

DISABILITY AWARENESS

A Primer on **People First Language**

Addressing Individuals with Disabilities with Respect



“The difference between the right word and the almost right word
is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.”

Mark Twain

Revised 2021

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**Language in relation to individuals with disabilities is always changing. This booklet represents proper language as of March 2021.*



Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education

UtahStateUniversity

INSTITUTE FOR DISABILITY RESEARCH, POLICY & PRACTICE

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The purpose for this booklet on “People First Language” is to help us understand the importance of addressing persons with disabilities in a respectful manner. Practice and reflection will help break our habits of how we verbally address each other.

The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.

Old Chinese Proverb



*Language
of the*
Past

- Impaired individuals
- The handicapped...
- People who “suffer” from the “tragedy” of “birth defects...”
- Categorically... “the disabled, the retarded, the autistic, the blind, the deaf, the learning disabled” and more
- Disabled person
- Autistic child



*Language
of the*
Present

Individuals who have a disability are moms, dads, sons, daughters, employees, employers, scientists, friends, neighbors, movie stars, leaders and followers, students, and teachers.

THEY ARE PEOPLE. THEY ARE PEOPLE, FIRST.



People First Language describes what a person *HAS*, not what a person *IS*!

Are you myopic or do you wear glasses?
Are you cancerous or do you have cancer?
Are you freckled or do you have freckles?
Are you disabled or do you have a disability?



People First Language puts the person before the disability.

Disability has been defined as a physical or mental function that operates differently.

Contrast that meaning with the past definitions of **“handicap”**:

A *published* origin of **“handicap”** refers to “hand in cap,” a game where winners were penalized or put at a disadvantage.

A *legendary* origin of the word “handicap” refers to a person with a disability required to beg on the street with “cap in hand.”



“Handicapped,”
“Disabled,”
or
“People with Disabilities”

Which description is more accurate?



Using “the handicapped,” and even “the disabled,” usually evokes and negative feelings (sadness, pity, fear, and more) and creates a stereotypical perception that people with disabilities are all alike. Just as all people who have brown hair are not alike; all people who have disabilities are not alike. Many people who have disabilities would never think of themselves as “handicapped.”

In the 1990’s, the federal special education law dropped the term “handicapped” and replaced it with “disability”. The law went from the Education of All Handicapped Act (EHA) to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The community of persons with disabilities is the largest minority group in our country. It includes people of both genders and from all religions, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic levels. About the only things people with disabilities have in common with one another are 1) having a body function that operates differently and 2) often encountering prejudice and discrimination. Unique to the community of persons with disabilities is that it’s the only minority group that any person can join in the split second of an accident.

The Disability Rights Movement is following in the footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s and the Women’s Movement of the 1970’s.

While people with disabilities and their advocates work to end discrimination and segregation in education, employment, and our communities at large, we must all work to end the prejudicial language and perceptions that create an invisible barrier from being included in the ordinary mainstream of life.



“Disability is a *natural condition* of the human experience.”

*The U.S. Developmental Disabilities Act and
The Bill of Rights Act, 1993*

Disability is not the “problem”.

We need to avoid the word “problem” when talking about people’s needs! A person who wears glasses doesn’t walk around saying, “I have a problem seeing”. They would say, “I wear (need) glasses”. We must recognize that a “problem” is really a need.

The Real Problem is *Attitudinal Barriers*.

There have always been people with disabilities in our world and there always will be.



If **EDUCATORS** - and our society at large - perceive children with disabilities as individuals who have the potential to learn, who have the need to receive the same education as their peers without disabilities, and who have a future in the adult world of work, we wouldn’t have to push for inclusive education.

If **EMPLOYERS** - and our society at large - believed adults with disabilities have valuable job skills (because they received a quality education), we wouldn’t have to fight for real jobs or for real pay in the real community.

If **BUSINESS OWNERS** - and our society at large - viewed people with disabilities as consumers with money to spend (because they are wage-earners), we wouldn’t have to pass laws for accessible entrances and other accommodations.

