



Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

When Push Comes To Shove: The Pusher's Handbook (Part One)

By: Dave Hingsburger

"Hey!" she yelled, "Don't tilt me back without telling me first!" She was angry. She had a right to be. I had been hired to work in a classroom with teens who had physical disabilities. In my interview I wasn't asked a single question about pushing a wheelchair and the etiquette that the job requires. It was as if it was assumed that pushing was just, well, pushing.

It's not.

I learned that from those students. And, now of course, I know that from having had the experience of being a wheelchair user and needing the occasional push myself. I'll tell you after being helped in the chair a couple of times, I wanted to go back and apologize to every student that I pushed along hallways, down sidewalks and up ramps. I get it. I've rolled a mile in their tires I guess. This article will present a handbook ...

The Pushers Handbook: Respectful Rules for Rolling

1.) *Permission, Permission, Permission*

Even if the person asked you for help, get permission before you actually start pushing. Asking, "Ready to go?" or "I'm ready, are you?" are ways to request permission to start. Permission asking doesn't have to be an arduous and cumbersome interchange between pusher and pushee. It just lets the person be in control of the movement of the chair. Being pushed, or needing to be pushed, makes one very vulnerable. It feels like you are handing control of your body and your movements to another person. It feels like that because it IS like that! So, by handing control back, you are saying something about yourself and something about the experience you are both going to have together.

Remember, this is a shared experience. You aren't pushing and they aren't riding in separate realities. Communicating your willingness for this to be an experience directed by the person requiring help, says something quite deep about your character and your view of the other person as being worthy of consideration.

Some of you may be thinking, 'But the person I push is non-verbal, why would I do this?' (I'll leave aside that I am on a campaign to eliminate the phrase 'non-verbal' and replace it with 'non-traditional



Hands

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communicator' for now.) Well, just because the person doesn't speak doesn't mean that they can't communicate, of course, but it also doesn't mean that they can't respond to your respectful tone and your inclusive approach.

2.) *It's not a toy*

Wheelchairs are expensive.

People rely on wheelchairs the same way you rely on legs.

Waiting for repairs can completely interrupt someone's life.

So ... don't go joy riding! Never, ever, ever, get into someone's wheelchair, without their permission. Never. Ever. Even with their permission, don't give in to the temptation to pop wheelies or race to see how fast it, or you, can go. People with disabilities will often play in their wheelchairs, I do, but they know exactly what the chair can and cannot do; they know precisely what they can and cannot do. And, it's their chair. I have raced my chair down a long ramp when there was no one else around that I'd crash into ... and it was fun. I've spun my chair around with a child on my shoulders ... and it was fun. But that doesn't make the chair a toy any more than you using your legs to run down a ramp or to twirl with kidlets in your arms makes your legs toys.

3.) *No Distracted Driving*

Right now, at this very moment that I'm typing this, I have a huge bruise on my right wrist. The person who pushed me, who offered to push me, let go of the right hand grip on my chair to type a text message and I veered into a door jamb and pushed my watch – hard – into my skin. It really, really, hurt. I won't write here what I said, but you can guess. Then the person who offered to push me when I had been pushing myself, was upset that I was upset, after all they were just helping out. I was upset for two reasons: firstly, "Pay attention, I'm vulnerable up here!" and secondly, it hurt like golly gee willikers.

It's tempting to simply think of distractions as technology – but if you are a person who is distracted SQUIRREL!! by the makes of cars going by, the various items in shop windows, or the sight of attractive passers by, then realize that, when you are getting behind someone to push them, you are going to have to actively marshal your attention and work at keeping the person in front of you safe. I didn't choose the list of distractions above at random, each one of those distractions has ended with me hitting a wall, being nearly tipped over a curb or crashed into a light pole, respectively.

Safety.

You are being given the safety of another person. Take it seriously and pay attention, no matter how SQUIRREL!! the distraction is.

4.) *Pay Attention To Pavement*

When I'm pushing myself, or when I'm out in my power wheelchair, I am very, very aware of the surface of the road or sidewalk. So much so that some people in my apartment building think I'm a snob. I don't notice people as much as I notice pavement! My power wheelchair is operated entirely by a little joystick that is incredibly sensitive to the touch. Not seeing an uneven spot created by a crack in the sidewalk can send me flying off in the wrong direction. So it's vital that I see and anticipate the change. The same is true for anyone who is pushing a wheelchair, look for the condition of the surface you are rolling over and adjust to it. If you see a bumpy patch coming, say so, "It's going to be a little rough for a few feet here," or my favourite, "The captain is expecting some minor turbulence for the next few minutes." That joke gets tired after, say, one time, so mostly you just need to say, 'getting bumpy' or any other bit of information.

