



Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

Need more information on disability etiquette? Listed below are some useful links:

<http://www.mcil.org/mcil/mcil/etiqu01.htm>

<http://www.unitedspinal.org/pdf/DisabilityEtiquette.pdf>

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Wheelchair Etiquette

By Linda and Madison Jorgensen

I spend a significant part of my day, every day, working with my daughter who uses a power wheelchair as her primary source of mobility. We go just about everywhere together. Recently we had an interesting conversation regarding manners and the general public. I hadn't really noticed but my daughter pointed out that when we are together many people do not speak directly to her; they speak to me, instead. There were other things she brought up as well. By the time we finished our conversation I had received a long list of "pet peeves" with a request to "write about it Mom". Ok. I've had my marching orders so here it is.

Most people are well meaning and simply unaware of the basic rules of wheelchair etiquette. This can create bad feelings and sometimes unsafe situations, depending on the circumstances. A little appropriate conversation and education can go a long way in helping resolve this problem.

- People need to be aware that due to increased medical knowledge and changes in medical technology more individuals with mobility needs are becoming independent and able to participate in community activities using motorized wheelchairs or scooters. Don't assume that using a wheelchair is a tragedy. It is an asset for the user allowing them freedom of mobility they would otherwise not enjoy. As Madison loves to point out, "I can go there on my own, Mom".
- Don't classify a wheelchair user as "sick". Wheelchairs are used for a wide variety of reasons; contagious illnesses are generally not one of them.
- Always ask the wheelchair user if they would like help before you render it. They may not need, or want, the assistance. Let them tell you what they need, and when, as appropriate.
- An individual's equipment is an intimate part of them and should be treated as such. **DO NOT TOUCH.** Don't lean on; grab handles or other parts of the wheelchair, for any reason. To do so makes movement impossible and is considered disrespectful and personally invasive.
- Do not use the wheelchair to hang items on nor assume the individual will be happy to hold your items on their lap. As Madison says, "I am not a closet nor am I a shelf".

- Speak directly to the person using the wheelchair, not their companion, as if the wheelchair occupant does not exist. Most often the wheelchair user can speak quite well for themselves.
 - If your conversation is going to last more than a moment or two consider seating yourself or kneeling down to bring yourself to eye level with the other person. This will prevent neck strain and is an appreciated courtesy.
 - It is ok to use terms or phrases such as “run along” or “walk away” in general conversation. Chances are the other person uses that same phrase when speaking.
 - NEVER patronize a person by patting them on the head. A hand shake is generally most welcome.
 - If a wheelchair user transfers out of their wheelchair leave the chair where they left it and within reach. ****Under no circumstances should anyone attempt to move a power wheelchair themselves.** This equipment is easily damaged if not handled properly and is expensive to repair. Steering joy sticks are NOT the same as the joy stick found on popular gaming systems and should not be treated as such. This is highly technical equipment. Cost to repair/replace damaged joysticks is high, quite often ranging in the thousands of dollars. Since most insurance policies will not cover this type of repair this leaves both the occupant and the offending would-be-driver at liability for repair costs out of their own pockets.
 - Parents must never allow infants, toddlers or young children to satisfy their curiosity by playing with, on, or next to (especially behind!), motorized mobility aids. This could result in injury to the child, the wheelchair occupant, damage to the wheelchair or all of the above. Smaller, pediatric, motorized wheelchairs weigh in at over 250 lbs. Many adult sized chairs weigh in at 450-500 lbs. Add the weight of the occupant and the danger of small children being run over and severely injured is high. Think Safety First.
 - **Do** encourage appropriate curiosity at a SAFE DISTANCE and supervised directly by a parent or guardian. Be sure to ask any questions to the wheelchair user directly.
 - Do not park your vehicle in public parking spaces marked specifically for the disabled.
- Even if you have a handicap tag or license plate on the vehicle, if the individual for whom the tag is assigned is NOT with you in the car, park elsewhere. This will leave the parking space open for those who really do need that space.
- Avoid sitting in designated handicapped seating unless otherwise directed. Many public venues are providing specific seating spaces for users of mobility aids in order to meet Federal, state and local fire code requirements. Seating may be marked with a small, appropriate sign, to ensure individuals a proper place to sit. Avoid those seats. Open spaces should be left at the end of rows of folding chairs set up in overflow rooms and cultural hall areas. Individuals must be able to keep their mobility aid with them at all times.
 - Be aware of closed doors. Not all wheelchair occupants are able to open exterior or heavier interior doors. Many buildings are equipped with solid core doors, as required by fire code, which weigh quite a bit. This makes pulling a door open difficult. It is almost impossible for a wheelchair occupant to open, hold open and maneuver a wheelchair (powered or manual) through an interior door one handed, unassisted. To leave a wheelchair occupant with decreased upper body strength alone in a room with the door closed can be as effective as locking someone in. Ensure individuals are comfortable with having the door closed and are capable of safely leaving the room on their own or make sure someone is available to open the door as needed.
- Living and working with a wheelchair or other mobility aid becomes much easier for everyone when simple rules of courtesy are followed. The more others understand, the easier it becomes for those using mobility aids to be active and thrive within their communities. Like Mom always says, “Mind your manners, it’s appreciated”.