

PHILOSOPHY & VALUES

PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE-DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

*The difference between the right word and the almost right word
is the difference between lightening and the lightening bug.*

-- Mark Twain

What is People First Language?

People First Language describes what the person HAS, not what the person IS. People First Language puts the person BEFORE the disability. The support coordinator (formally known as service coordinator) should make reference to the person first, then the disability. The support coordinator should say “a person with a disability”, rather than “a disabled person”. (More examples are included at the end of this section). People First Language also means avoiding the use of words or phrases that evoke pity or fear, or that have a negative connotation. Support coordinators should avoid words such as abnormal, birth defect, burden, deformed, disfigured, invalid, imbecile, idiot, moron, palsied, spastic, tragic, victim, suffers from, or stricken with.

Why?

If people with disabilities are to be included in all aspects of our communities--in the ordinary, wonderful, and typical activities most people take for granted--we must talk about them, and they must talk about themselves, in the ordinary, wonderful, typical language others use about themselves.

Language is powerful. When we misuse words, we reinforce the barriers created by negative and stereotypical attitudes. When we refer to people with disabilities by medical diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as members of the human race. For too long, labels have been used to define the value and potential of people who are labeled. Often, when people hear a person’s diagnosis, they automatically make assumptions. Assumptions are made about the person’s potential, what he or she can or can’t do, whether he or she can learn, be employed, or live in the community. We must believe all people with disabilities are real people with unlimited potential, just like all people. People will live up (or down) to our expectations. If we expect people with disabilities to succeed, we cannot let labels stand in their way. A person’s self image is strongly tied to the words used to describe the person. We must not let labels destroy the hopes and dreams of people with disabilities and their families. *The only label a person really needs to use is his or her name.*

History

Certain words used to describe people with disabilities have a historic and often very derogatory origin. For example, the word “handicapped” has a historic origin which refers to a person with a disability having to beg on the street with “cap in hand”. People with disabilities do not want to be the recipients of charity or pity. They want to participate equally with the rest of the community. A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person’s ability to walk,

hear, talk, learn, etc. ONLY use “handicap” to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society or the environment.

Even in our casual language, we use words that have historic origin in the world of disability. For example, words such as “moron”, “imbecile”, and “idiot” were once used as technical terms to describe and categorize people with disabilities. When we use this language in our everyday lives, it is insulting and degrading to people who have disabilities.

Language is often corrupted in our society. What is the worst insult nowadays that a child can sling at another child? “Retard”. When people use the word “retard” or “retarded” in casual conversations, it is insulting and degrading to those who happen to have that label.

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's of short stature

he has an emotional disability

she uses a wheelchair or mobility chair

he receives special ed services

typical kids – kids without disabilities

congenital disability

he has a brain injury

accessible parking

INSTEAD OF...

the handicapped or disabled

he's mentally retarded

she's autistic

he's Downs

she's learning disabled

he's quadriplegic/crippled

she's a dwarf (or midget)

he's emotionally disturbed

she's wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair

he's in special ed

normal or healthy kids

birth defect

he's brain damaged

handicapped parking

she needs - or she uses...

she has a problem with

Common Courtesies

- If the disability isn't germane to the conversation, don't mention it.
- Remember, a person with a disability is not necessarily chronically sick or unhealthy.
- Don't automatically assume a person with disabilities in a public place needs your assistance. Offer assistance, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help. Listen to any instructions the person may give.
- A wheelchair is part of one's personal body space. Leaning or hanging on it, or pushing it unasked, is annoying and rude.
- When speaking to a person who uses a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, place yourself at eye level with that person. This will spare both of you a sore neck.
- Share the same social courtesies with everyone. If you shake hands with people you meet, offer your hand to everyone, regardless of disability.
- When planning events which involve people with disabilities, consider their needs when choosing a location.
- When speaking about people with disabilities, emphasize achievements, abilities and individual qualities. Portray them as they are in real life: sons, daughters, parents, employees, etc.
- When talking to a person who has a disability, speak directly to that person, not through a companion. For people who use sign language, speak to them, not to the interpreter.

REMEMBER, the disability community is the largest minority group in our nation, and it's all-inclusive. It includes people of both genders and of all ages, as well as individuals from all religions, ethnic backgrounds, and socio-economic levels. About the only things people with disabilities have in common with one another are 1) having a body part that is different and 2) facing prejudice and discrimination. The disability community is the only minority group that *anyone* can join, perhaps in the split second of an accident, or perhaps through aging. Many people who do not have a disability now will have one in the future.

Others will have a family member or friend who acquires a disability. If and when it happens to you, will you have more in common with others with disabilities or with your family, friends, and coworkers? How will you want to be treated? How will you want to be described?

Adapted from Kathie Snow's "Disability is Natural"
(www.disabilityisnatural.com)