This includes noticing the state of the curbs you are going to be going over. Some of them are very steep – which can be frightening to ride over; some of them are very uneven – which can be jarring to get past. Know when to turn the chair around and go down backwards. For steep or uneven curbs, backing down really is the only safe option. Yep it takes more time, but, really, that's a problem?

5.) *Stopping and Waiting on Wheels*

Many wheelchairs have seats that are made of nylon or vinyl, which are, in a word, slippery. Further, many are made without seatbelts. This means that a sudden stop can have someone sliding off the chair. Now sudden stops are a necessary part of being out in the world. When I rent a wheelchair van, I discovered that very quickly when we were driving in the city and came to a sudden, and necessary, stop. I'd slide forward and, terrifyingly, under the seatbelt. That's because the floor was easy to slide on and so was my chair. We now put down a lovely green and blue striped mat (just because it's utilitarian doesn't mean it can't be pretty) that prevents my feet from sliding and therefore I can resist the forward motion when the car stops.

But this is about pushing. I've had to train everyone who pushes me about the propensity for me to slide in my seat and the difficulty to avoid becoming street meat when we wait on the downward slope of a curb cut. Instead of holding on tight and praying for the light to change – which, by the way, increases the wait time, I've taught everyone to stop just shy of the curb cut, wait on the flat surface, and then cross. It was easy to motivate people to do this, none of them particularly wanted to help me up from the ground and back into my chair.

Ramps are also something to think about with the slipper slidey effect. Always announce that a ramp is coming so that the person can prepare; they know how. But for those who cannot push themselves back up in their chair, ask them if they are still comfortable in their chair after the use of a ramp or, for those who are non-traditional communicators, come around front and ask them. They may not speak in words but they may communicate by being halfway out of the chair that they need help getting back into a more comfortable position.

6.) *Alone in a Crowd*

Once, waiting at a particularly busy intersection, I had the most incredibly strong sense of aloneness and claustrophobia at the same time. I felt alone because I was sitting and everyone else was standing. I felt claustrophobia because I was sitting and everyone else was standing – therefore, I was in a forest of legs, surrounded by bums, and I couldn't see a thing. I really hated it.

In my power chair I always make sure that, when I approach a busy curb, I head to an edge so that I can wait and not be in the centre of the crowd. I want those who push me to think of this as well. Remember, you are standing. You can see what's happening. You don't have to worry if those around you are on a high fibre diet. Aim for the side, for the edge or for the back of a group. Even in a line up, you can stand in line together a little off center; everyone is then a little more comfortable.

7.) *Dealing with Disability*

When one is in front and the other behind, it can be difficult, it seems, to see both people as a social unit made up of two social beings. Most typically it seems that people see the pusher as the person and the person in the wheelchair as their cargo. This leads to people speaking directly with you, the pusher, and paying no attention, and making no attempt to include, the person with a disability in the conversation or in choices, even choices that directly effect the person in the wheelchair.

“What will he be having?”

“Is he allowed to have a beer?”

“Are you sure he needs to go to the toilet?”

This can happen even if the person begins the conversation or interaction. The person spoken to hears the question and then directs their response to the person pushing the chair. There are three ways of handling this: if the person knows how to speak up and demand that the conversation happen with them, then shush; if the person does not yet know how to do this, direct them to speak directly to the person with a disability. Encourage advocacy whenever you can, don't give into the temptation to 'be their voice.' If they have a voice, ensure they get a chance to use it. If the person does not speak, but has another way of communicating, use it. Even if it takes time. Let others see what respect looks like.

It's easy to notice when prejudice makes a person invisible. It's less easy to notice when you do it yourself. When a friend of the individual comes along, or when you run into someone that one of you knows, it always happens, ALWAYS, that the two people who walk, walk beside each other and chat. The person out front is out of the picture socially. It's hard to hear what's said and it's difficult and uncomfortable to twist round in the chair to hear or to contribute to the conversation. However, when you encourage the third party to walk alongside the person in the wheelchair, conversation can naturally include everyone.

It's interesting too to see how others respond to seeing the person in the wheelchair being walked beside, not pushed from behind. It does all sorts of education without saying a single word. Sometimes what you do and how you do it is the best form of awareness training.

Summary of Part One

So those are some of the things I've learned. I have four more I want to write about but I'm also aware that this is already getting a little too long. So, what I'd like is to hear from other people, either those who are pushed, or those who do the pushing. What etiquette rules would you add to this list? When what you suggest and the items I have left to cover come up to 7, I'll do part two. So send your tips to me at dhingsburger@vitacls.org And, if you send it like it's written here, with a title paragraph or two explaining it, I'll put you on the authorship list. How cool an opportunity is that?? So I look forward to hearing from you. Please put 'Pushers Handbook' in the RE: line of your email so I can easily find it.

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About the Author

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