



Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

For more information please feel free to read Disability Etiquette published by the University of Texas San Antonio

<http://utsa.edu/events/documents/docs/eventplanners/DisabilityEtiquette101.doc>

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Disability Sensitivity: Accessibility Helps for Leaders

By Linda Jorgensen

Occasionally we get asked to provide helps or advice on how to make meetings and activities easier to access for individuals with mobility challenges. The following is a list I generated in response to a request for help from a church youth group but these items can be applied to many other settings and groups as well.

***Please note: Some of these suggestions (specifically #2, #5, #6 and #12 in the bottom section) came from several blog posts but after a good deal of searching, unfortunately, we have not been able to figure out which blogs they came from. If you, Gentle Reader, spot a blog that we've quoted please let us know so we can properly credit them and refer back to the original post. Thank you.*

General Rule of Thumb

1. Stay home if you're sick. No member is totally indispensable. Delegate responsibilities, combine classes, etc. This is where you get to be selfish! Stay home and keep your germs to yourself!
2. Unlock the wheelchair accessible doors *anytime* there are activities or business is going on in the building, even if it's "just the Pastor" or "just a leadership meeting". If you have only one wheelchair accessible door and you don't unlock it you are, in essence, letting individuals know they are not welcomed there. Unlock the door.
3. Leave no-one behind. Only go as fast as the slowest member of the group. This includes driving places, walking or any other activities. Allow time for wheelchair users and slow walkers to get to their vehicles and load up. For some this can take as long as 10 minutes or so. Give individuals a head start if need be.
4. During the winter ensure snow is shoveled out of the marked handicapped parking stalls and loading zones including pedestrian cuts onto the sidewalk. This is the most important time of the year to ensure these areas are clear. A cleared parking and loading area often means the difference between attending an activity or turning around and going back home. If you can't safely park and unload, you can't attend. Keep these areas clear. If you have a snow removal service let them know that keeping those areas clear is part of your service expectations. If they fill those areas up with snow, call them back and have them move it to another area. They'll get the hint after having to return and "finish the job" once or twice.
5. Shovel sidewalks and entryways well. Treat with ice melt if needed.
6. Treat the handicap signs inside the building with the same rules as outside. If a bench, restroom stall or other area is marked handicapped, you cannot "park there if you do not have a tag".
7. When setting up folding chairs in classrooms or other meeting areas leave ample open space for wheelchairs or walkers on the isles in a direct line to the exit door. Generally one wheelchair equals two folding chairs.

Larger wheelchairs may also need one in front and one directly behind removed as well. This prevents tripping over protruding feet and foot plates. Be sure these spaces are within easy access of the classroom door and remain unimpeded.

8. Do not surround a wheelchair with folding chairs. Leave enough space for the individual to get out of the room if need be. Never block in a wheelchair/walker user. Always leave them a quick way to get out a door.
9. Ensure all aisles, walkways, and doorways are clear per local/national fire code.
10. **NEVER** take away an individual's mobility aid! Walkers, crutches, and wheelchairs must remain with the user at all times. If you take away their equipment you've just rendered the individual immobile. **NEVER** take away an individual's mobility aid(s) or equipment.
11. Do not use podium ramps as storage. Keep indoor access ramps clear and uncluttered. It might make a great place to lay down your movie screen but it will be in the way of pedestrians. Put your equipment away where it belongs.

Leadership Helps

1. **** Treat EVERYONE as "normal", no matter what. Don't shout, speak down to, or ignore an individual. Make no assumptions or judgment calls**.** Appearances can be, and often are, deceiving. Many individuals have difficulty speaking but their brains work just fine. Treat everyone "normally".
2. "Learn to interact. Ask parents and care givers for help. Some kids may not want to fully participate but that does not mean they are not worth getting to know. Ask parents to help you know how to help their child."
3. Lead by example. Show your members that manners are important.
4. Educate your group members. If need be teach the group about specific disabilities as needed. Explain what they are and what some of the common problems/behaviors are all about. Knowledge is power and a huge help. Educate your group as needed.
5. "Be flexible. Life with disabled children means a full schedule for family members and care givers and plans often change unpredictably at the last moment. Accept that they may not always be able to make it to an activity or an event but don't stop inviting them! They need to know you still want their company and they are welcomed."
6. "Hold off on advice. This is a very important one. You may have opinions about therapies or treatments you read about, doctors people should see, discipline techniques they should be using - but

keep them to yourself. Parents have a lot of people in their ear telling them what they should do and how they should do it. It's stressful and confusing for parents. Make church a restful, refreshing place by being the calm in the center of their storm. If, or when, they need your advice, they'll ask for it."

7. Use caution and check with parents or care givers when interviewing an individual privately. Many individuals, children especially, may require a chaperone. Make sure you're appropriate in your conversation and in any task you may ask them to perform. This is a safety net for yourself and the individual.
8. Use the same caution when arranging a specific activity for an individual. Double check with the individual, parents or care givers to ensure a task or activity is within the scope of the individual's capabilities, first. If they say no, take that as your answer. **DO NOT ASSUME** an individual can perform certain tasks and **DO NOT PESTER**. "No means no." That is your answer. There may be restrictions or a lack of capability that you are unaware of. You don't need details, just *ask first* and accept the answer you are given.
9. Always act immediately if a problem or concern has been brought to your attention by an individual, their family members or care giver. You may perceive it to be of no concern to you but if someone feels strongly enough to say something to you it means a lot to the individual. Taking action could mean the difference between attending church and going home for that individual. **NEVER** dismiss a complaint or a request. Work the problem.
10. **DON'T CAUSE PROBLEMS FOR FAMILIES** if you can help it. Be sensitive and think before acting. (see #9)
11. Have patience. Remember, you might be the tired leader ready to send a kid home at the end of a lesson time or an evening activity but you'll get through it. It's only for a short time. Who is **TRULY** the tired, worn out care giver?

And my favorite one:

12. "**SKIP THE REMEDIES!** Cures for any disability are a sensitive subject and can be offensive to some. If you come across an ad, website or news story that claims to have new breakthrough remedies or cures, don't even discuss it. (I can't tell you how many times people have tried to give us supplements or juices or recommend "miracle" procedures...UGH!) Trust me. If it was something worth trying it would already be out there and folks would be using it in droves."