

DISABILITY AWARENESS: A PRIMER ON PEOPLE FIRST LANGUAGE



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

Mark Twain

Revised 2007

The purpose for this primer 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:

- 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.

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.



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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
body 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 having to beg on the street with “cap in hand.”

“ **H**andicapped, ”

"Disabled," or "People with Disabilities": Which description is more accurate?



Using “the handicapped,” and even “the disabled,” usually evokes 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 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



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- He's retarded — He has a cognitive impairment.
- My son is autistic — My son has autism.
- She's a Downs kid, a mongoloid — She has Down Syndrome.
- He's learning disabled — He has a learning disability.
- I'm a paraplegic — I have paraplegia.
- She's crippled — She has a mobility impairment.
- He's a dwarf (or midget) — He's of short stature.
- She's emotionally disturbed — She has an emotional disability.
- He's wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair — He uses a wheelchair or a mobility chair.
- Normal and/or healthy kids — Typical kids or kids without disabilities
- He's in special ed — He receives special ed services.
- Birth defect — Congenital disability
- Handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc. — Accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.
- She has a problem with...— She has a need for...

is following in the footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s and the Women's Movement of the '70s. While people with disabilities and advocates work to end discrimination and segregation in education, employment, and our communities at large, we must all work to end the prejudicial language that creates an invisible barrier to 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." 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 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 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're wage-earners), we wouldn't have to pass laws for accessible entrances and other accommodations.

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



The odds are great that you will have a short 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*?

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

Make People First Language a habit.

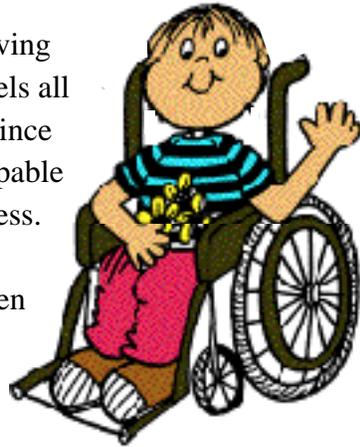
Examples of People First Language

- | Labels not to use | People First Language |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| • The handicapped or disabled | — People with disabilities |
| • The mentally retarded | — People with a cognitive delay |

isn't "wheelchair bound." He's free when he uses it — free to go when and where he wants to go.

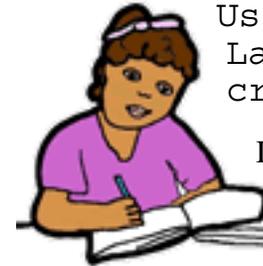
We know that a person's self-image is strongly tied to the words used to describe that person. We've been told that descriptions can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a child is told she is retarded or slow or lazy, she will probably live up to that expectation. If told she's brilliant, she'll probably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



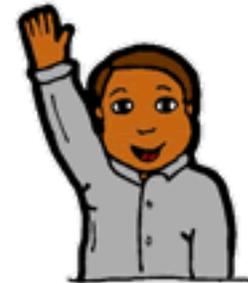
People First Language can change how people with disabilities feel about themselves.

Disability issues are issues that affect *all* Americans!



Using People First Language is a crucial issue.

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



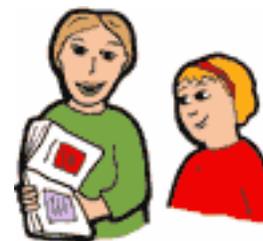
are misused.

- 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 at 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 of 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 with out 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