

Who Are People with Disabilities?

People with disabilities are -- first and foremost, people -- people who have individual abilities, interests and needs. For the most part, they are ordinary individuals seeking to live ordinary lives. People with disabilities are moms, dads, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students and teachers. About 54 million Americans -- one out of every five individuals -- have a disability. Their contributions enrich our communities and society as they live, and share their lives.

Changing Images Presented

Historically, people with disabilities have been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared or ignored. They have been portrayed as helpless victims, repulsive adversaries, heroic individuals overcoming tragedy, and charity cases who must depend on others for their well being and care. Media coverage frequently focused on heartwarming features and inspirational stories that reinforced stereotypes, patronized and underestimated individuals' capabilities.

Much has changed lately. New laws, disability activism and expanded coverage of disability issues have altered public awareness and knowledge, eliminating the worst stereotypes and misrepresentations. Still, old attitudes, experiences and stereotypes die hard.

People with disabilities continue to seek accurate portrayals that present a respectful, positive view of individuals as active participants of society, in regular social, work and home environments. Additionally, people with disabilities are focusing attention on tough issues that affect quality of life, such as accessible transportation, housing, affordable health care, employment opportunities and discrimination.

Eliminating Stereotypes -- Words Matter!

Every individual regardless of sex, age, race or ability deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. As part of the effort to end discrimination and segregation -- in employment, education and our communities at large -- it's important to eliminate prejudicial language.

Like other minorities, the disability community has developed preferred terminology -- People First Language. More than a fad or political correctness, People First Language is an objective way of acknowledging, communicating and reporting on disabilities. It eliminates generalizations, assumptions and stereotypes by focusing on the person rather than the disability.

As the term implies, People First Language refers to the individual first and the disability second. It's the

difference in saying the autistic and a child with autism. (See the other side.) While some people may not use preferred terminology, it's important you don't repeat negative terms that stereotype, devalue or discriminate, just as you would avoid racial slurs and say women instead of gals.

Equally important, ask yourself if the disability is even relevant and needs to be mentioned when referring to individuals, in the same way racial identification is being eliminated from news stories when it is not significant.

What Should You Say?

Be sensitive when choosing the words you use. Here are a few guidelines on appropriate language.

- Recognize that people with disabilities are ordinary people with common goals for a home, a job and a family. Talk about people in ordinary terms.
- Never equate a person with a disability -- such as referring to someone as retarded, an epileptic or quadriplegic. These labels are simply medical diagnosis. Use People First Language to tell what a person HAS, not what a person IS.
- Emphasize abilities not limitations. For example, say a man walks with crutches, not he is crippled.
- Avoid negative words that imply tragedy, such as afflicted with, suffers, victim, prisoner and unfortunate.
- Recognize that a disability is not a challenge to be overcome, and don't say people succeed in spite of a disability. Ordinary things and accomplishments do not become extraordinary just because they are done by a person with a disability. What is extraordinary are the lengths people with disabilities have to go through and the barriers they have to overcome to do the most ordinary things.

Use handicap to refer to a barrier created by people or the environment. Use disability to indicate a functional limitation that interferes with a person's mental, physical or sensory abilities, such as walking, talking, hearing and learning. For example, people with disabilities who use wheelchairs are handicapped by stairs.

Do not refer to a person as bound to or confined to a wheelchair. Wheelchairs are liberating to people with disabilities because they provide mobility.

Do not use special to mean segregated, such as separate schools or buses for people with disabilities, or to suggest a disability itself makes someone special.

Avoid cute euphemisms such as physically challenged, inconvenienced and differently abled.

Promote understanding, respect, dignity and positive outlooks.

-- Revised February 2007

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."
Mark Twain

People First Language recognizes that individuals with disabilities are -- first and foremost -- people. It emphasizes each person's value, individuality, dignity and capabilities. The following examples provide guidance on what terms to use and which ones are inappropriate when talking or writing about people with disabilities.

People First Language to Use

- people/individuals with disabilities
an adult who has a disability
a child with a disability
a person
- people/individuals without disabilities
typical kids
- people with intellectual and developmental disabilities
he/she has a cognitive impairment
a person who has Down syndrome
- a person who has autism
- people with a mental illness
a person who has an emotional disability
with a psychiatric illness/disability
- a person who has a learning disability
- a person who is deaf
he/she has a hearing impairment/loss
a man/woman who is hard of hearing
- person who is deaf and cannot speak
who has a speech disorder
uses a communication device
uses synthetic speech
- a person who is blind
a person who has a visual impairment
man/woman who has low vision
- a person who has epilepsy
people with a seizure disorder
- a person who uses a wheelchair
people who have a mobility impairment
a person who walks with crutches
- a person who has quadriplegia
people with paraplegia
- he/she is of small or short stature
- he/she has a congenital disability
- accessible buses, bathrooms, etc.
reserved parking for people with disabilities

Instead of Labels that Stereotype & Devalue

- the handicapped
the disabled
- normal people/healthy individuals
atypical kids
- the mentally retarded; retarded people
he/she is retarded; the retarded
he/she's a Downs kid; a Mongoloid; a Mongol
- the autistic
- the mentally ill; the emotionally disturbed
is insane; crazy; demented; psycho
a maniac; lunatic
- he/she is learning disabled
- the deaf
- is deaf and dumb
mute
- the blind
- an epileptic
a victim of epilepsy
- a person who is wheelchair bound
a person who is confined to a wheelchair
a cripple
- a quadriplegic
the paraplegic
- a dwarf or midget
- he/she has a birth defect
- handicapped buses, bathrooms, hotel rooms, etc.
handicapped parking

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