

# Ten Commandments

## for Communicating with People with Disabilities

**1. When talking** with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.

**2. 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. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)

**3. When meeting** a person with a visual impairment, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.

**4. If you offer assistance**, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.

**5. Treat adults as adults.** Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending that same familiarity to all others present. (Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.)

**6. Leaning or hanging** on a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.

**7. 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.

**8. When speaking** with a person in a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.

**9. To get the attention** of a person who is hearing-impaired, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. Not all people with a hearing impairment can lip-read. For those who do lip-read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.

**10. Relax.** Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions that seem to relate to the person's disability, such as "see you later" or "did you hear about this?"

*—Adapted from "The Ten Commandments of Communicating with People with Disabilities," originally developed by United Cerebral Palsy Associations, Washington, D.C.*

*For information concerning people with disabilities, contact:*

**AXIS Center for Public Awareness  
of People with Disabilities**

249 E. Cooke Road, Columbus, OH 43214  
614-262-8124 (V/TTY), [axiscenter@aol.com](mailto:axiscenter@aol.com)

