

Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities at the Museum of Science

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Museum of Science.

Dear Museum of Science Staff/Volunteer:

As a staff person or volunteer at the Museum of Science, you have a role in ensuring that all visitors have access to exhibits. When interacting with visitors, you are enhancing the visitor experience. Your ability to interact positively with people, including people with disabilities, will ensure that all visitors have the same access to the Museum.

The needs and capabilities of people with disabilities vary from person to person, even among individuals who have the same disability. Some people with disabilities will require no more assistance from you than any member of the general public, while other people with disabilities may need more individualized service than you typically provide.

The high level of customer service that you routinely provide to Museum visitors is extremely valuable. It sets the tone for their experience in the building, contributing to the overall goal of making the Museum inclusive to everyone who wishes to visit.

This guide provides basic tips and communication guidelines that will assist you in interacting with visitors who have disabilities and in performing your routine customer service duties at the Museum of Science.

1 Museum Resources

The ADA & 504 Coordinator is the employee at the Museum responsible for ensuring that people with disabilities are able to participate in all programs and activities in the building. The Museum's ADA & 504 Coordinator is a resource to you as well as to the disability community and is available during regular business hours to answer questions, to resolve problems, and to provide technical assistance on any disability-related matter.

If at any time you are unsure of how to accommodate an individual with a disability, you should contact the Museum of Science ADA & 504 Coordinator. Similarly, if a person with a disability approaches you to report a grievance in the building, you should refer the individual directly to the Coordinator.

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- Sign language (ASL) interpreters and sighted guides can be arranged, with advance notice, through the Museum's ADA & 504 Coordinator.
- Wheelchairs, electric scooters, and strollers are available free of charge, on a first-come, first-served basis, at the Information Booth in the main lobby.
- Braille and other alternative formats are available.

2 Reasonable Accommodation

State and federal laws require public facilities and all of their programs, services, and activities to be accessible to, and usable by, people with disabilities. It may be necessary to modify policies and procedures that prevent people with disabilities from accessing and participating in Museum activities because of their specific limitations. This concept is referred to as “reasonable accommodation/modification.”

Providing reasonable accommodation to a visitor with a disability is often very simple. It may mean taking a bit of extra time to communicate with an individual or to direct them to the appropriate place. While there is no exhaustive list of what could be considered a reasonable accommodation, possible scenarios include:

- Taking a visitor with a hearing disability to a quiet place to ask you a question.
- Notifying maintenance that a visitor cannot get to an exhibit because of a broken elevator.
- Helping a person get to their desired location.

There will be instances when a person’s disability is not visible. If an individual indicates that they have a disability and need extra assistance, you must listen to his or her request and do your best to assist them. Be advised that a person does not have to use the term reasonable accommodation in order to be qualified to receive individualized assistance.

3 Proper Language

The way we express ourselves tells a great deal about our attitudes and beliefs. As people who interact with the public, it is our responsibility to make sure that everyone who enters the Museum feels welcomed and valued. Therefore, it is important to know the do's and don'ts of language when interacting with a person with a disability. Always use people-first language as demonstrated below.

DO SAY

A person with a disability

She uses a wheelchair

He has a cognitive disability

She has a learning disability

He has autism

She has a brain injury

He has a psychiatric disability

A person who is blind

A person who is deaf

DON'T SAY

A cripple, handicapped,
special needs

She is confined to a
wheelchair or
wheelchair bound

He is mentally retarded

She is learning disabled

He is autistic

She is brain damaged

He is crazy

Blind person

Deaf person

4 General Do's and Don'ts

- Familiarize yourself with the resources in the building such as where the accessible bathrooms are located, where wheelchairs are stored, and how to contact the Museum of Science ADA & 504 Coordinator. Keep that information handy whenever interacting with the public.
- Do not make assumptions about what a person wants or needs. Take their lead, listen, and then respond according to their instructions.
- It is permissible to offer assistance. If the person declines, do not insist on helping.
- When speaking to a person with a disability, look at and speak directly to them rather than the person who is accompanying them, unless the person is a child.
- Speak to adults as adults. Do not interact with an adult with a disability the same way you would a child.
- Never touch a person unless they specifically instruct you to do so.
- Never touch a person's wheelchair.
- Be flexible and responsive. You will always encounter new scenarios. If you can accommodate someone easily, you should.
- You are not required to provide personal care.

5 People with Service Animals

To ensure that the Museum is complying with accessibility standards regarding service animals, providing a welcoming experience for our guests who are accompanied by service animals, and minimizing the number of times that guests may be asked about their service animals, the Museum has set the following procedures:

Only trained staff at access control points (entry to Exhibit Halls, *Discovery Center*, Mugar Omni Theater, and Planetarium) may ask if an animal is a service animal.

If any staff person or volunteer sees a guest with an animal they strongly suspect is NOT a service animal, they should NOT approach the guest. Instead, they should alert Public Safety with a location and a description.

If any staff person or volunteer sees an animal behaving inappropriately or creating problems for other visitors, they should alert Public Safety with a location and a description.

Please remember that:

- Service dogs come in all sizes and many breeds.
- Service dogs perform many different services for their owners, many of which are not obvious.
- Service animals may even be miniature horses.
- Service animals DO NOT need to have identifying vests or tags.
- You MAY NOT ask what the guest's disability is.
- You MAY NOT ask for proof that an animal is a service animal.

