



THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The following list of ten “commandments” serve as a helpful little primer in etiquette and communication related to some disabilities that are commonly-encountered.

- I** Speak directly rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
- II** Offer to shake hands when introduced. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands and offering the left hand is an acceptable greeting.
- III** Always identify yourself and others who may be with you when meeting someone with a visual disability. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- IV** If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen or ask for instructions.
- V** Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others. Never patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.



- VI** Do not lean against or hang on someone's wheelchair. Bear in mind that people with disabilities treat their chairs as extensions of their bodies. And so do people with guide dogs and help dogs. Never distract a work animal from their jobs without the owner's permission.
- VII** Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking and wait for them to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- VIII** Place yourself at eye level when speaking with someone in a wheelchair or on crutches.
- IX** Tap a person who has a hearing disability on the shoulder or wave your hand to get his/her attention. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. If so, try to face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when speaking. Never shout at a person. Just speak in a normal tone of voice.
- X** Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use a common expression such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about this?" that seem to relate to the person's disability.

The Ten Commandments were developed by the United Cerebral Palsy Association, Inc. They were later updated by Irene M Ward & Associates, for their video entitled, [*The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities.*](#)