

Treat children with disabilities with respect and autonomy.

Keep eye contact.

When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands.

Leaning on or hanging on to a person’s wheelchair or other mobility device is similar to leaning on or hanging on to a person. Remember: the chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.

Listen attentively when you’re talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.

Don’t assume ... about a person’s capability, interests, etc.

Don’t overgeneralize. Disability is a unique experience. As Stephen M. Shore points out, “If you’ve met one person with Autism, you’ve met one person with Autism.”

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Disability–Related Suggestions: The Do's and Don'ts – *Continued*

Don't discourage children from asking questions about disabilities. Children have a natural curiosity that needs to be satisfied so they do not develop fearful or misleading attitudes. Most people are not offended by questions children ask them about their disabilities.

Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions that seem to relate to or refer to a person's disability, such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about that?" Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure about what to do.

Consider accessibility at the forefront. Accessibility should not be an afterthought.

Don't settle for tolerance of people with disabilities; rather, strive for true integration.

Seek to understand the disability experience rather than ignore it.

People with disabilities are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, likes and dislikes, and 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 like everyone else.

Be kind.

Want to Know More about Kindness and Disability?

Creating space that is universally designed and welcoming for ALL is no easy task. However, there are many wonderful places that have devoted themselves to creating that space. Resources include:

- ✿ Disability Resource Center at the University of Arizona is committed to creating inclusive and sustainable learning and working environments, as well as facilitating access, discourse, and involvement through innovative services and programs, leadership, and collaboration. Disability Resources collaborates with students, faculty, and staff to create a campus environment that is usable, equitable, sustainable, and inclusive of all members of the university community.
 - ✿ For more information, contact 520-621-3268 or drc-info@email.arizona.edu
- ✿ DIRECT Center for Independence is dedicated to advocating voice, choice, and independence for people with disabilities. It is a great resource for people with all types of disabilities. The only eligibility criteria for consumers is that the person has a disability or identifies as having a disability. Programs include life skills training, peer support, advocacy, Benefits 2 work, Home Access, and more.
 - ✿ For more information, contact 520-624-6452 or direct@directilc.org
- ✿ National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) advances independent living and the rights of people with disabilities. NCIL envisions a world in which people with disabilities are valued equally and participate fully.
 - ✿ For more information, visit <https://www.ncil.org/>