

COMMUNICATING WITH VICTIMS WITH DISABILITIES

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

- ◊ When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than to a companion or sign language interpreter who is present.
- ◊ 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.
- ◊ When meeting a person who is visually impaired, 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.
- ◊ If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- ◊ Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others.
- ◊ Respect all assistive devices (e.g., canes, wheelchairs, crutches, communication boards, service dogs, etc.) as personal property. Unless given specific and explicit permission, do not move, play with, or use them.
- ◊ 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. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- ◊ When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
- ◊ To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do lip-read, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face a light source and keep hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.
- ◊ Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seems to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

(1) United Cerebral Palsy. (2006). *Ten commandments of etiquette for communicating with people with disabilities*. Retrieved October 29, 2006, from <http://www.ucp.org>.

(2) National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult. (1992 - 2005). *Basic etiquette*. Retrieved October 31, 2006, from <http://www.onestops.info>.

WHEN COMMUNICATING AFTER SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION

- ◊ Do not assume that a person with a disability is incapable of recognizing or recalling sexual victimization. Even if a person has a severe disability, it doesn't mean that she does not know what happened or cannot describe it.
- ◊ Failure to understand the ramifications does not mean the assault did not occur or was not traumatic.
- ◊ The terms *rights*, *refusal*, and *sexual abuse* may be unfamiliar concepts to the individual with a developmental disability because often this population is taught only compliance.
- ◊ Victims may have had little or no education on sexual concepts or basic anatomy, and therefore may have greater difficulty in communicating about the sexual assault or abuse.
- ◊ Use simple words and phrases. Speak in concrete terms (i.e., what, when, where questions) and avoid abstract language (i.e., why questions).
- ◊ Listen to how clients talk and match your speech to their vocabulary, tempo, and sentence structure.
- ◊ Frequently ask what a particular word means to the person to avoid miscommunication.
- ◊ Avoid treating the client like a child – do not use condescending tones of voice, avoid terms of endearment, and do not use affectionate behaviors (which can unsettle or intimidate the client).
- ◊ Avoid asking leading questions and allow clients to respond in their own time and in their own way.
- ◊ With non-verbal clients, be attentive to other ways they express themselves – they may show you what happened, instead of verbalizing what happened.
- ◊ Most importantly, be supportive and let clients know you believe them.

Baladerian, N.J. (1991). "From the frontlines: Interviewing sexual abuse victims with developmental disabilities." *Frontline*, 6-10.

