

Fact Sheet 2 - Communication, Etiquette and Behaviour

Guidance on Communication, Etiquette and Behaviour

When volunteering as a Gym Buddy with disabled (and non-disabled) people, you will use a wide range of communication methods such as:

Verbal: sounds

Written: instructions, factual, diagrams and pictures

Physical: demonstrations, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact

It may be necessary to adopt additional methods of communication when buddying people with particular impairments. Below are some examples that will assist you in doing this. These are only guidelines covering communication, etiquette and behaviour appropriate when working with disabled people.

When Working with Disabled People, regardless of the Impairment

- Do not underestimate the intelligence or ability of the disabled person
- Be aware of personal needs and preferred ways of communicating and working
- Consider adaptations where required
- When assisting, ask the individual how best to do this
- Use inclusive language (See CD Rom Resource 5.4 - Fact Sheet 4)
- For specific information, ask the individual (if this is unsuccessful, ask their permission to ask their personal assistant, parent or carer)
- Demonstrate what you mean if you are not getting the message across successfully verbally
- Always address the disabled person, not the person they are with.

Working with People with a Speech Impairment

- Assume nothing - just because a person's speech is impaired, it does not mean their brain is impaired
- Be patient and do not rush people
- Concentrate on what the person is communicating, not how it is communicated
- If appropriate, suggest moving to an area where you will both find it easier to communicate – i.e. away from loud music
- Don't interrupt, correct, speak for the person or be tempted to finish sentences off for them
- If you don't understand completely, repeat what you do understand and try again
- If you are having difficulty understanding them, even when they have repeated what they have said, ask the individual if they object if you ask for assistance from someone who knows them well and communicates with them regularly
- Confirm your understanding using questions / gestures that only need short answers or gestures as a response
- Always ensure you understand before proceeding
- Try not to get embarrassed
- Never say, "it does not matter" - it does!
- Remember, you will not be the first person they have had to communicate with and if you are embarrassed, then you need to deal with it, not the disabled person.
- Working with People with a reading & writing impairment
- You may have to read their Gym Programme for them. Have patience and be prepared to go over things more than once or give people extra time to think things over.

Working with People who are Blind or Visually Impaired

Visually impaired is a generic term to describe people who are partially sighted. If somebody has no sight, it is perfectly acceptable to use the term 'blind'. Statistically, very few people who are registered blind have no sight at all (approx 4%).

Offer help, but wait for your offer to be accepted and always ask the person to tell you the best way to help.

- In all cases, speak directly to the individual, not through a companion or their guide dog if they use one
- Ask what conditions / environment will support them to access services more easily, for example literature in alternative formats. Do not ask them specific questions relating to their impairments
- When introducing yourself, ensure you give your name
- Wherever possible, use names to get attention
- Clear, accurate verbal instructions are vital
- Describe the area and layout
- Explain the cause of any external noises
- When you have ended your conversation, tell the person before you move away, do not leave them talking to an empty space (it can and does happen!)
- Do not talk to, fuss or feed a support dog / guide dog without permission from the owner. If a dog is wearing a harness, it is working, whether the owner is holding the harness or not. It only takes seconds to remove and replace the harness
- It is perfectly acceptable to say "see you later", however avoid the use of the word 'blind' in a negative context.

To Guide Someone who is Blind or Visually Impaired:

You may find the following points useful, but they should only be used as required and **not** as a matter of course:

- Tell the person your name and that you are a Gym Buddy
- Let the person decide on which side they prefer you to walk, if they have a guide dog this will be generally on their left side, as guide dogs are trained to work on the left
- Walk slightly in front of the person, allowing your arm to be held at the elbow, do not hold on to the person
- Say when you are about to approach an obstacle, such as a door or steps and inform the person which way the door opens i.e. towards them or away from them
- Stop at the top or bottom of steps, and if there only a few, state how many there are and if they go up or down. If there are hand rails, let the person know which side they are on and let the person know when you come to any landings
- If the person has little or no sight, ensure you keep them informed of what is happening in group situations
- Keep people aware of any changes in layout or group
- It may be necessary to describe the layout of an area e.g. the fitness suite layout. It can be useful to use the clock method e.g. exercise bikes at 2 o'clock as you enter etc. Some visually impaired people will not use this method, because of unfamiliarity with a clock face, but others will find it very useful, check with the person first
- Remember, a person's eyesight can change according to the environment they are in – particularly when lighting is very bright or dim.

