

People First Language

Language is power. Our words have the power to inspire, motivate, and uplift people. They also have the power to hurt, isolate and oppress individuals or entire segments of society. Often times, throughout our history, it has become necessary to change our language and the way in which we refer to individuals and groups to avoid further oppressing those members of society. The time has come to reshape our language once again so that we may refer to people with disabilities and the disability community in a respectful and inclusive manner.

Choosing to Use People First Language

Generally, in choosing words about people with disabilities, the guiding principle is to refer to the person first, not the disability. In place of saying "the disabled," it is preferable to say "people with disabilities." This way, the emphasis is placed on the person, not the disability.

It is only important to refer to the person's disability if it is relevant to the conversation or situation. Disability should not be the primary, defining characteristic of an individual but merely one aspect of the whole person.

Why Should You Use People First Language?

People who have disabilities are present in every aspect of society. They are:

- moms and dads
- sons and daughters
- employees and employers
- scientists (Stephen Hawking)
- friends and neighbors
- movie stars (Marlee Matlin)
- students and teachers

Most importantly, they are people first.

Examples of People First Language:

Many labels used for disabilities in our society have negative connotations or are misleading. Using labels contributes to negative stereotypes and devalues the person they attempt to describe. Avoid them when speaking to, or about, persons with disabilities.

The following terms should be avoided when speaking to or about people with disabilities:

- invalid
- wheelchair-bound
- mongoloid
- deaf and dumb
- defective
- mute

- victim
- crippled
- special person
- suffers from
- handicapped
- stricken with
- a patient
- retarded
- afflicted with
- handicapped

Making the Change to People First Language:

- "handicapped" or "disabled" should be replaced with "people with disabilities"
- "the handicapped" or "the disabled" should be replaced with "people who have disabilities"
- "he/she is wheelchair bound" or "he/she is confined to a wheelchair" should be replaced with "he/she uses a wheelchair"
- "he/she has a birth defect" should be replaced with "he/she has a congenital disability"
- "handicapped" in reference to parking, bathrooms, rooms etc. should be replaced with "accessible"
- "he/she is retarded or MR" should be replaced with "he/she has a cognitive disability or mental retardation"

General Guidelines for Talking about Disability:

1. Do not refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant to the conversation.
2. Use the word "disability" rather than "handicap" to refer to a person's disability. Never use "cripple/crippled" in any reference to a disability.
3. When referring to a person's disability, use "People First Language."
4. Avoid referring to people with disabilities as "the disabled, the blind, the epileptics, and the retarded." Descriptive terms should be used as adjectives, not as nouns.
5. Avoid negative or sensational descriptions of a person's disability. Don't say "suffers from, a victim of, or afflicted with." These portrayals elicit unwanted sympathy, or worse, pity toward individuals with disabilities. Respect and acceptance is what people with disabilities prefer.
6. Don't use "normal" or "able-bodied" to describe people who do not have disabilities. It is better to say "people without disabilities," if necessary to make comparisons.

People First of Missouri: www.missouripeoplefirst.org