

Person First Language: Guidelines for discussing people with disabilities

It's the "Person First" – THEN the Disability

If you saw a person in a wheelchair unable to get up the stairs into a building, would you say "there is a handicapped person unable to find a ramp?" Or would you say "there is a person with a disability who is handicapped by an inaccessible building?" What is the proper way to speak to or about someone who has a disability?

Consider how you would introduce someone – Jane Doe – who doesn't have a disability. You would give her name, where she lives, what she does or what she is interested in – she likes swimming, or eating Mexican food, or watching Robert Redford movies.

Why say it differently for a person with disabilities? Every person is made up of many characteristics – mental as well as physical – few want to be identified only by their ability to play tennis or by their love for fried onions or by the mole that's on their face. Those are just parts of us.

Person First Language

In speaking or writing, remember that children or adults with disabilities are like everyone else – except they happen to have a disability. Therefore, here are a few tips for improving your language related to disabilities and handicaps.

1. Speak of the person first, then the disability.
2. Emphasize abilities, not limitations.
3. Do not label people as part of a disability group – don't say "disabled", say "people with disabilities."
4. Don't give excess praise or attention to a person with a disability; don't patronize them.
5. Choice and independence are important; let the person do or speak for him or herself as much as possible; if addressing an adult, say "Bill" instead of "Billy."
6. A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, talk, learn, etc. Use handicap to describe a situation or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or oneself.

SAY...

child with a disability

person with cerebral palsy

person who has...

without speech, nonverbal

developmental delay

emotional disorder or mental illness

deaf or hearing impaired

SAY...

uses a wheelchair

person with mental retardation

has a learning disability

non-disabled

has a physical disability

congenital disability

INSTEAD OF...

disabled or handicapped child

palsied, C.P., or spastic

afflicted, suffers from, victim

mute, or dumb

slow

crazy or insane

deaf and dumb

INSTEAD OF...

confined to a wheelchair

retarded

is learning disabled

normal, healthy

crippled

birth defect