Working with People who are Deaf or Hearing Impaired

The word 'deaf' is used as a general term to describe people with a severe to profound hearing loss. 'Hearing-impaired' is the term used to describe a degree of hearing loss.

Many deaf or hearing-impaired people can join in conversations by using a hearing aid, by lip-reading, using sign language or a combination of one or more of these things. Inform users of provisions available at the gym, such as a hearing induction loop.

Lip-reading and Face-to-Face Communication

Lip-reading is very difficult and tiring, especially if your first language is sign language. Some of the sounds made in speech look alike on the lips, others are not seen at all. Only about one word in five in spoken English can be accurately lip-read, the rest is contextual guesswork. The lip reader therefore needs clues as to what the content of conversation may be about.

- If necessary, attract attention with a light touch to the person's upper arm.
- Ensure you face the person before speaking. Keep head, body and hands relatively still, although some simple gestures help.
- Face the light - do not stand or sit with your back to the window or light source, as this makes it much more difficult to see what you are saying.
- Make yourself easy to lip read. Keep your mouth visible and do not hide it with your hands, drinking bottles or Gym Programmes etc.
- Get the distance right - not too far or too near and on the same level.
- Cut out background noise. Extra volume may be painful and create distortion for hearing aid users.
- Speak in short sentences - not individual words or long sentences, use straightforward language.
- Speak clearly, but do not shout or over-emphasise your lip movements. This only distorts your lip patterns and facial expressions. Remember, if the person is deaf, then shouting is a waste of time and it could be construed that you are angry with them. In some instances, shouting can cause the person physical pain.
- If not understood, repeat exactly the same sentence. If unsuccessful, find a different way to say things.
- Use the written word, if necessary, for names, addresses etc. remembering that if somebody's first language is British Sign Language (BSL) their second language is English. Therefore, you should not automatically assume that they will understand written English.
- Avoid speaking through a third person. Speak directly to the person, not through their assistant.
- Signing takes a great deal of concentration. Be sensitive. Are you being understood? Do they need a break?
- As BSL is a language in its own right, it should be remembered that there will not necessarily be a sign for what you are trying to convey e.g. muscles of the body, certain types of exercise etc.
- Learn the BSL alphabet, you can communicate information much more easily if you know some basic sign language and can spell out words letter by letter.
- If you do not understand – do not pretend that you do.

Working with People with Mobility Impairments

In an accessible building, people should be able to travel independently and may not require any help whatsoever. However, this is often not the case and it may be necessary to assist the individual concerned. As with any impairment group covered within this fact sheet, just ask if they require any assistance and what exactly they need you to do.

- Wheelchairs can give people independence. If wheelchair users are restricted, it is likely to be by the environment and other people's negative attitudes, not by the wheelchair itself.
- The wheelchair should be viewed as part of the user's body space. Keep an appropriate distance and never use the chair as something to lean on.
- Talk to wheelchair users in a position comfortable to both of you. It will help when meeting / speaking to a wheelchair user to seat yourself at the same level. Standing puts the wheelchair user at a disadvantage, hurts the neck and can feel intimidating, as you are 'standing over' them.
- It is perfectly acceptable to offer to help guide the wheelchair or negotiate obstacles such as doors. But only push someone's chair if they have said that it is OK for you to do so.
- Always speak directly to the wheelchair user and not the person who may be assisting them.
- Use the term 'wheelchair user', not 'wheelchair bound'.

Working with People with a Learning Difficulty

- The form a learning difficulty takes will be unique to the individual.
- Having a learning difficulty is not the same as having a mental illness.
- Never underestimate or place limits on what a person can do or understand.
- Treat and talk to people by their age and not their apparent level of ability.
- Language should be kept simple but appropriate, do not use jargon.
- Give extra time for learning and processing of information.
- You may need to repeat information in a variety of ways to ensure understanding.
- Speak to the person concerned - not the person who may be assisting them.
- Pictures can speak a thousand words. Do not just rely on the spoken word.

Hopefully, these guidelines will assist you in feeling more prepared and confident when working out alongside disabled people as a Gym Buddy.

Finally, if a person is being assisted by someone other than yourself (an advocate, wheelchair assistant, sign language interpreter) you must still talk to the disabled person and not the assistant.

