

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

HOW TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF RESPECT

People with disabilities are, first and foremost, people. They are mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, students, teachers, religious leaders, political leaders, entrepreneurs, scientists, doctors, artists, writers, bosses and employees. They're from every part of society and in every community. Regrettably, people with disabilities have long had to hear misguided comments from those who see their disability first instead of the individuals that they are. This tendency toward insensitivity has led to the use of common expressions that hurt and alienate.

For example, describing someone as retarded, handicapped, autistic, crippled or learning disabled makes the disability the primary description of the person, rather than acknowledging the person first. That is the type of disrespectful description that "People First Language" seeks to overcome.

People First Language is a language of inclusion for what is essentially the nation's largest minority group. According to The Arc, about 54 million Americans – or, one in five individuals – have a disability. Within this population, all ages, religions, socioeconomic levels, ethnic backgrounds and genders are represented. And their contributions enrich their families, their communities and all areas where they live, serve, work and play.

Words matter, and how words are used to describe others shape how they are seen in their communities. Referring to people based on old stereotypes is harmful to their abilities to contribute and make a difference.

One specific area of terminology that People First Language addresses is the distinction between emphasizing a medical diagnosis rather than an objective way of acknowledging and addressing an individual.

What Is a Disability?

There is no universal description of a disability, nor a time when a disability is likely to occur. A disability may impact a person at any point in the life cycle – from birth to mid-life to the older years.

A disability is essentially a medical diagnosis. Depending on the age and circumstance, a disability diagnosis may be important for accessing such services as special education, vocational rehabilitation or workmen's compensation. Thus, a disability diagnosis is important to how individuals



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will access services based on the characteristics of the medical condition. Unfortunately, uneducated attitudes about disabilities can become greater obstacles for individuals to overcome rather than medical diagnoses. In other words, when you see the diagnosis as the most important quality of the person, you devalue the person.

Think of it this way. The disability itself isn't a "problem." The disability indicates a need. An individual wouldn't say "I am wheelchair bound," but would instead say, "I need to use a wheelchair." Someone who relies on glasses for better vision wouldn't say, "I have a seeing problem," but would instead simply say, "I wear glasses." Neither the eyeglasses nor the wheelchair are the defining characteristic of the person.

That's why and how People First Language puts the person ahead of the disability.

What Can You Do?

There are many opinions about the use of People First Language, but what you can certainly do is think about how you see individuals with disabilities and how you can adjust what you say when you refer to them. With such a large part of our society affected by a wide variety of disabilities, individuals will vary on how they refer to themselves and how they would like you to refer to them. It's always a good idea to ask their preference.

In the meantime, take a look at the following examples and notice how a simple change in language demonstrates greater respect for individuals with disabilities:

Examples of People First Language

Say:

People with disabilities
 He has a cognitive disability
 She has autism
 He has Down syndrome
 She has a learning disability
 He has a physical disability
 She uses a wheelchair
 He receives special ed services
 Congenital disability
 Brain injury
 Accessible parking, hotel room

Instead of:

The handicapped or disabled
 He is retarded
 She is autistic
 He is Down's, a mongoloid
 She's learning disabled
 He's a quadriplegic, is crippled
 She's confined to a wheelchair
 He's in special ed
 Birth defect
 Brain damage
 Handicapped parking, hotel room

Source: Kathie Snow, DisabilityisNatural.com