

DISABILITY CAMPAIGN

Welcoming a Wheelchair User into Your Home



Photo: Angela and her neighbor decorate their home's walkway and install a ramp for Joni Eareckson Tada to feel welcomed into their home.

“Sometimes, just thinking about visiting someone’s home for the first time can make me so nervous; I wonder, ‘Have they made a way for my wheelchair?’” — Joni Eareckson Tada.

The concern of what it will be like to visit someone else’s home is one that many wheelchair users have. If you are opening your home to a person in a wheelchair, we’d like to share with you some tips and suggestions on how to make your home more disability friendly, and safe for you and your guest.

Cost-free steps to make your home accessible

1. Make sure electrical cords and cables are out of the way.
2. Remove area rugs or mats.
3. Remove breakable objects from furniture.
4. Remove any furniture that might get in the way. Most wheelchairs require a minimum five-foot radius of clear space in order to maneuver comfortably.
5. Keep pets outside or in a corral.
6. Make room at the kitchen table by removing a chair or two.

Low-cost and/or moderate-cost steps to make your home accessible

1. Install a ramp. You can buy a manufactured ramp or make one at a discount price and safely install it. Or, ask your friend if he/she owns a portable ramp.

2. Install grab bars in the bathroom.
3. Raise furniture with furniture coasters or secured, small blocks of wood.
4. Change doorknobs and faucet levers. Replace standard, round doorknobs with lever type handles. You can tie a string to the lever handle to make it easier to pull the door open or closed. Instead of round handles in the bathroom sink, install a single lever faucet.
5. Get rid of gravel. Maneuvering a wheelchair through gravel is difficult. If possible, replace the gravel with concrete or leveled paving stones. Another option is to use smaller stones instead of gravel.

Accommodating a friend in a wheelchair

Whenever you invite a friend or guest your home, you want to make sure that you accommodate them and any special needs they might have, such as food allergies or chemical sensitivities. It's important to also keep this in mind when inviting someone in a wheelchair to your home. Contact your guest ahead of time, and see if there are any accommodations you can make so that your friend will be more comfortable. For example, if your friend is a quadriplegic and cannot use his/her hands, purchase long straws to use when giving your friend a drink to prevent spills. If you are planning an activity, such as a trip to the movies after the home visit, contact your guest and the location ahead of time to make sure your place of interest is accessible and that any necessary accommodations can be made in a timely manner.

How to greet a person in a wheelchair

You've taken the steps to make your home accessible and have made accommodations, but how do you greet someone in a wheelchair as they come to your home?

1. Instead of a handshake, reach for your friend's hand and grasp the wrist or gently squeeze his/her shoulder or forearm.
2. Lower yourself to be at the same eye level as your friend or pull up a chair.
3. Consider the person's wheelchair as his/her personal space; ask before automatically going to assist by pushing the person.

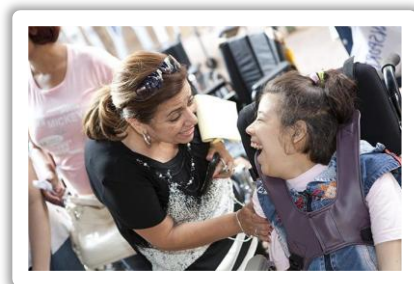


Photo: Joni and Friends

4. If the wheelchair user is with a caregiver, speak directly to your friend in the wheelchair. If he/she needs help replying or understanding, your guest will turn to the caregiver. Speak in your usual tone of voice and greet your friend in a wheelchair as you would greet anyone else.

Remember, a wheelchair user should feel as welcome as any guest in your home. In addition to making your home accessible and accommodating, it's important to keep in mind your attitude can make anyone feel welcome or unwelcome. With your demonstrated kindness, understanding, and willingness to serve, your friend in a wheelchair will feel welcomed even if your home is not 100% accessible or if you forget to make an accommodation.

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