

R N I B

How to Guide People with Sight Loss

See differently





How to Guide People with Sight Loss

Introduction

This booklet should give you the information you need to feel more confident guiding people with sight loss. There are many ways to guide someone and you should always ask the person you're guiding what they'd prefer and let them know of what you're doing. When approaching someone who looks like they need some help, its good to keep in mind that they will likely have been guided many times before so will know what works for them.

Offering to guide someone will often be welcomed by them but there are many reasons why someone may decline your help. They may have reasons around culture, gender or personal space, or just be orientating themselves in an unfamiliar place. Sometimes they may not need guiding but just need to know where they are to orientate themselves.

It is important to remember that guide dogs are working animals, so you should ask the owner of a guide dog before you touch their dog or distract them. If someone has a white cane with red bands or a guide dog with a red and white harness this means they have sight loss and hearing loss. Be sure to stand in front of them and speak clearly when you introduce yourself.

Guiding

Setting off

Stand alongside the person you're guiding and hold out your arm slightly for them to take. They will hold your elbow, either cupping their hand against it or take hold of it lightly. You put your arm where its comfortable as long as your upper arm is straight. The person you're guiding will walk about half a pace behind you, this makes it easier for them to tell when you're turning your body.

Narrow and busy spaces

With narrow and busy spaces you will need to walk in single file. This includes shops, stations, crowded areas, and public transport. Let the person you are guiding know that you're approaching a narrow or busy area and that you will need to walk in single file. Move your guiding arm back and hold it behind you, keeping it straight. It may be easier for the person being guided to move their hand to your wrist when doing it. It can be helpful to slow down.

Roads and kerbs

When approaching a kerb or road let the person know that it is coming up and as you approach say whether it is a "kerb up" or "kerb down". Pause at the kerb so that the person you're guiding can feel the change in your movement through your arm.

When crossing a road always go straight across, rather than at an angle. You should use pedestrian crossings where possible and allow plenty of time to cross at a pace comfortable for the person you're guiding and not take risks. For wide crossings you may need to walk to a narrower section of the road, make sure you explain to the person you're guiding what you're doing.

It is important to not assume that just because someone is standing by a kerb or road that they want to cross, so don't worry if your offer of help is declined. For more information see the "Offering help to someone you don't know" section later in this booklet.



Steps, stairs and slopes

Let the person you're guiding know that you're approaching steps or slopes and whether they're going up or down. If possible they should be on the side with the handrail, it may be necessary to ask to change sides with them. As you go up or down the stairs the person you're guiding will feel your arm move which is their cue to start, this means they will be one step behind you. Let them know when you've reached the final step and pause while they find it with their foot. When they feel their arm resume its normal position they'll know you're both on the same level. Because going down stairs can be more hazardous, allow more time to find the handrail and feel the first and last steps.

If you are shorter than the person you're guiding, take your first step with the leg nearest them so they can feel your movement more clearly.

Some people use their guide dog as a substitute for the handrail and others prefer to use the stairs without a guide, using the handrail and their dog.

Escalators, lifts and travelators

Let the person you're guiding know if you are approaching an escalator or traveller and ask if they're happy to use it. Many blind and partially sighted people prefer to avoid them so its good to offer them the option of using an alternative route. If there isn't an easy alternative route you can request the escalator to be turned off.



Many of the same things you need to do for stairs is similar with escalators and travelators but sometimes it is better if they negotiate the first step on their own as there is often not space for two people. If this is the case then go slightly ahead of them. It may help to hold your arm behind your back to guide them off.

Not all guide dogs are trained to use escalators so ask if you need to find an alternative route. Never try to carry a guide dog on an escalator.

If you are in London, not all areas of the Underground network is accessible for people with guide dogs. You can guide the person to a member of staff who will know the most appropriate route.

Lifts are straightforward, let the person you're guiding know whether you're going up or down and which direction the exit is if there are doors at each end.

Doorways

When approaching a doorway let the person you're guiding know whether the door will open away or towards them and if it's a double door, if it opens their side or your side.

Always try to have the person you're guiding on the hinge side of the door. Open the door with the arm you're guiding with, this means that they can tell which way the door is opening. It can also act as a guide for them to move their hand along so they can place their hand on the door easily or find the door handle.

If in doubt on how to negotiate a doorway it may be easier for the person you're guiding to go through it themselves. Simply open the door for them and rejoin them the other side. If they have a guide dog they will probably prefer this approach.

Its best to avoid revolving doors and they shouldn't be used if the person has a guide dog. If there is no alternative, position yourself so the person you're guiding is on the widest part and guide them out at the end.

Automatic doors rarely pose problems but you should let the person you're guiding know that you're approaching them and which way they will open.

Turnstiles and ticket barriers

As always let the person you're guiding know that you're approaching a turnstile or ticket barrier and move to walking in single file as described in the "Narrow and busy spaces" section. If the turnstile is

high, such as ones that are full length, this will not be possible but you can help by describing how to navigate it and talk them through what they need to do.

