

TAKING THE HANDICAP OUT OF DISABILITY

In recent years, much attention has been given to the rights of people with disabilities. Legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and efforts of many consumer groups have spurred ramp construction, affirmative action to increase employment opportunities and television programming to include realistic role portrayals for people with disabilities.

These developments, resulting from the recognition that people with disabilities are, indeed, valuable and equal members of society, have helped people with disabilities lead more productive lives.

However, many people still view individuals with disabilities as lesser people- to be pitied, feared or ignored. These attitudes may arise from fear of someone who is different in any way or simply from lack of knowledge about disabilities. Despite good intentions and education programs, negative stereotypes remain.

This article gives suggestions on how to relate to people with disabilities, how to look beyond the disability and look at the ability and the personality- the things that make each of us unique and worthwhile.

ATTITUDES AND BARRIERS

A person with a disability is, first and foremost, a person. While a particular disability may limit certain types of activities or abilities, it does not make the individual any less a person. Ten to fifteen percent of the population has a disability such as blindness, deafness, paralysis, cerebral palsy, neurological disorder, mental illness, arthritis or mental retardation.

An attitude is a feeling or emotion which a person has towards a fact, situation, or person. Awareness is the knowledge or perception about a situation, object or person. Attitudinal barriers are a way of thinking or feeling that blocks or limits people's perception of the potential of people with disabilities to be capable, independent individuals.

Positive attitudes and awareness help people in their contacts and relationships with people with disabilities. Attitudes which are insensitive and prejudicial produce poor relationships. A person may not be aware of biases or negative attitudes and may express them in words or actions.

COMMUNICATION: THE TWO WAY STREET

If you are not used to communicating with a person with a disability and have any hesitations or concerns, here are a few tips:

USE COMMON SENSE- People with disabilities want to be treated the same way as everyone else.

BE POLITE- Show the person the same respect that you would expect to be given to you.

OFFER ASSISTANCE- Do not hesitate to offer assistance. However, do not automatically give help unless the person clearly needs help or asks for it. If the person declines your offer, do not insist on helping. Ask the person if assistance is needed and how it should be given.