

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

CONSIDER:

What is people first language?

How can we learn to use it?

People First Language

“As a Direct Support Provider (DSP), I will respect the human dignity and uniqueness of the people I support. I will recognize each person I support as valuable and help others understand their value.

As a DSP, I will:

- *Honor the choices and preferences of the people I support.*
- *Interact with the people I support in a respectful manner.*
- *Provide opportunities and supports that help the individuals I support be viewed with respect and as integral members of their communities.”*

**National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals
www.nadsp.org/library/code-of-ethics*

Historically, individuals with disabilities have been regarded as individuals to be pitied, feared or ignored. Therefore, they have also been disrespected and devalued members of society.

Our Words Matter

Every individual regardless of sex, age, race or ability deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Like other minorities, community of individuals with disabilities 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.

People First Language refers to the individual first and the disability second. It's saying “a child with autism” instead of “the autistic.” 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'd avoid racial slurs or saying “gals” instead of “women.”

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.

*Adapted for use from The Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities,
<http://tcdd.texas.gov/resources/people-first-language/>

How do we speak to or about our consumers?



OK:

First name

Mr. or Ms.

**Consumer, Customer,
Client, Resident**



NOT OK:

Last name only (unless it's their nickname)

**Referring to adults/teenagers
as "kids", "kiddo", "baby", etc.**

Patient

REMEMBER:

Your thoughts become your words.

Your words become your actions.

Your actions become others' thoughts.

As Direct Support Professionals, we model for other people – our words become their thoughts. We help to influence how people with disabilities are perceived.*

*Adapted for use from Partners for Inclusive Communities
Direct Support Professional Training Manual

People first language means using words in a way that identifies the person first ... before their disability. We should use people first language as much as possible, when speaking or writing to or about individuals with disabilities. As always, remember to ask yourself – “is it necessary to mention the disability at all?” If not, then don’t!

CONSIDER:

If you had a disability, which would you prefer:

“Disabled person”

“Person with a disability”

Or just simply ...

“Person”

The following page includes a list of examples how to use people first language. As you read through them, ask yourself the following questions ...

- How does the preferred language (“Say”) put the person first?
- What is wrong, or negative, about the “Instead of” language?
- If this language referred to me, or my family member, would I be happy with it?

People First Language

Remember: a disability descriptor is simply a medical diagnosis.

People First Language respectfully puts the person before the disability.

A person with a disability is more like people without disabilities than different!

SAY:

People with disabilities

He has an intellectual disability/diagnosis

She has autism (or a diagnosis of ...)

He has Down syndrome (or a diagnosis of ...)

She has a learning disability

He has a mental health condition/diagnosis

She uses a wheelchair/mobility chair

He receives special ed services

She has a developmental delay

Children without disabilities

Communicates with her eyes/device/etc.

Consumer, client, customer

Congenital disability

Brain injury

Burn survivor

Seizure

Person with epilepsy

Accessible parking, hotel room, etc.

INSTEAD OF:

The handicapped or disabled

He's mentally retarded

She's autistic

He's Down's; a mongoloid

She's learning disabled/is a slow learner

He's emotionally disturbed/mentally ill

She's confined to/is wheelchair bound

He's in special ed

She's developmentally delayed

Normal or healthy kids

Is non-verbal

Patient

Birth defect

Brain damaged

Burn victim

Fit/attack

Epileptic

Handicapped parking, hotel room, etc.

**Adapted for use from Kathie Snow at www.disabilityisnatural.com*

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References:

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