

## Choosing Words the “People-first” Way

As more people with disabilities become active participants in community life, our shared vocabulary will continue to change. Generally, in choosing words about people with disabilities, the guiding principle is to refer to the person first, not the disability. Instead of saying “the disabled,” it is preferable to say “people with disabilities.” Putting the word “people” first places emphasis on the person instead of the disability. The disability is no longer the primary, defining characteristic of an individual but merely one aspect of the whole person. It is still all too common in our society to come across labels for disabilities that either have negative connotations or are misleading. Using such labels contributes to negative stereotypes. For this reason, some words, such as the following, should be completely avoided: afflicted, bleeder, crazy, defective, deformed, invalid, lame, maimed, pitiful, spastic, unfortunate. All of these words devalue the person they attempt to describe. Avoid them when speaking to, or about, persons with disabilities.

In fact, unless it’s pertinent to the conversation, when talking about a person with disabilities, you don’t even need to refer to the disability. Remember that it’s best to focus on getting to know the person, not the disability. Relax! Be yourself! When in doubt about the correct word to use, simply ask the person, or his/her friends and family, what he or she prefers.

Here are some suggestions on how to incorporate people-first language into your written and verbal communications.

**AVOID:** “afflicted with” a particular condition, such as polio or multiple sclerosis

**USE:** “someone who had polio” or “person with multiple sclerosis”

**AVOID:** crippled, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound, wheelchair user

**USE:** person with a physical disability, person who uses a wheelchair

**AVOID:** deaf and dumb, deaf mute

**USE:** person who is deaf, person who is nonverbal, person who uses an alternative communication device. Note: Many people who are deaf advocate for the term “deaf person” to symbolize the pride they feel as part of the deaf community.

**AVOID:** epileptic

**USE:** person with epilepsy, person with a seizure disorder

**AVOID:** cerebral palsied, spastic

**USE:** person with cerebral palsy

**AVOID:** stricken with..., a victim of ..., suffering from ...

**USE:** person with ...

**AVOID:** mongoloid

**USE:** person with Down syndrome

**AVOID:** handicapped person, the handicapped, handicapped

**USE:** person with a disability, people with disabilities

**AVOID:** special needs child, special person

**USE:** child with a disability, child with a chronic illness

**AVOID:** physically challenged, intellectually challenged, retarded

**USE:** person with a disability, people with cognitive (or intellectual) disabilities

### **Suggestions for Interacting with People with Disabilities**

Here are some recommendations that will put both you and the person with the disability more at ease.

- Talk directly to the person with the disability, maintaining eye contact, even if he/she is using an interpreter or personal assistant. Encourage the person with the disability to express his/her own opinions, even when parents or friends feel they can speak for the individual.
- Ask if assistance is needed rather than assuming it is. If the person says, "No, thanks," don't pressure him/her to accept help anyway.
- Use a normal tone of voice. If the person cannot hear or understand you, he/she will let you know.
- When talking with a person with a cognitive disability, speak in simple, clear sentences. Remember that simple language does not mean childish language. When appropriate, ask the person to put in his or her own words what has been said to confirm understanding.
- If appropriate, sign or gesture to make yourself understood.
- If you do not understand what the person with the disability is saying, you should say so. Ask the person to repeat if necessary.
- When interacting with a person with a speech or language disability, be patient. Give the person ample time to respond to your question. Do not try to finish a statement for him/her.
- Be careful not to assume that a person with one disability also has other disabilities. A person with a physical disability does not necessarily have a cognitive disability; nor is a person who is blind particularly likely to have a hearing loss.
- When talking with an adult who uses a wheelchair, sit across from the person at eye level. If no chair is available, stand. Kneeling may convey a demeaning attitude toward the individual.
- Use the same terms with persons who have disabilities as you would with anyone else. For example, do not avoid using "look" or "see" with a person with a vision loss. Likewise, do not hesitate to say, "Let's walk over ..." to a person using a wheelchair.

- In casual conversation with someone with a disability, talk about the same things as you do with others—the weather, the garden you want to plant, the latest baseball game. While people with disabilities may be willing to answer questions about their disability, making such questions the focus of an interaction can inhibit friendly conversation.
- In social settings, treat people with disabilities just as you would anyone else. Avoiding contact or being overly attentive calls attention to the disability at the person's expense.
- Be aware that an assistance animal, for example, a guide dog helping an individual who is blind, is on duty. Petting or otherwise distracting the animal is discouraged unless first approved by the owner.
- Encourage children and adults to learn about people with disabilities. Open, informed communication helps overcome fear and misleading attitudes. People with disabilities are their own best spokespersons. Disability is not “abnormal,” it's normal. It may affect any of us at some point in our lives.