



# RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



RUDERMAN  
FAMILY FOUNDATION



## **SPEAKING WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE DISABILITIES**

- The most important thing when speaking with a person who has a disability (or anyone really) is simply to remember that he or she is a human being – the fact that he or she has a disability is just one attribute. Say hello, make eye contact and give yourself time to get to know them, just like you would with any new acquaintance.
- Focus on using “person first” language, such as “a girl who is deaf,” rather than “a deaf girl” or “a teacher with epilepsy” rather than “an epileptic teacher.” Far more important than the words you use however, is keeping your focus on the person, not the disability. This should go without saying, but if a person expresses a preference of how they would like you to refer to them – including rejecting “person first” language – honor their request.
- Avoid making disability a source of pity or otherness. When you speak of a person’s disability, speak directly and matter-of-factly, avoiding cutesy terms like “differently-abled” or “special.” Try to be as comfortable with a word like “deaf” as you would be with a word like “blonde.”
- Don’t unnecessarily mention a disability if it is not relevant to the conversation. For example, you wouldn’t say, “Jim, our synagogue president, who has brown hair,” unless you were trying to point him out in a crowd. Similarly, there’s no need to say “Jim, our synagogue president who uses a wheelchair,” unless the wheelchair is relevant to the conversation.
- Avoid describing the activities of people with disabilities as “special” simply because the person has a disability. A person’s wedding is a very special day, but it is not made more or less special because they are deaf, so you probably don’t need to mention it in your description.
- It’s good to practice simple courtesy when interacting with people with disabilities. For example when speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair, it is appropriate to sit or crouch down in order to talk face-to-face. When speaking to a person who uses an interpreter, speak to the person and not the interpreter. Similarly, it is considerate to announce your presence when approaching a person who is blind.
- Don’t worry about common phrases. As long as your interaction is respectful, there’s nothing inherently wrong with saying a phrase like “see you later” to a blind person, or inviting a person in a wheelchair to take a walk. The vast majority of people with disabilities are not offended by common usage. Of course, it’s worth remembering that there is someone who will be offended by just about anything.
- Be ready to help, but don’t be patronizing. It’s polite to offer assistance that you would offer to anyone, such as holding a door. For any other type of assistance, you should either wait until the person asks for help, or ask respectfully if they would accept your help.
- Assistive devices like wheelchairs or canes should be treated the same way that you would treat a person’s body. Don’t touch them beyond casual contact or move them without permission.

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