

# Working with People with Disabilities

## Simple Tips to use while working with Participants:

- Remember: they are a person too – use person first language (an adult with Autism versus an Autistic adult)
- Be knowledgeable about the disability your participant may have (i.e.: ask to see medical forms from staff, ask staff questions, talk with parents or caregivers)
- Break down activities into smaller tasks
- Start with small goals to accomplish a bigger goal
- Building a relationship fosters trust and is important for the individual’s success
- Be open-minded and non-judgmental
- Not every person needs assistance, ask if you can help them and respect their choice
- Use consistency in vocabulary, behavior support and your feedback
- Remember that people who use wheelchairs, walkers or canes see these devices as a part of their personal space. Avoid touching or moving these aids without permission
- Phrase requests and language in a positive way (i.e.: “Don’t touch that” can be positively rephrased as “Hands to self, please.”)

## Language

We may be used to using terminology a certain way to describe someone with a disability. Today’s terminology focuses on “person-first” language. Using person first language promotes putting their personhood before their disability. Below is the correct terminology for today:

<b>Old Terminology</b>	<b>Politically Correct Terminology</b>
Handicapped/Disabled	Person with a disability.
Afflicted/stricken with	Person who has ____.
Victim	Person who has survived ___
Crippled/Wheelchair bound	Person with a mobility impairment. Person who uses a wheelchair.
Retarded/retard	Person with a developmental/intellectual disability.
Lunatic/nuts/crazy	Person with a mental illness.
Deaf / Blind	Person with a hearing impairment, Person who is deaf. Person with a visual Impairment (low vision). Person with low vision. Person who is blind (no vision).
Normal	Person without a disability or able-bodied/typically developed.

## Conversing & Increasing Comfort

Be patient with those who have difficulty speaking. Do not finish sentences or answers for participants. When you do not understand something said, ask them to repeat. Try repeating what you thought you heard. Do this as often and as much as you need. Ask him/her to rephrase if you feel you cannot understand a word or sentence. If you still don't understand, ask a staff or lead volunteer to help you. It's important that the participant's needs are heard and understood.

If your participant is non-verbal, you can still communicate and have a great experience together! Learn about your participant before meeting them. They may use assistive devices such as technology, pictures, or written word. If you feel like you are having difficulties communicating, ask your lead or staff for help and tips.

It is **OK** to say no to a person with a disability, just as you might to anyone else. You are welcome to set your comfort limits that do not interfere with others' rights. For example, if a person with a disability invades your personal space, you can ask them not to. With some people, you may have to be repetitive, just like you may have to do with your family members.

Many of us feel uncomfortable around people who are different than ourselves. It's OK if you feel this way; your comfort level will increase with your exposure, practice and knowledge. Don't hesitate to ask for help!

Appreciate what people CAN do. The difficulties a person faces often stem more from society's attitudes and barriers than from the effects of impairment. Focus on ability and use the participant's abilities to compensate or adapt. Remember that you can always ask staff questions about how to work with your participant or how to modify an activity for success.

### **Ask yourself:**

- Am I using an appropriate tone of voice? Is this individual responding to how I am speaking to them? Try and refrain from using "baby talk" with participants.
- Does my body language match what I'm saying? Am I sending mixed signals?
- How am I feeling? Do I feel stressed? Am I frustrated? Do I need a break?
- Am I upset, stressed, or frustrated over other things? Is this impacting my interactions?

It is important to make sure that you are constantly addressing these things when working with these individuals. Clearing your mind can be extremely helpful and impacts how you interact with others. Sometimes when you are overwhelmed, it is best to take a break. This may mean taking deep breaths, switching roles with another person, or taking a few moments before you respond. One of the most important times to monitor yourself is when you are working with an individual having a difficult time. Your interactions with this individual during this point of time can affect them – positively or negatively.

### **References:**

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