If you're using an automatic ticket barrier the person you're guiding should go through first. Position them in the correct place by the barrier, place their ticket in the machine and take it out while they go through the barrier. You can then follow them through and rejoin them on the other side.

Never use a turnstile when guiding someone with a guide dog. Instead use an alternative to them and ticket barriers such as a gate. Many people will generally prefer these as well so where possible use the wider gate positioned at the end of the barriers.



Seating

To help someone in to a seat first describe what type of chair it is, this includes things like whether it has arms rests, how high it is and if it has wheels. You can ask them to let go of your guiding arm and place your arm on the back, arm or seat of the chair. Choose whichever feels most appropriate for the kind of chair. The person you're guiding can then follow your arm with their hand to locate the chair, you should let them know which part of the chair you've placed your hand on.

If a chair is under a table let them know this and guide their hand to the back of the chair. If the chair is on wheels then hold the chair whilst they sit on it. It is important to always guide people into a seat and not back them in to it.

Rows of seats

It is usually easier to lead someone in to a row of seats and you may need to change sides to do this. When you've reached your chairs you will need to turn and take small side steps to position them in the right place for their chair. From there they can do the rest.

When leaving, position yourself so you can lead them again. When you reach the aisle you may need to switch sides again.

Cars and taxis

Let the person know whether they are getting in to a front or backseat, as well as the kind of vehicle it is. There are differences in the height of the step in to a vehicle as well as the amount of room around the seat.

Place your guiding hand on the car door handle and tell them which direction the car is facing. They can then use your arm to guide them to the handle and find the top of the door with the other, this helps them to avoid banging their head. Alternatively you can open the door for them and place your guiding arm on the top of the door frame. The person you're guiding can then use your arm to find the top of the door frame. Always let the person you're guiding know what you're doing.

When getting out of the car you should open the door for them and help them out, letting them know if there's a gap between the car and kerb.



Buses, coaches and trains

Buses, coaches and trains vary in design a lot so there are no hard or fast rules. The basic principles as described in the other sections can be used though. Let the person you're guiding know what kind of gap there is between them and the vehicle, lead them single file on, off and through trains.



Offering help to someone you don't know

Introduce yourself and ask them if they need any assistance and where they're going. If they do want your help, then you can ask which side they'd like you on to guide them. If they have a guide dog you should go on the opposite side. Hold out your arm slightly so they can take hold of it.

It is important to bear in mind that sometimes people may seem like they need help and decline your offer for a variety of reasons.

Guiding someone with a guide dog

You should always approach someone who's using a guide dog from the opposite side to the dog. It is also important not to take hold of the dog's harness or lead, even though you're guiding someone they will still be using the dog. Some people also prefer for you to walk alongside them without holding your arm or walking in front with the dog following you.

There is also advice on how to guide someone with a guide dog under each section in this booklet.

Guiding someone with sight loss and hearing loss

If someone has a white cane with red bands or a guide dog with a red and white harness this means they have sight loss and hearing loss. When you approach be sure to stand in front of them and speak clearly when you introduce yourself. This means that they can use the useful sight and hearing they do have more effectively.

If they do not respond you can gently place a hand on their upper arm and leave it there, they will then be able to respond and touch your hand. You can try tracing letters on their palm using your forefinger. Sometimes its better to guide their right forefinger on their left palm. You can use this method to let them know of steps and kerbs that are coming up.

Guiding children

Guiding children with sight loss is no different from guiding an adult. Just like adults, remember to never grab a child by their arm or hand and that they may decline your offer of help.

Further information

RNIB Helpline

Our Helpline is your direct line to the support, advice and services you need. Whether you want to know more about your eye condition, buy a product from our shop, join our library, find out about possible benefit entitlements, or be put in touch with a trained counsellor, we're only a call away.

Our Helpline can be contacted **0303 123 9999** 8am to 8pm weekdays and 9am to 1pm Saturdays. Alternatively you can email **helpline@rnib.org.uk**.

Guiding

For the latest information on guiding, visit our website **rnib.org.uk/guiding** where you can watch our guiding videos which feature two blind and partially sighted people explaining how they like to be guided, as well as a number of helpful guiding tips.

Guide Dogs for the Blind Association

For further information on sighted guiding with guide dogs contact Guide Dogs by telephone **0845 372 7499**, email **myguide@guidedogs.org.uk** or visit their website **guidedogs.org.uk**

If you or someone you know is living with sight loss, we're here to help.

**RNIB Helpline 0303 123 9999
helpline@rnib.org.uk**

The Sight Advice FAQ answers questions about living with sight loss, eye health or being newly diagnosed with a sight condition. This includes those who are supporting people through their sight loss journey. It is produced by RNIB in partnership with a number of other sight loss organisations.

sightadvicefaq.org.uk

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