The odds are great that you will have a short-term or long-term disability in your lifetime. If you acquire a disability in your lifetime, how will you want to be described? How will you want to be *treated*?

Most people who do not have a disability now will have one in the future.

Using People First Language is a *crucial* issue.

Disability issues affect all Americans!

Most individuals in our society will have a disability at some time during their lifetime. If people with disabilities are to be included in all aspects of our communities—in the very ordinary, wonderful, typical activities most people take for granted—then they must talk about themselves in the very ordinary, very wonderful, very typical language other people use about themselves.



Children with disabilities are children first. The only labels they need are their names!

In our society, “handicapped” and “disabled” are all-encompassing terms that are misused.

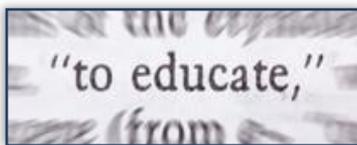
- People with hearing or vision impairments don’t need “handicapped” parking or restrooms. People with mobility impairments do need accessible parking and restrooms.
- If a “handicapped” entrance has a ramp for people who use wheelchairs, does the doorway have Braille signage for people with visual impairments?
- Accommodations that enable people with disabilities to access a facility—regardless of their disabilities—are accessible!
- Society has a negative perception of certain words. When the traffic report mentions a traffic jam, you’ll often hear, “There’s a disabled vehicle on the highway.” “Disabled,” in that context, means “broken down”.
- The terms “disability” and “disabilities” should be used in appropriate situations and with people first language.
- If a new toaster doesn’t work, we return it, saying “It’s defective,” and get a new one! Instead of babies who have birth “defects,” the proper term is “congenital disability”.



When we understand the meanings of words and how they’re misused, we realize they are the tip of the iceberg in relation to inappropriate language and false perceptions.

When people with disabilities are referred to by their diagnoses, we have devalued them as human beings. When we devalue others, we devalue ourselves.

When we start calling people by their right names, when we recognize that people with disabilities are people first, we can begin to see how people with disabilities are more like people without disabilities than they are different. When we understand that disability labels are simply diagnoses, we can put them in their proper perspective.



A Story

He loves ice cream and playing on the computer. He has blonde hair, blue eyes, and cerebral palsy. His disability is only one small piece of his life. For many people with disabilities, their diagnoses define who they are and how they are treated.

When I introduce myself to people, I don't tell them I'll never be a prima ballerina. Like others, I focus on my strengths — the things I do well — not on what I can't do. Don't you do the same? I don't say, "My son can't write with a pencil." I say, "My son uses a computer to do his school work." I don't say, "My son can't walk." I say, "My son uses a walker and a wheelchair." And Benjamin isn't "wheelchair bound." He's free when he uses it — free to go when and where he wants to go.



We know a person's self-image is strongly tied to the words used to describe that person. We've been told that descriptions can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a child is told she is retarded or slow or lazy, she will probably live up to that expectation. If told she's brilliant, she'll probably exceed at school.

People with disabilities, having been described by their labels all their lives, must often convince themselves that they are capable and have potential for success. Parents must convince themselves, and their children, that their kids are capable and have potential for success.

Examples of People First Language

PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE	INSTEAD OF
People with disabilities	The handicapped/disabled
People with a cognitive delay	The mentally retarded
He has a cognitive impairment	He's retarded
My son has autism	My son is autistic
She has Down Syndrome	She's a Downs kid, a mongoloid
He has a learning disability	He's learning disabled
He's short of stature	He's a dwarf/midget
She has an emotional disturbance	She's emotionally disturbed
He uses a wheelchair or a mobility chair	He's wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair
Typical kids or kids without disabilities	Normal and/or healthy kids
He receives special ed. services	He's in special ed.
Congenital disability	Birth defect
Accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.	Handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc.
She has a need for.....	She has a problem with.....

**People First Language can change
how people with disabilities
*feel about themselves.***



**People First Language can change how
society views and treats
people with disabilities.**

Make People First Language a habit.

***Remember - the language we use today might
not be appropriate tomorrow as we as a society
become more sensitive and accepting.**

Notes: