



MENTORING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

DEFINING DISABILITIES

The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment. An intellectual disability (ID) is a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. It is a diagnosis protected under the ADA. Nevertheless, having general knowledge about IDs may be helpful to your mentee.

People with an intellectual disability may have difficulty in:

- Understanding complex information
- Using logical thinking to plan ideas and solve problems
- Following directions and instructions, particularly those which involve multiple steps or complex information
- Using sound judgment and abstract thinking
- People with ID may have limited experiences or social engagement
- Limited opportunities to engage in social activities
- Protection from risk and failure
- Parental fear

DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

- Don't let fear and uncertainty keep you from getting to know people with disabilities. Fear of the unknown and lack of knowledge about interacting can lead to uneasiness when meeting a person who has a disability.
- Remember that a person with a disability has feelings. Treat the individual as you would want to be treated. Common sense and friendship may break down any barriers you may encounter.
- A handshake is not a standard greeting for everyone. When in doubt, ask the individual if they would like to shake hands with you. A smile, along with a spoken greeting, is always appropriate.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability, not just to persons who may be accompanying them.
- Don't mention the person's disability unless they talk about it or it is relevant to the conversation.
- Treat adults as adults. Don't patronize or talk down to people with disabilities. Likewise, don't lavish praise on a person with a disability for having the "courage" to overcome a disability.
- Do not lean on a person's wheelchair. Think of it as an extension of their body.
- Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort.
- Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase as necessary.
- It is okay to use common expressions like "See you soon" or "I'd better be running along."
- Relax. We all make mistakes. Offer an apology if you forget some courtesy. Keep a sense of humor and a willingness to communicate.
- Keep your communication clear. Use short sentences and rephrase comments or questions for better clarity.
- Stay on point by focusing on one topic at a time. Use open ended questions.
- Allow the person time to respond. Ask questions and clarify your comments. If appropriate, repeat any messages to confirm mutual understanding.
- Focus on the person as they respond to you. Pay attention to body language.
- Encourage them to use their schedules to tell you what is next. Encourage students to take charge of their own time and set of logistics.

- Words are powerful. They can influence perceptions and perpetuate negative stereotypes. It is important to remember the importance of person first language. Person first language emphasizes the person, not the identity. Some examples are:
 - o Person with a disability vs. handicapped or disabled
 - o Person diagnosed with a mental health condition vs. crazy, psycho
 - o Person is a wheelchair user vs. person bound to a wheelchair

UGA DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTER

If your mentee expresses having a disability and in need of resources, the Disability Resource Center (DRC) is a great place for students. The DRC's primary commitment is to assist the University of Georgia in educating and serving students with disabilities who qualify for admissions. While their mission is to ensure equal educational opportunities as required by the ADA and other legislation, the DRC strives to promote a welcoming academic, physical, and social environment for students with disabilities at UGA. The DRC houses three distinct services:

- Testing Accommodations Office for onsite classroom testing
- Assistive Technology Lab equipped with a variety of programs designed for people with disabilities
- Alternative Media Services to assist students with print or reading disabilities by converting printed material required for courses into accessible formats

Students can register with the DRC at any time during their tenure at UGA. If you are mentoring a student who has expressed an interest in registering, you can refer them to the DRC website at drc.uga.edu.