

Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities

No special talent is required to interact with people with disabilities. These simple tips will help you feel more comfortable while volunteering for Mosaic.

Just say hello! Talk directly to the other person, do not try to “talk through” someone else or carry on a conversation with someone else about the person you are assisting. Do not assume that non-verbal means non-communicative, look for other means of communication. Speak in a natural, adult voice and treat the other person as an adult, equal to you.

Conversation. Do not force conversation, be natural. Try to find things that you have in common. Good topics to consider are work, hobbies or recreation. Be cautious about family since this can be a sensitive area. If using questions, make them easy to answer. Be patient, some people take more time to complete their thoughts and others need more time to express their thoughts.

Daily routine is important. If you will be planning an activity with someone, try to work around the person’s daily schedule. Routines help people feel control over things in their lives.

Focus on abilities, not on disabilities. Encourage the person to do all they can. Do not assume you have to lead or direct. Watch for barriers and dangers of which they may not be aware. Remember you are doing activities with them, not for them. Respect their decision if they say “no” to something.

Wheelchairs. Try to place your face at eye level for the other person; sit, squat or kneel beside him or her. Do not touch the wheelchair without asking. Do not move the person’s wheelchair without asking. Treat the wheelchair as the other’s personal space.

Silence is OK. Sometimes sitting silently with someone is comforting and comfortable. Your presence may be all that is required as the other person learns to feel comfortable with you.

Listen. Active listening requires effort, give the person all of your attention. Don’t fidget or doodle. Reduce distractions by putting your mobile phone away in your pocket or bag.

Ask “Can you repeat that?” If you do not understand something that is said, do not pretend to understand; that is disrespectful. Be polite and ask the other person to repeat what was said. A speech impediment or noisy environment can make this necessary. People would rather repeat themselves until understood than be misunderstood.

Touch: Appropriate or not? Respond as you would in other situations; follow appropriate physical boundaries. Respect personal space of the other; do not force touch. Avoid any kind of contact that could be misunderstood by either person. It is easiest to let the other person take the lead in this area but do not do anything you are uncomfortable with. If the person wants a hug or to hold hands and you are not comfortable with that, offer some alternative as a substitute. You could make the moment lighter by saying something like, “I like fist bumps. Do you know how to do those?”

Offer your help, but do not force it. “May I help you with that?” is a good question to ask. People generally would like to try to accomplish things on their own before having someone else step in and help. You can offer your assistance, but do not force it. We all want to make our own decisions on what we can or cannot do.