6 People with Mobility Impairments

Don't make assumptions about a person's ability.

- Always ask the person first if they need assistance and how you can be of help.
- Never touch a person's wheelchair.
- When giving directions to a person using a wheelchair, consider physical obstacles such as stairs. Remember that the wheelchair accessible routes into the Mugar Omni Theater and the Theater of Electricity are very different. Become familiar with those routes.
- When giving directions to a person using crutches or a cane, ask if they would prefer the shortest route which may include escalators, or a less direct route that uses an elevator.
- If you are working at or near theaters or stages, be prepared to inform visitors about wheelchair seating locations.

7 People with Hearing Disabilities

Communication needs for people with hearing loss vary widely and therefore, the preferred method of communication will also vary among individuals. Some people may use sign language, read lips, use speech, use hearing aids, or communicate in writing. Others may just need you to speak clearly.

- Ask the person how they prefer to communicate.
- Take the time to communicate effectively. Use simple language, recognizing that some individuals may not have a good understanding of English.
- Always be prepared with a pen and paper in the event that someone must communicate with you in writing.
- Establish eye contact. If the individual is using the services of an interpreter speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter.
- If a person indicates that they speech read, make sure that you face them and that your mouth is not obstructed when you speak. Use gestures, facial expressions, etc. Do not assume that they can read your lips.
- Make sure that the communication is understood on both sides, repeating your understanding of the discussion for verification.
- Never pretend that you understand what is being said when you do not.
- Be patient. Some individuals may need you to repeat yourself more than one time or may need to speak to you in a quieter space without background noise.

8 People with Speech Impairments

People with speech impairments have a wide range of cognitive abilities. Do not assume that a person cannot understand what you are saying because they have a speech impairment.

- Give the person your full attention and attempt to understand what they are saying.
- Do not interrupt the person, attempt to finish their sentences, or ask the person they are with to tell you what they said.
- Speak in a regular tone of voice.
- Be patient and do not pretend you understand if you do not. Ask follow-up questions and summarize your understanding of the conversation for verification.
- If you continue to not understand what they are saying, ask if they can say it in a different way.
- Offer a pen and paper and/or invite the person to repeat the information in a quieter area if applicable.
- If the person brings a communication device, take the necessary time to interact with the person using the device.

9 People with Cognitive Disabilities

- Speak directly to the individual using simple, clear, and concrete language in a normal speaking voice. Do not use baby talk.
- Be patient and flexible. Take the time necessary to understand what is being said to you and to be understood by the person. You may need to repeat information more than once or in a different way, using different words.
- If the person brings a communication device, take the necessary time to interact with the person using the device.
- If the area is loud and has many distractions, suggest moving to a quieter area.
- Some people with cognitive disabilities may not use eye contact or may be easily distracted. Do not interpret this as rude behavior.

10 People with Visual Disabilities

People with different degrees of vision loss are considered visually impaired. Some people who are legally blind have some vision, while others have none. There is no obvious way to immediately determine whether or not someone is visually impaired, or to what extent, when first meeting them. People with visual impairments may or may not wear glasses, have guide dogs, or use canes.

- If you see a person using a guide dog or cane, announce your presence immediately so they know where you are. In all situations speak directly to the individual. Do not yell.
- Offer your assistance, and await instruction from the individual as to what specific help is needed. If your offer is declined, do not insist.
- Identify yourself as a Museum of Science staff person or volunteer.
- Do not touch or attempt to guide an individual without first asking if they want help. If they want assistance, let them take your arm or shoulder for guidance. As you walk advise them of any upcoming obstacles or changes in level.
- If you are giving directions, give specific non-visual information.
- Speak naturally. In conversation, do not be afraid to use visual terms like, “look,” or “see” or to use words that are visually descriptive, such as colors or shapes.
- Announce when you are leaving.

11 General Tips

In many cases, you cannot identify a person with a disability just by looking at them. People who have various health conditions, learning disabilities, multiple chemical sensitivities, diabetes, and a multitude of other conditions may require some level of assistance.

Some disabilities can cause people, both adults and children, to behave in ways that others may find objectionable. In such instances, remember that there is no intent to be disruptive.

- Stay calm. Remember that visitors take their cues on how to respond to situations from Museum staff and volunteers.
- If a person appears to be agitated or upset, do not touch them. Speak to them in a calm manner and consider moving the conversation to another location.
- Be empathetic and flexible, taking the necessary time to listen to the person's concerns. If it's a child, respectfully ask the parent if you can be of assistance.
- If a person tells you they need assistance because of a disability, you should provide it, even if it takes extra time.

Museum of Science Accessibility Initiative VISION STATEMENT

October 2012

The Museum of Science, Boston is committed to the inclusion of people with disabilities and will create an environment that is inviting, engaging, and accessible for everyone.

We will achieve this through an Accessibility Initiative that focuses on:

- Establishing meaningful inclusion as a core institutional value evident in all of our actions
- Designing our exhibits, programs, and facilities, especially key experiences, so that they are inclusive of a broad range of individuals
- Creating a work environment that is inclusive of a broad range of staff members and volunteers
- Embracing a process of continuous improvement toward greater inclusion
- Educating staff and volunteers about inclusive practices
- Communicating and demonstrating our commitment to the internal and external community
- Involving external partners through collaborations
- Identifying, prioritizing, and committing the resources necessary to achieve this aim

Accessibility Committee

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For further information, contact:

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